

Protests Against Forest Road Score Few Victories

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

May 17, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

Activists removing a fence in Zhukovsky Forest, in the Moscow region, and a confrontation between protesters and police, on April 30. Video by Alexandra Odynova / MT

ZHUKOVSKY, Moscow Region — They wrote protest letters and research papers, appealed to higher authorities and fought with police — all to protect a beloved pine forest slated for destruction to make way for a road.

But despite the effort of local environmental activists and citizens, the powerful Kremlin-connected corporations behind the plan have won out.

Earlier this week, local authorities disbanded a camp set up by activists protesting the construction of the road through the forest that will connect the city — named after Russian aviation pioneer Nikolai Zhukovsky — to a free economic zone at a nearby air field.

“They came like locusts,” said Antonina, a local drug store worker who regularly joined the camp with relatives. “We woke up, and there was no forest anymore.”

Officials at Mosavtodor, the agency building the road, said they would provide 170 million rubles (\$5.4 million) in compensation for the trees.

Officials said the road, which was begun by the city’s administration in 2007, would ease traffic and help connect the city of 100,000 to a federal road leading to the institute where the biannual MAKS aviation and space salon is held.

The plan, however, required cutting down 12 hectares of the forest — or 8 percent of the total — and was met with an angry response from many locals.

The protesters said they were inspired by the activists who fought to save the Khimki Forest to the northeast of Moscow, which was cut down by federal authorities in 2010 to make way for an \$8 billion expressway connecting Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Locals in Zhukovsky argued in favor of a different approach that would have bypassed the forest and the city entirely.

But the alternative routes were rejected by the city during a public hearing in 2009, which activists said was not properly organized.

It later turned out that city officials combined the signatures of thousands of people against the road with those in support of the project, said Natalya Znamenskaya, an editor of Zhukovskiye Vesti, the only independent newspaper in the city.

While the scandal over the signatures forced the city’s first deputy mayor, Boris Aubakirov, to leave his post, authorities were able to remove a designation of the forest as a “monument of nature,” which had been granted in 1982.

Znamenskaya said the forest lost its status, despite testimony from independent experts, who had been invited by the government, that stated that Zhukovsky Forest contained unique species and rare breeds of animals.

Before the camp was broken up, local activists managed to exact a small victory, receiving a letter from the Federal Forestry Agency saying they would put the forest under their protection and would appeal to prosecutors to stop its destruction.

The victory was short-lived, however, as a follow-up letter reversed the agency’s position, saying the area in question was not “part of the city’s forestry,” and the agency was not responsible for it. The letter was signed by the same official who wrote the previous letter.

Znamenskaya and other forest defenders believe that the plans to build the road are connected with an ambitious effort to construct a transportation and logistics economic zone on the territory of the flight and research institute.

The institute trains test pilots and hosts the MAKS aviation show and is at the heart of a plan begun in 2008 by then-President Dmitry Medvedev to build a \$4.4 billion National Aviation Center.

“They just used the road as a pretext to get into the forest,” said Znamenskaya, referring to the center’s investors.

The center, jointly developed by Russian Technologies, is chaired by Sergei Chemezov, a Kremlin-connected official, and United Aviation Corporation, the company behind Sukhoi Superjet.

The head of the center, Tigran Alexanyan, told Interfax in 2011 that the center would employ 11,000 workers and would become an “innovation zone,” similar to Skolkovo, focusing on the aviation industry.

But critics question Alexanyan’s intentions, pointing out that he spent most of his career in development and not aviation, and suggest that the center’s main aim would be toward developing a port zone.

“The zone can be reconfigured with the regular test flights and research,” according to a research paper done by ecological activist Nikolai Kachnov quoting Lavrenty Lovitsky, the deputy of a local city assembly.

Lovitsky was echoed by Moscow regional assembly Deputy Alexander Anikanov who said the planned National Aviation Center “raises many questions.”

Alexanyan has not commented publicly on the matter, and the center’s spokeswoman said all questions could be answered with information available on the center’s website and declined further comment.

Industry experts have also questioned the ambitious plans for the aviation center in light of the poor state of Russian civil aviation. The country produced only 13 civilian planes last year, according to industry figures.

The early government strategy, which gave birth to the idea for the center, predicted sales of Russian-made planes rising to \$5.9 billion by 2015.

“The center might have a good program, but Russian aviation is dead and there is no opportunity to bring it back. We are just modernizing everything being built in the 1980s,” said Magomet Tolboyev, a former test pilot who worked for the flight institute.

Roman Gusarov, editor of Avia.ru, an aviation industry website, also questions the center’s creation.

“You have to develop people for the aviation industry over years. You can’t give an order and bring people and their families to a new place. This is not the communist era,” he said.

While the cut trees of Zhukovsky Forest will not be brought back, some activists pin their hopes on the new administration of former Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu who recently became governor and said in his inaugural speech that the government would consult independent experts.

Several local activists and former aviation industry employees living in Zhukovsky have also penned a letter to Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, urging him to take the National

Aviation Center development under his supervision.

Kachnov noted that the protest had been joined by members of the pro-Kremlin youth group, Nashi, even blaming city officials for corruption.

“This means that the city administration will leave,” he said, referring to the fact that Nashi often acts on orders from the Kremlin.

Zhukovsky resident and former aviation industry engineer Sergei Dombrovsky believes that the rest of the forest can still be saved.

“We have a good perspective. All we need is to bomb them with the facts,” he said.

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