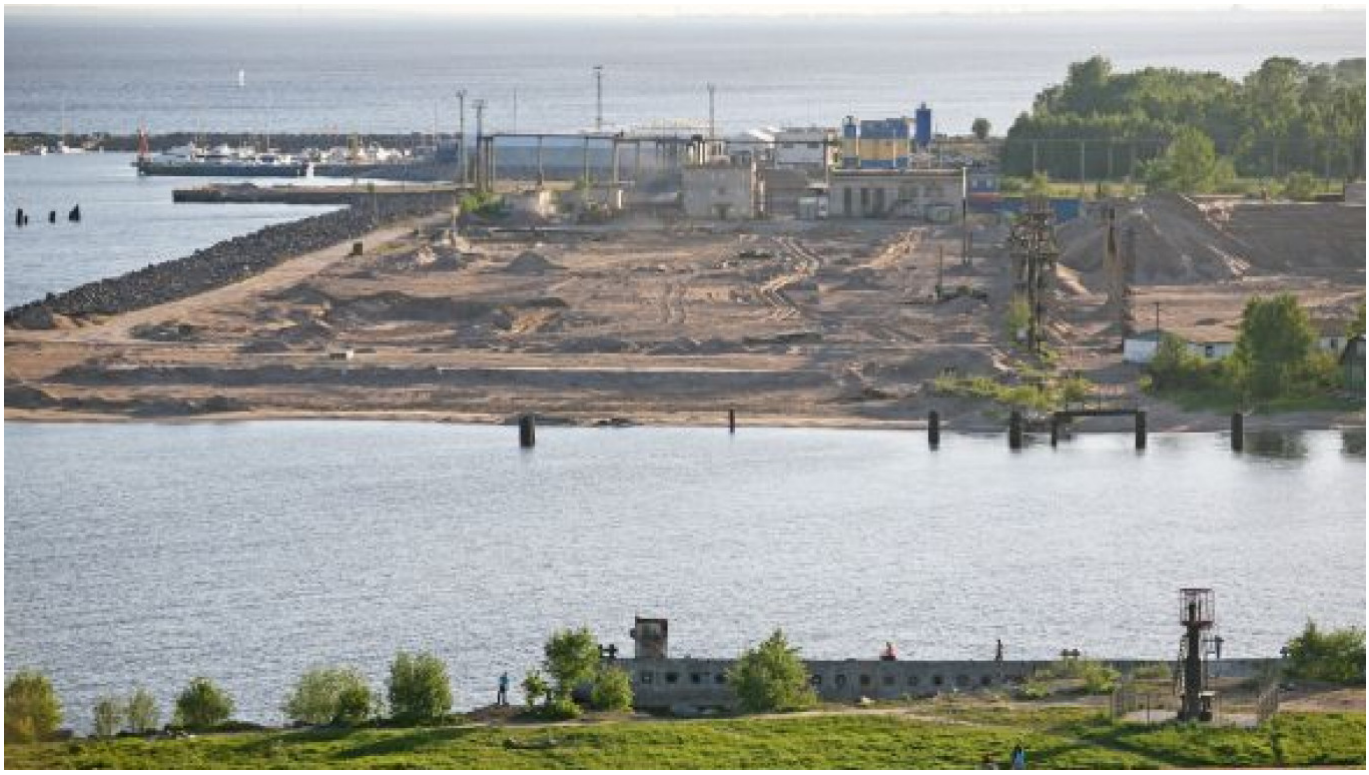
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St. Petersburg Skyscraper Approval Prompts Protests

By Galina Stolyarova

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The land plot in the Lakhta district on St. Petersburg's outskirts where Gazprom Neft's headquarters are set to be built.

ST. PETERSBURG — A group of local politicians and city heritage activists have appealed to City Governor Georgy Poltavchenko, asking him to reduce the height of the planned 463-meter Lakhta Center skyscraper, which is slated to host the headquarters of Gazprom Neft.

In an open letter, preservationists claim that the skyscraper will "interfere with the panoramas protected by UNESCO and alter some of the city's signature views, including gems such as the Rostral Columns and the Peter and Paul Cathedral."

The petitioners include Oksana Dmitriyeva, a Just Russia lawmaker at the State Duma; award-winning filmmaker Alexander Sokurov; Maxim Reznik, head of the liberal Yabloko faction at the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly, where he is also head of the Culture and Education Commission; Alexander Karpov, head of the Naturalists' Society Expertise Center (ECOM);

Yulia Minutina, head of the Living City preservationist group; and Alexander Kononov, deputy head of the St. Petersburg branch of the Russian Association for the Protection of Monuments.

"The building of any constructions of the suggested height in this area would de facto mean ignoring not only the existing city policies for the protection of St. Petersburg's architectural heritage but also going against UNESCO recommendations," the letter reads. "We express our protest against erecting the skyscraper in the area. Additionally, we would like to draw your attention to the fact that, if built, the tower will create a dangerous precedent and inevitably pave the way for the mushrooming of similar buildings. Indeed, what one investor has been allowed to do is sure to provoke envious rivals into trying to do the same thing."

City Hall gave its official blessing on Aug. 17 to the construction of the notorious project.

The design of the Lakhta Center involves a vast office building and a science and education center surrounded by a large exhibition space, a sports center, a medical center, a children's science theme park and a viewing platform, as well as a number of cafes, stores and entertainment venues, such as movie theaters and skating rinks.

Yabloko's Reznik said that the new development — the approval of the construction in its existing shape by City Hall's construction surveillance and assessment service — is sure to prompt another wave of public unrest.

"Gazprom's local headquarters saga has been a painful story for the city," he said. "It attracts a great deal of attention both at home and abroad, and serves as a litmus test for the integrity of the authorities. This is your chance to show that the legislation, with its requirements — however strict — applies to all companies equally, and no exemptions should be made, even for mighty taxpayers. If the authorities give in to an investor's interests this time, it will send a clear signal to others."

Originally, Gazprom had planned to build a skyscraper in the Okhta area across the River Neva from Smolny Cathedral, but at the end of 2010, the plans were shelved following a wave of protests from the local heritage protection community that saw widespread support among city residents. Since the project was launched in 2006, the gas giant has been strongly criticized for numerous violations of the law, from using rent-a-crowds at public hearings to faking opinion polls and publishing paid biased news items supporting the project in the local media. Under pressure from residents and preservationists, the location of the planned business complex was moved to the Lakhta district on the outskirts of the city.

The cost of the Lakhta Center project, which is due to be finished in 2018, is estimated at 60 billion rubles ($1.87 billion).

This July, local heritage protection groups tried to interest UNESCO's World Heritage Committee, which was in town for UNESCO's 36th session, into looking into the construction of the Lakhta Center. The plan collapsed after Eleonora Mitrofanova, Russia's permanent representative at UNESCO, who also served as the session's chairperson, avoided delving into the subject on the grounds that the Lakhta Center will be located outside the historical center of the city and is therefore not under UNESCO's jurisdiction.

Mitrofanova was adamant that since the complex itself is located outside the historical center,

her organization has no right to intervene in the argument.

Poltavchenko has not yet responded to the letter. At a news conference in August 2011, however, the governor promised that he would support the construction project on the condition that it does not elicit protests from residents and will not destroy the integrity of the architectural landscape of St. Petersburg.

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