

Medvedev gives the green light to run a motorway through Khimki forest

The governmental commission chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov passed a final decision on 14 December to order the construction of the Moscow–Saint Petersburg motorway through the forest in Khimki near Moscow, as had initially been planned. This solution was supported on 24 December by President Dmitri Medvedev, who had previously ordered the construction to be halted, thus supporting ecologists' protests. This decision shows that, despite the initial goodwill gestures to the protesters, the government was simply pretending to make concessions, and that one of the most prominent public protests in Russia has in fact been disregarded by the decision-makers.

The residents of Khimki, supported by environmental activists, have been making efforts since 2007 to prevent the construction of the motorway through the Khimki forest. The protest escalated this July and August, when the city administration removed the protesters by force, which was widely publicised in Russia. On 26 August, President Medvedev supported the ecologists and ordered the forest logging to be halted. Public consultations to resolve the problem took place over the next few months, albeit without any success. In effect, the governmental commission approved the initial version of the motorway's route through the forest, and only increased the total amount of compensation to be paid from 3 billion to 4 billion roubles, and extended the reforestation area to 500 hectares. Previous plans for building infrastructure (including filling stations) were also withdrawn. President Medvedev deemed the decision 'balanced', and appealed to the local communities to behave 'responsibly'.

The revival of the initial plan of the motorway's route was influenced by the business interests of people linked to the political elite, including Arkady Rotenberg, a good friend of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Rotenberg's firm will be one of the contractors building the Moscow–Saint Petersburg motorway. <WojK>