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Skolkovo Innovation Hub to Lead in Green Construction

By Roland Oliphant

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President Dmitry Medvedev's flagship project, the Skolkovo innovation hub, may also become a standard-bearer for sustainable construction under a new deal signed last week.

The agreement between government agencies and green-construction advocates paves the way to hold joint forums as well as training in the use of environmentally friendly materials and building techniques.

But crucially, it marks the intention for new construction at the so-called "innovation hub" to conform to international green-construction standards — making it a flagship for Russia and indeed Europe.

"Skolkovo has the potential to become a breakthrough and landmark project, which could change the market perception of green building in Russia," Guy Eames of the Russian Green Building Council, a trade group that is party to the agreement, told The Moscow Times.

Officials hope it will also give a boost to domestic industry.

"We have patents in Russia that are considered some of the best in the world in the field of green construction and green waste processing, but they need to be realized. We hope Skolkovo will be able to help with this," Deputy Natural Resources and Environment Minister Rinat Gizatulin said at the signing ceremony.

The memorandum of understanding signed by the Skolkovo Fund, the ministry, the Center for Environmental Green Certification Standards and the nongovernmental Russian Green Building Council paves the way for both energy-efficient building designs and a "green" waste-processing program.

Russia adopted a certification system for environmentally friendly construction last year, and the government has been keen to promote its construction projects for the Sochi 2014 Olympics as a showcase for environmentally friendly engineering.

But the use of some green technologies at Sochi has been marred by allegations of building in protected areas, leading critics to label Sochi as only "semi-green."

Skolkovo has the potential to avoid those pitfalls, Eames said.

"Skolkovo can be extremely green as it is still in its concept format and is an entire new city. Sochi was limited in its scope as designers only considered sustainability during the 'project' stage," Eames told The Moscow Times.

The deal to make Skolkovo Russia's model "green city" follows a deal between the center and the Regional Development Ministry to open a new urban planning school at the innovation hub.

The Skolkovo urban design project will train specialists in advanced technologies to make "city life more comfortable and the urban economy less expensive and more environmentally friendly," a source at the fund told Interfax last week.

The new center is expected to teach urban planning professionals techniques to use geothermal sources and biogas from waste processing to heat buildings, rainwater management and managing transport systems without fossil-fueled vehicles, the source said.

Medvedev dreamed up the Skolkovo innovation hub as an incubator for new technologies and innovative businesses. Dubbed "Russia's silicon valley," the zone offers perks and support for high-tech companies that sign up to work there.

Currently, however, the mostly empty campus to the west of Moscow is dominated by the modernist building housing the Skolkovo School of Management.

A budget for the building project released by the Finance Ministry last week revealed that the government has earmarked 27.1 billion rubles — nearly $1 billion — for the construction of Skolkovo in 2012.

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