

5 Suspiciously Expensive Initiatives That Have Outraged Muscovites

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As the ruble weakens, prices grow and life in Moscow becomes increasingly expensive due to the economic crisis gripping Russia, some City Hall spending decisions have sparked outrage among Muscovites.

This week, a citywide scheme to replace concrete curbs with granite ones grabbed the public's attention after the RBC news agency revealed the results of an investigation that showed that the program would cost the city budget at least 1.5 billion rubles (\$23 million).

The claim immediately elicited speculation that city officials would benefit from the spending plan.

“Moscow City Hall is acting extremely rationally — they are [in] a practically unique region

with a lot of money left," Alexei Navalny, Russian opposition firebrand and head of the Anti-Corruption Foundation, wrote in his blog Thursday, commenting on RBC's investigation.

"While there's war, sanctions, a circle of enemies surrounding Russia and other delightful things letting officials steal as much as they can, they are really making the most of this opportunity," he said.

Tenders for the new granite curbs and work to install them, the RBC report said, were won by companies closely affiliated with the city-run enterprise Avtomobilnye Dorogi (Automobile Roads), responsible for all roadwork in Moscow. The granite curbs themselves will cost 970 million rubles (\$15 million), and in total the city budget will have to pay at least 1.5 billion rubles.

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"It's historically [always] been like that," Pyotr Biryukov, the permanent deputy mayor for housing, utilities and amenities was cited by RBC as saying Wednesday.

According to an unidentified source in Moscow City Hall, the curb replacement is nothing but the "execution of Muscovites' will," RBC reported. In May 2015, the authorities conducted a survey on the improvement of city streets via the Aktivny Grazhdanin (Active Citizen) online platform, and 74 percent of respondents supported the installation of granite curbs instead of concrete ones, the source said.

"Say hello to all the Muscovites who sign off on this roadworks and curbs nonsense," Navalny wrote in his blog.

Inconvenience for residents is not the only issue making the initiative controversial. Last year, city officials laid off 7,000 medical staff, claiming the cuts were necessary to balance the budget, eliciting large-scale protests from residents.

This is not the first time Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin's administration has made costly decisions that have raised eyebrows.

Famous Flagstones

Covering the capital's sidewalks with flagstones was one of the most notorious things Sobyenin did after becoming mayor — and is probably the thing he will be remembered for in years to come.

The flagstone saga began in 2011, when the new mayor ordered the asphalt on all the sidewalks in the city center and on main roads to be replaced with flagstones. As he explained back then, amid rigorous questioning by journalists, flagstones are used in all European cities and are more practical as they maintain their form better than asphalt in both cold and hot weather, and are more durable.

The city spent 2 billion rubles (about \$66 million at the time) on the project in 2011, the Vedomosti newspaper cited Sobyenin as saying.

In 2012 the project was expanded, despite being widely slammed: Muscovites complained that the flagstones were being laid unevenly and losing their form in the winter, creating holes full of water in the spring.

Several Russian media outlets speculated that Sobyanin's then-wife Irina owned the company that produced the flagstones, but the mayor repeatedly denied the allegation. According to media reports, in 2012 about 500 million rubles (\$16.6 million at the time) was additionally assigned to the scheme.

Trees on Tverskaya

In 2013, City Hall decided that Moscow's central street, Tverskaya Ulitsa — home to City Hall and many other state buildings, including several ministries — needed trees. The trees that had once graced the street had been cut down more than 20 years earlier.

According to the head of Moscow's department of environmental management and protection, Anton Kulbachevsky, the project cost the city 529 million rubles (\$16.5 million at the time), the Interfax news agency reported back then.

The sum of money bought the city 60 trees in marble tubs plus five years of maintenance services, making each one worth more than 8 million rubles, RBC reported.

That initiative was also condemned by Muscovites, who expressed shock at the price of the small trees, which after being installed, did not make the bustling Tverskaya Ulitsa much greener and, according to experts, required too much specialized care in order to survive in the polluted air of downtown Moscow.

New Metro Logo

In 2014, some city residents were excited to hear that the Moscow metro was to undergo a re-branding, but the results were discouraging. The new logo presented by Russian design studio Art.Lebedev consisted of the same red letter "M," but without the blue line that used to surround it.

It certainly wasn't worth the 232 million rubles (\$6.3 million at the time) that City Hall paid him for it, State Duma deputy and a member of the A Just Russia party Mikhail Serdyuk told the media. The lawmaker promptly filed a request with the Prosecutor General's Office asking for a probe into whether the money had been spent appropriately.

“You can set up an institute and create a new language for 232 million rubles,” Serdyuk was cited as complaining by pro-Kremlin Izvestia newspaper in 2014. “The metro's logo has been transformed numerous times over the years, and no one paid even 100 times less than that, so it's obviously a waste of money,” he said.

Moscow's deputy mayor and head of the department of road infrastructure development Maxim Liksutov denied the allegations, saying Lebedev's team had created the logo for just 1 ruble (\$0.02). According to unidentified department officials cited by Izvestia, the sum of 232 million rubles had been assigned to a whole range of projects intended to improve the Moscow metro's image.

It remained unclear what those other projects were, or whether the Prosecutor General's Office followed up Serdyuk's complaint.

Pricey Bikes

In April 2015, at the start of the cycling season in Moscow, Navalny announced that the cost of renovating the city's bike-sharing scheme — which had only been launched two years earlier — meant that each bike cost some 233,333 rubles (\$4,320 at the time).

“In 2014, City Hall and state-run banks [Bank Moskvyy and Sberbank] spent 300 million rubles [an average of \$7.5 million in 2014] on [upgrading] the city bike system. By 2018, 1.05 billion rubles [an average of \$18.5 million in 2015] will be spent on it, or an average of 233,333 rubles [\$4,320 in 2015] per bike,” Navalny wrote in his blog at the time.

Authorities had promised to provide 4,500 bikes by July 2014 for that sum of money, but there were in fact only 480 of them, he claimed. Navalny also said it was unclear whether the money people paid for renting the bikes went directly to the Moscow budget or was routed to offshore companies.

City Hall denied any wrongdoing in a comment to The Village local news website, and suggested Navalny should check the facts used in his investigations more carefully.

In comparison, the London bike-sharing scheme cost taxpayers £11 million (\$17 million at the time), or £1,400 (\$2,156) per bike per year in 2013, the Daily Mail newspaper reported. But, the newspaper report pointed out, similar but cheaper schemes in Paris, New York and Montreal didn't use any taxpayers' money and were funded by private enterprises.

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