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Experts Defend Price of Roads

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Very little funding has been allocated to road maintenance in recent years. **Igor Tabakov**

A panel of government officials and experts met for the first time Wednesday in an attempt to dispel the idea that road building is so corrupt that Russia's notoriously bad roads are much more expensive than in Europe and the United States.

"When roads are badly built, people blame corruption. You have to separate the flies from the meat patties; it's not so simple," said government road technology expert Mikhail Pozdnyakov.

The Russian version of Esquire magazine calculated last summer that a new 48-kilometer road being built in Sochi, at nearly $8 billion, might be built for the same price out of foie gras or caviar.

The perception of road building as synonymous with graft is not completely unfounded.

Road building is one of the most corrupt sectors, according to recent analysis by the National

Anti-Corruption Committee. Research showed that, while the budget for roads has significantly increased and the price of materials has gone down, new roads continue to be of poor quality and old roads are not being repaired, committee chairman Kirill Kabanov said.

"We are at the level of the early 20th century," Kabanov said. "We have some of the most expensive roads, but even the Moscow-St. Petersburg highway is full of potholes."

Russia's roads cost about the same as in some European countries, or even less, according to research by a branch of the Transportation Ministry. The most common price of one kilometer of one lane for one car is 8 million rubles in Russia, while in Germany that price is 43 million rubles, the research found.

Roads may seem more expensive because the price of the land, about 30 percent of the cost, is included in the price tag; in Europe, the cost of land is not.

For the last 20 years, very little funding has been allocated to road maintenance, and small problems escalated into large ones, Pozdnyakov said. Small cracks became gaping potholes.

Plans for roads and technologies are outdated, and there are not enough resources to develop new methods. High prices for electricity, ineffective bureaucracy, lack of infrastructure and the vast size of the country contribute to the high price and bad conditions of motorways.

Truckers who carry much heavier loads than they should contribute to the disintegration of roads.

The Transportation Ministry has plans in the works that include a web site that will document road expenses, road repairs and the organization of stricter regulatory systems.

"There is a whole set of hardships; something needs to be done," said Moscow State Automobile and Road Technical University professor Eduard Kotlyarsky.

A bill recently submitted to the State Duma might make quality guarantees necessary for all state projects.

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