

European Parliament Scrutinizes Khimki Road

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A poster exhibited by environmental activists at the European Parliament on Tuesday.

Members of the European Parliament have announced moves to pressure French civil engineering company Vinci to quit the project to build the controversial road through the Khimki forest.

At a hearing organized by green and liberal MEPs on Tuesday, opponents of the road including Yevgenia Chirikova, the leader of the movement to defend the Khimki forest, presented evidence they say shows that Vinci is complicit in the establishment of a corrupt network of overseas companies leading back to Kremlin-connected oligarchs including Arkady Rotenberg.

The move is part of a strategy to force Vinci out of the project by attacking its reputation on its home turf in France and Europe. Chirikova told reporters in Brussels that she believes the road scheme will collapse without the French firm.

Satu Hassi, a green MEP and former Finnish environment minister who helped organize Tuesday's event, said MEPs were preparing measures to pressure Vinci, including formally requesting that the European Commission, the 27-member bloc's executive body, examine and assess the company's involvement in the project.

"This case is a powerful example of the need for a law banning European companies from involvement in corruption outside the EU," she told The Moscow Times.

Meanwhile, French MEPs will also lobby the new French government over the project, and European financial institutions were asked not to fund the project.

Vinci won the concession to build the 51 billion ruble (\$1.6 billion), 43-kilometer section of the new Moscow-to-St.-Petersburg highway in 2009. It works on the project via a Russia-based joint venture called the North-West Concession Company.

The road is opposed by environmentalists and local residents who complain that it has been routed through an ancient oak forest near the northern Moscow suburb of Khimki to enrich property developers close to senior officials.

Public protests against destruction of the forest forced then-President Dmitry Medvedev to suspend work and order a review of the route in 2010. A report later that year said the project should continue, with the proviso that roadside construction should be banned within the forest.

In October 2011, the Russian company announced a "rehabilitation" program for the forest and brought in a French sustainable-development consultancy called Pur Projet to advise on minimizing the environmental impact of the road.

But even though the renewed attention to the controversial road will not be welcome to Vinci, it is unclear how much pressure the Europeans can really bring to bear.

Hassi said the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank had already decided not to fund the 43-kilometer section of road as a result of the evidence presented Tuesday, but the move is largely symbolic because neither institution finances the road at the moment.

Repeated calls to NWCC went unanswered Wednesday. By late Wednesday evening, Vinci had not responded to e-mailed requests to comment.

MEPs will ask senior executives from Vinci to attend a hearing when the parliament returns in September from the summer recess.

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