

# St. Pete Court Bans Towering Buildings

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The Okhta Center's purposed 403-meter tower would dramatically alter the skyline of Russia's imperial capital. **E. Kuzmina**

The St. Petersburg City Court on Monday ruled to ban construction of any buildings in the historical center that would be more than 40 meters high in yet another measure that makes Gazprom's Okhta Center project impossible.

In handing down the verdict, the court ruled in favor of the local branch of the Yabloko party that contested the city's permission for the plans by the company's oil arm Gazprom Neft to erect a 403-meter tower, which would dramatically alter the skyline of Russia's imperial capital.

The ruling, which may be appealed in the Supreme Court, came after St. Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko said earlier this month that the city repealed its permission to construct tall buildings in the area and agreed with Gazprom to cancel the project.

Gazprom had hired Arabtec Construction, the biggest construction company in the United

Arab Emirates, to do the development.

The Yabloko member in charge of the lawsuit, Maxim Reznik, said the city had changed its mind on the project before the court ruling because it might have wanted to avoid having to obey the court.

In an interview published Monday, Gazprom chief executive Alexei Miller for the first time publicly confirmed that the company had irreversibly canceled the construction of the skyscraper on a spot near the Okhta River.

“It's not a temporary retreat. There will be no Okhta Center project on the Okhta Cape,” Miller told the Itogi magazine in the interview.

He also said Gazprom might sell the site to another investor because implementing a different project on the site wouldn't be profitable.

Gazprom has received a number of proposals to build the Okhta Center elsewhere, including Omsk, where Gazprom Neft has a refinery, and Vladivostok, the terminus of a major gas pipeline that is still under construction, Miller said. The Armenian capital Yerevan has also expressed a desire to host the tower, he said.

The Leningrad region government may also allocate a site to implement the project, Deputy Governor Grigory Dvas said last week, Interfax reported.

Chief architect of the Okhta Center project, Filipp Nikandrov, said he hadn't received any proposals of other possible locations from the St. Petersburg government. Nikandrov said construction of the skyscraper on another site was theoretically possible, but that the project's design was tailored to the Okhta site.

“We have created the Okhta Center specially for this place, and I believe that it would look great at this place. It wouldn't damage the city skyline and would complete it perfectly,” he insisted in a telephone interview from St. Petersburg.

President Dmitry Medvedev urged St. Petersburg authorities earlier this year to reconsider the height of the tower.

Gazprom Neft and ODTs Okhta, which is managing the project, declined to comment on the issue Monday.

Arabtec could not be reached for comment Monday afternoon, but the scuttling of the project might have been an abrupt decision for the company. Its chief financial officer Ziad Makhzoumi said in November that complaints from “different parts of the community” had been addressed and the company was going ahead with the plan to build the skyscraper.

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