Case Study: Skopje Bypass Project

Introduction

The Skopje Bypass is a planned 25-km highway around Skopje, the capital of Macedonia. The state-owned company, Fund for National and Regional Roads of Macedonia ("Project Sponsor"), has requested a EUR 25 million loan from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) for the construction of the Section 2 of the Skopje Bypass.

Two key pan-European transport corridors (Corridor VIII and Corridor X) cross the country of Macedonia and intersect at Skopje, forming part of the Trans-European Network. The Skopje Bypass is a part of Corridor VIII.

The Skopje Bypass has been proposed for more than 30 years. It was first introduced during preparations of the Skopje Basic Urban Plan in 1965, and in 1985 the need for the bypass was confirmed by additional amendments to the Plan.

The currently proposed bypass contains two sections. Section 1 is being financed by the EIB (European Investment Bank) and Section 2 by the EBRD (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) the Macedonian Government and the KfW- Germany.

Problems

The non-governmental sector of Macedonia with the help of the CEE Bankwatch Network has followed the development of the Skopje Bypass Project. In early 2002 certain problems of the alignment of the bypass in the area north-west of Skopje, in the villages of Orman and Volkovo were identified. The alignment here is planned to pass very near the water reservoir containing drinking water, over the graveyard in the village of Volkovo, near the Churches and through fertile agricultural land used for production. Also, the local community was never invited or participated on the project planning meetings or scoping meetings for the Environmental Impact Assessment.

As a result, the villagers were highly unsatisfied with the alignment, as it would destroy important sites and objects for the villages during the construction and operation of the highway. Therefore, they asked the NGOs to help them change the alignment of the road.

Independent review

The non-governmental organizations offered their help by lobbying the Fund for National and Regional Roads of Macedonia and the EBRD and demanding a change of the alignment. After being lobbied for a period of 4 months, the EBRD decided that the number and importance of complaints to this project is significant and therefore suggested that the whole project be revised by an independent consultant. The consultant proposed several measures to decrease the impact of the road to the community, featuring the micro-relocation of the alignment in the region of the Churches.

The villagers, believing that the micro-relocation would not solve the problems and still being concerned with the alignment, raised their voices against “The road of death” with the following arguments:

The Project has been developed without the knowledge and involvement of the local community of the villages of Volkovo and Orman.

The scoping process for the Environmental Impact Assessment of the project did not include the affected citizens of Volkovo and Orman. The inhabitants of these villages learnt that the road would pass near their villages, affecting important sites and locations, only six months later. They immediately contacted the Ministry of Transport and the Road Fund in order to receive more information and discuss the route. However, the Road Fund showed no understanding for the villagers or their alternative proposals for the project. Even during the public consultations held in April 2002, the representatives of the Fund for National and Regional Roads of Macedonia showed total disrespect to the proposals made by local communities and NGOs.
Danger to the water reservoir

The water reservoir was built solely on the donations of the local population and it is private property of the community. It is also one of the most vital objects in the community, symbolizing the unity of the community. The Bypass should pass less then 20 meters from the reservoir. The independent reviewer believes that the road will not cause damage on the reservoir and proposes that the Road Fund would issue a guarantee that would see to the safety of the reservoir and would include monitoring of its structure during the construction and two years during the operation of the road. However, the guarantee is not specified in the Environmental Management Plan and therefore the villagers are not receiving any certainty that the Road Fund would take care of their reservoir. If no guarantee is issued for the period of construction and during two years of operation of the road, then the road remains to be a threat to the reservoir.

The planned route will pass close to the Church of St. Atanasij and over the cemeteries in Volkovo

At less than 10 meters from the proposed route of the planned road two Orthodox Churches with a graveyard are located. The churches are regularly visited by the local people. The “St. Atanasij” Church is the only church in the area that performs all religious services for the community. If the bypass is built next the church, substantial noise and pollution will occur and the church's importance, value and role for the community would be lost. The proposed route would overpass a part of the local cemetery, located next to the church. This land is the only one used for burials and constructing the road over the graveyard is completely unacceptable for the local people.

The human right to religion and belief is undisputable and therefore should not be forgotten or ignored.

Destruction of agricultural land

The planned route of the Bypass in this area will destroy first class agricultural land used by local farmers for production of different food products. By supplying the citizens of Skopje with healthy and high-quality food products the farmers financially support themselves and their families. If their land would be taken for the purpose of building a Bypass, farmers would lose their possibility to grow and expand their production and the city of Skopje will suffer from the lack of significant products. From the total amount of land that would be used for the construction of the road, 40% consists of first class land and 28% of other agricultural land.

The alternate route

The villagers have proposed a different, north-oriented route which would solve the problems with the current route. The designers of the Balkan Consulting Company have estimated much higher costs for this route, in spite of the fact that the villagers suggested that the route be constructed on state-owned land which would decrease the needs for expropriation and therefore reduce costs.

Decisions

At the end of 2002, The Ministry of Transport and Communications of Macedonia made significant efforts in overcoming the problems and organized series of meeting where all interested parties were invited. Regrettfully, a consensus on the issue was not made and the villagers and the non-governmental organizations demanded for a review of the whole Environmental Impact Assessment and the consultant’s proposal by a group of local experts (including the Ministry of Environment and Urban Planning because the later has not been incorporated in any stage of the project).

As a result of the meetings, the Ministry prepared an informative package to the Government of Macedonia. However, in spite of the numerous and straining efforts made by the non-governmental sector and local community to alter the disastrous route of the bypass road of Skopje, the Government of Macedonia made a decision not to change the route at all. The decision was made on 20th of February 2003, after more than a year of lobbying and fighting for a change in a more environmental and nature preserving way.

Being supported by more than 25 non-governmental organisations from more than 17 countries in Europe, the community made great efforts to inform and urge the Government of Macedonia, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Road Fund to alter the route and save the environment. Still, the Board of the Directors of EBRD approved the project on May 19th and the Government signed the loan on July 15th.
Environmental Management Plan

With the Environmental Management Plan (EMP) for the project, the Macedonian Government is obliged to establish the Environmental Monitoring and Advisory Group (EMAG) - a committee responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Environmental Management Plan. Once construction activities begin, the EMAG should be fully operational. The EMAG shall be chaired by the Environmental Monitor who is an independent expert that will be appointed by the EBRD and it should include representatives from the Ministries of Transport and Environment, Road Fund, the local affected communities of Volkovo and Orman as well as interested non-governmental organisations. However, the EMAG has not been established yet and NGOs have still not received information about the final establishment of this Committee.

Current happenings

Currently, a baptistery is being built on the church’s property and regretfully, this area is planned to be over passed by the Bypass. The community highly opposes that the church’s operation is disrupted by large amount of vehicles passing by and therefore their fight will obviously, not end here.

In spite of this, The Road Fund has successfully ended its quest for the missing 5 million EUR for the construction of the “Road of Death”. On the 2nd of October the Ministry for transport and connections publicly announced that the missing 5 million EUR have been acquired by a slight change in the project documentation. They also stated that “…they expect the road to be functional till 2007…”

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