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Khimki Road Gets Luzhkov as Backer

By Alexander Bratersky

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Traffic will appear in what is now part of the centuries-old Khimki forest, if the route backed by Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov and other regional politicians is maintained. **D. Grishkin**

KHIMKI, Moscow Region — Mayor Yury Luzhkov has backed the construction of an $8 billion toll road through the Khimki forest, disappointing forest defenders who had hoped that Luzhkov's strained relations with Moscow region Governor Boris Gromov would prompt him to throw his considerable weight behind an alternative route.

The main alternative route — long favored by forest defenders and even Russian Roads, the state company overseeing the project — would see the Moscow-St. Petersburg highway pass through Molzhaninovo, a Moscow neighborhood where a company owned by Luzhkov's billionaire wife once controlled large swathes of land.

“The planned and agreed route should stay. It is realistic," Luzhkov said in a commentary published Monday in Rossiiskaya Gazeta, the official government newspaper.

"Some sacrifices have been made, and it is a pity. But the price is more justified than the

alternatives," he said.

Luzhkov's support for the route through the Khimki forest came as a shock after Oleg Mitvol, prefect of Moscow's northern district, which includes Molzhaninovo, announced last week that the mayor would back the Molzhaninovo route.

Yevgenia Chirikova, a Khimki businesswoman who leads a grassroots campaign to defend the forest, said she was "surprised" at Luzhkov's remarks because Moscow City Hall earlier had promised to protect the forest, a centuries-old oak woodland whose oxygen-producing trees have earned it the nickname "Moscow's lungs."

President Dmitry Medvedev ordered a halt to construction and the start of public hearings on Aug. 27, days after 3,000 protesters gathered on Pushkin Square to denounce the Khimki route.

The years-long fight over the highway is far from cut-and-dry, and both the Khimki and the Molzhaninovo routes would require deforestation.

Among the many twists: Mitvol, who gave to support to Chirikova by announcing that Luzhkov backed the Molzhaninovo route, previously supported Chirikova when she ran against Khimki Mayor Vladimir Strelchenko in an election in March 2009. Chirikova placed third, with 15 percent of the vote.

The candidate who placed second, with 22 percent, was previously a deputy mayor under Strelchenko who now accuses his former boss of nepotism and corruption.

Strelchenko, who won with more than 50 percent, declined requests for comment on the highway. But his spokeswoman said the mayor was not responsible for the construction work. "That is a federal road and does not lie within the city's realm of responsibility," she said by telephone.

Russian Roads backed the Molzhaninovo route when blueprints were first drawn up for the highway in 2004, its acting chief, Andrei Zhuravlev, said in an interview.

"Economically, it was more lucrative, but socially it was less profitable," Zhuravlev said, noting that the route would have required the demolition of about 50 houses in the village of Vashutino and the payment of compensation to the owners.

He said Russian Roads managers approached Moscow city authorities with the Molzhaninovo proposal in 2005 but were told that the land was off-limits because it included a nature reserve.

In fact, as first reported by Vedomosti in August 2009, much of the land in question had been handed over to Inteko, the construction company owned by Luzhkov's wife, Yelena Baturina. Inteko, which planned to build a residential neighborhood there, announced last month that it had canceled the project last year.

While forest defenders back the Molzhaninovo route, it would require the cutting down of 80 hectares of forest, Zhuravlev said during public hearings in Khimki on Thursday.

On the Khimki route, Zhuravlev promised that only 100 hectares of forest would be cut down instead of the previously planned 144 hectares. The forest covers more than 1,000 hectares.

Scrapping the approved route would require Russian companies involved in the construction to pay 6 billion rubles ($196 million) to contractors, including France's Vinci and Russian company SZKK, Russian Newsweek reported last week, citing estimates by government officials.

“This is almost the first contract of its kind by the Russian government, and now we are going to lose it because of a bunch of people who claim that they are saving nature,” said Nikolai Lizunov, head of the Khimki News newspaper, the city's official mouthpiece, and an adviser to the Moscow's regional administration's transportation department.

Lizunov, speaking on the sidelines of Thursday's public hearings, conceded that the hearings should have been held before the contract was signed, but he said the mayor should not be expected to have enough time to do everything. “Can you imagine a local official resisting the prime minister's decision?” he added, referring to Vladimir Putin, who as president in 2003 approved the Khimki route.

In 2005, Mayor Strelchenko issued a decree approving the Khimki route, angering environmentalists who had called for public hearings on alternative routes. In 2008, Strelchenko canceled his decree, but the construction plans continued.

Igor Belousov, a former deputy Khimki mayor turned opposition activist, said Strelchenko's management style was not responsive to people's needs. “He is a very tough guy who doesn't care about any other opinion,” Belousov said.

Belousov, who quit as deputy mayor after the March 2009 election, has become a strong critic of his former boss, filing a complaint with the Investigative Committee earlier this year that accuses Khimki authorities of illegally selling several municipally owned apartments through the administration's mortgage fund.

In June, Khimki police reported back to the local branch of the Investigation Committee that “possible evidence exists of a crime by officials.” The report, a copy of which Belousov provided to The Moscow Times, said local officials might have committed abuse of office.

Belousov has faced problems of his own. In February, his apartment was visited by police officers who claimed that a detained drug user had accused him of selling cocaine — a charge Belousov denies. “They just caught a random guy who told them something they wanted to hear," Belousov said. "I have never seen that person before.” He said the case has been postponed for lack of evidence.

Strelchenko, meanwhile, has filed a defamation lawsuit after Belousov accused him of rigging elections.

Last week's public hearings, co-organized by Khimki City Hall and Russian Roads, were supposed to give residents a chance to consider alternative routes. But forest defenders said the hearings amounted to little more than an attempt by the authorities to convince residents to support the forest route.

“I support the existing route. The trees have been cut anyway, and it is not possible to bring them back,” said Yekaterina Podporina, a retiree, as she left the crowded hall of the local movie theater where the hearings were held.

Podporina, like many of those present, said they received notice of the hearings at the last minute.

Podporina said she had not been aware of the other routes before the hearings. “But today they have explained everything to us,” she said.

Chirikova, leader of the forest defenders, did not attend, calling all hearings connected with the highway “not very legitimate.”

Chirikova was denounced by a group of youth activists at the movie theater who chanted, “Chirikova, go way from Khimki.” When asked by a reporter whom they represented, the young people refused to answer.

During the hearings, residents were given copies of the Khimchanka newspaper with an article that accused Chirikova of not holding a residency permit to live in Khimki and of having ties with Mitvol.

Belousov, the former deputy mayor, said Khimchanka was published by people close to Strelchenko's administration.

Analysts say Strelchenko faces no threat to his job as long as Gromov, the Moscow region governor, remains in office. Strelchenko is widely believed to be a protege of Gromov, and the two fought in the Soviet army during the Afghan War. Gromov's term expires in about 18 months.

The forest fight has left many Khimki residents confused. “For the locals, the forest is a beloved nature reserve," said Tatyana Anosova, a housewife with a 13-year-old daughter. "I have seen squirrels and moose with my own eyes there. But we also need a new road."

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