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City Hall Declares War on Street Banners

By Olga Razumovskaya

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Banner ads stretching across a Moscow street. The one in the foreground wishes Muscovites a happy May Day. **Igor Tabakov**

In an effort to improve views in downtown Moscow, City Hall is pushing to eliminate banner advertisements within the Garden Ring over the next three years, significantly damaging a market worth $50 million last year.

Advertisers and architects have criticized the plan as a half-measure to bring order to the city's cluttered streets. Without a clear set of advertising rules and an aesthetics committee empowered to enforce them, they say, downtown Moscow will remain dotted with promotional disorder.

"There are approximately 3,000 banners on Moscow streets and banners draw the most complaints from architects and the citizens," said Vladimir Makarov, the head of Moscow's advertising committee.

About 18,000 contracts for outdoor advertising space are set to expire between 2011 and 2013,

and when they do, “ugly” banners strung across roads in the center will be gone, Makarov told The Moscow Times.

The advertising committee, along with colleagues from the city’s -architecture committee, developed a plan last year that would exclude street banners from the list of advertising mediums allowed in central Moscow.

City Hall’s master planning -committee, chaired by Mayor Yury Luzhkov, discussed and approved the plan in June. Earlier this month, -Makarov began promoting the move in interviews to Russian media outlets.

“If you have contracts for these [advertising] platforms, we won’t touch you. Do your business. But we, the city, will decide whether to allow this type of advertising in new tenders,” Makarov said.

Alexei Klimenko, a veteran campaigner for city beautification and a member of the Moscow chief architect’s expert council, said the city’s approach should be more transparent and organized.

“Instead of seriously discussing the subject, they come up with projects like this every once in a while. Let’s make it a matter of public discussion,” he said in an interview.

“The city’s image should be put in the hands of professionals — those with the experience and the eye to work on it,” Klimenko said. “Luzhkov is an absolute virgin in issues of culture.”

He said there should be a systematic approach to improving the city, including a dedicated body in charge of “what the city looks like,” with professional architects, artists and designers working alongside Muscovites and the city’s administration.

The banners, part of the city’s Soviet legacy, gained new popularity as a place for commercial advertising in the 1990s, Makarov said. Now, he argued, they’re an eyesore obscuring Moscow’s architecture.

Makarov also contested claims that the plan infringes on advertisers’ rights to choose their platforms or operate in the capital.

“Imagine you have an apartment and decide to rent it out to a family of two. And then they let 15 Gypsies move in, start making *belyashi* [meat pies] and tell you that you’re violating their right to use your apartment. They put up ‘apartment for one hour’ type ads in the paper. Your friends start to call you and ask, ‘What’s going on in your apartment? It smells like marijuana, etc.’ Most likely you’ll get agitated,” Makarov said.

“It’s the same with companies that rent the city’s property,” he said.

But not everyone shares Makarov’s zeal.

Getting rid of banners that block historic buildings and monuments may be a good initiative, but it is -nothing but a “shield for other things the officials are doing,” Klimenko said.

Advertisers also want to see a more organized approach to the city’s policy. Moscow

companies have brushed off the upcoming ban, which only covers the city center.

“The demand will remain, and if all banners are removed, the prices will soar, “ said Igor Rybkin, an account manager at Mediakom CG, which matches advertisers with ad space across town. Banners, he said, are among the most effective ways to advertise, despite a higher price than billboards.

Renting a billboard costs 50,000 rubles to 60,000 rubles ($1,600 to $1,950) a month, while a banner will cost 40,000 to 50,000 rubles for 10 days, Rybkin said, adding that the numbers vary greatly based on the size and location.

“Banners constitute about 11 percent of Moscow’s nearly half a billion dollar advertising market — including above-ground transport and the subway,” said Sergei Shumovsky, chief expert at Espar Analitik, a Moscow firm specializing in advertising market analysis.

“This is a very important segment of the advertising market because banners reach broader audiences compared to other types of ads. They are perfect for social ads, advertising concerts and other major events,” Shumovsky said.

“This is their money; this is their bread. They’re cutting the branch they’re sitting on,” said Maxim Naidyonov, an expert at the Vse Peretyazhki Moskvy information portal on banner advertising.

“[Makarov] is a state official, so he does as he is told,” he said, adding that Luzhkov was probably ultimately behind the campaign to remove the banner ads.

“It’s like two or three years ago, when Luzhkov decided to reduce the number of billboards,” Naidyonov said.

“They got rid of about 500, but big companies continued to pour millions into their ad campaigns and it didn’t really affect the market.”

Moscow saw a decrease in outdoor advertising in the first quarter of 2009 compared with the same period a year earlier.

The Moscow market has shrunk by 46 percent since the crisis, compared with a 30 percent drop nationwide, according to a report published by News Outdoor, a major outdoor advertising company.

It has been a difficult few years for Makarov, as well. Investigators opened a criminal investigation against him last year for allegedly providing large discounts to several ad agencies.

The deals, concluded with the city between 2004 and 2007, cost the city budget 131 million rubles ($4.3 million) in revenue, investigators said.

Makarov spent nearly six months in pretrial detention before being released in February, although the case is ongoing.

He returned to work the following day and met with Luzhkov, whose top officials have faced a

number of corruption investigations in recent months.

“If the Moscow government had any problems with me, you’d be talking to me on a boulevard somewhere where I would be sitting hat in hand,” Makarov said.

“Mayor Yury Luzhkov fires [people] ... for much smaller misdeeds. Everything is OK here, in terms of order, which is why no one has any issues with me. ... Even the mayor has said that,” Makarov said.

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