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City Road Construction Yields Paradox and Protest

By Alexander Panin

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A tunnel for a bisecting road being built at the crossing of Bolshaya Akademicheskaya and Mikhalkovskaya Ulitsa. **Alexander Panin**

Half a decade ago, large American cities like Detroit and Los Angeles saw major road construction that led to entire downtown districts being deserted by local residents due to the reduction in quality of life. If everything the mayor has planned for Moscow streets were to come to life, experts fear Russia's capital is destined for the same fate.

It is 7 p.m. at the end of a quiet summer work day. A few dozen people have gathered at a small square in front of a long-abandoned cinema in Koptevo district in northern Moscow. They are carrying banners that clearly state their grievances: "Residents against road construction," "Sack Sobyanin and Khusnullin." A few policemen, standing at both ends of the square, watch without interest.

This is a sanctioned meeting against the construction of a bisecting road in northwestern part

of Moscow that is to connect Yaroslavskyoe, Dmitrovskoye, Leningradskoye and Skolkovskoye Shosses, running between the existing Third Transport Ring and the MKAD. This is one of three such segments that city authorities plan to build instead of a previous project to make a Fourth Transportation Ring encircling the entire city at about the same distance from the center.

If a road the size of the third ring does appear in Koptevo, that would mean that once-quiet 4-lane Bolshaya Akademicheskaya Ulitsa and adjoining streets will be turned into a 10-lane highway free of traffic lights and passing within 10 meters of existing apartment buildings.

"When we first heard of plans to make our street a highway we did not believe our ears; we thought 'this is just nonsense,' but here we are. Work has already begun," said Veronika, a resident of the street whose windows are now overlooking a road construction site instead of a boulevard that had been there before. She declined to give her last name.

Koptevo Said "No"

All the trees in front of the houses along the intended highway route have been cut down, the ground has been cleared to covered by asphalt. Two huge tunnels are currently being built — the one going under Leningradskoye Shosse and another under Mikhalkovskaya Ulitsa at one of the main junctions with B. Akademicheskaya Ulitsa.

When bombarded with furious letters from residents complaining of the expected pollution and noise that are inevitable in such close proximity to a freeway, the only reply from the City Hall, which The Moscow Times has a copy of, was that new windows and protective noise screens will be installed as a compensation for the possible damage.

Public hearings on the project were held last summer, and the people voiced their position against construction. At the time, the authorities said they would consider the residents' comments but then just went ahead with the original plans.

Not one of those in power turned up at the protest meeting last week near the cinema in Koptevo, although activist Vladislava Zhuravleva said the residents had sent written invitations to all City Hall authorities as well as to the representatives of the district government.

"This is because there are too few of us; there needs to be more protesters for them to pay any attention," said Vyacheslav Borodulin, another activist living in the neighboring district where people actually had some minor success in getting their position considered.

There were over 700 people protesting earlier against a road construction project in Strogino in northern Moscow and the authorities listened and canceled the project, he said.

"But that was a minor road and these are mega-plans; a lot more people have to go out into the streets to have any influence," Borodulin added.

He is living in an apartment building on Karamyshevskaya Naberezshnaya. This is where the northwestern road will come eventually, turning the already busy street into the same kind of a 10-lane highway as the one planned for Bolshaya Akademicheskaya.

Public hearings on the project in his neighborhood were also held last summer, but turnout was poor.

"The residents were not even invited. We were faced with the decision that our street will become a highway post factum," Vyacheslav said.

Residents filed over 400 complaints against the project but it is still being implemented.

"The public hearings were a fake, judging just by the small number of attendees. There were only 20 people present—yet there have been numerous complaints against the construction," Borodulin said.

In Lenin's Name

The northwestern road project is one in a series of government plans to decrease congestion by expanding existing roads to create multilane highways. Leninsky Prospect on the south side of town is another possible target.

It is already a major road that has three to four lanes in each direction and parallel service roads, separated by boulevards. The plans are to eliminate the greens and service roads and have only sidewalks separate houses from an expanded freeway that would have no traffic lights, running almost continuously from Ploshchad Gagarina in the center to the MKAD.

Many famous people live on Leninsky, including actors, notable doctors, academicians and ecologists. Most of them were outraged with the planned reconstruction and the public hearings which were held in April saw heated exchanges between residents and officials. Hundreds of people attended and the event enjoyed broad news coverage.

Sergei Dorofeyev, a lawmaker representing Gagarinsky district, which would be most affected by the planned reconstruction, has shed some light on how the hearings were organized during a meeting with Moscow deputy mayor Marat Khusnullin held in June.

"Proposed plans of road construction were drawn on maps dated from the 1990s. Moreover, the people who presented the project refused to give their names to the public," he said.

Having met significant resistance, the project has not yet moved to the construction stage. But the government is confident it should be implemented, along with other highway construction projects in Moscow.

"We do not have any doubts that the project to increase the capacity of Leninsky Prospect is well thought-out, optimal and feasible," Khusnullin said. "This and the northwestern bisecting project, as well as other roads like it, are strategic decisions."

The cost of building the 30-kilometer northwestern road is estimated at around 50 billion rubles ($900 million).

Independent Voice of Reason

While Moscow authorities are confident of their plans, no independent experts have expressed support for the city's plans.

Mikhail Blinkin, the head of the Higher School of Economics' Road Research Center, who is a well-known transportation expert with years in the field, has expressed grave concerns over the plans to turn city streets into highways, stressing that what makes sense for suburban space is harmful for city transportation because great roads only attract more cars. Also, having no traffic lights is not a panacea, because it eliminates the ability to regulate vehicular flow.

The neighborhood residents have demonstrated the seriousness of their opposition with their wallets, having donated more than 2 million rubles to fund an independent feasibility study on both horizontal bisecting road projects and the reconstruction of Leninsky Prospect.

The results of the study were presented by Vukan Vuchik, a noted urbanist and professor of transportation engineering at Philadelphia University, in Moscow in June. The conclusion nearly matched word for word the opinion expressed by Blinkin and his Russian colleagues.

"Los Angeles and Chicago, for instance, did a lot for car traffic. They increased road capacity, the number of parking lots — just the way it is being done here in Moscow — but in the end, when people switched from public transportation to cars, the jams continued," Vuchik said.

Also, he said the design of urban roads with no traffic lights in was tried in major cities in the United States about 60 years ago and the result was unsatisfactory.

"Practice showed that when a major highway intersects with other streets and there are no traffic signals, cars and public transport have to make complex maneuvers to turn on the next street, which leads to extra distance traveled, and traffic is only increased this way," Vuchik said.

The city transportation authorities said earlier that public transport in Moscow would be a priority. But projects such as the ones mentioned above actually go against this concept, experts said.

"The most efficient solutions in the world basically emphasize that you have to have two sets of policies — one is to encourage people to use public transport and the other is to limit and discourage the use of autos," Vuchik said, adding that turning city streets into highways has an opposite effect since such freeways are meant to facilitate vehicular traffic.

While such projects are not effective in organizing transport, experts also said the quality of life in cities dominated by cars actually decreased from what it was before long swaths of roads were constructed.

"In the long term, increased road capacity aimed to get people faster to the center of the city by car resulted in a loss of life in the downtown areas," Vuchik said.

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