

Petition against the Construction of the Okhta Center Tower (Saint Petersburg)

We, the undersigned, would like to express our opposition to the planned construction of the 396-meter-tall Okhta Center skyscraper in Saint Petersburg.

We believe that construction cannot be allowed to go ahead. Erecting a building of this height would irreversibly ruin the Petersburg cityscape, which is recognized as a cultural treasure not only within our city, but also around the country and the world.

We consider this project illegal for the following reasons:

1. According to the Saint Petersburg Rules for Land Use and Development, the maximum height allowed for new construction in the mouth of the Okhta River is 100 meters. In keeping with the Russian Federation City Planning Code, there are no legal grounds for permitting “deviation” from this maximum height because there is nothing about the proposed construction site that would prevent a 100-meter-high building from being erected there. The project to construct a 396-meter-high skyscraper is dictated exclusively by the commercial interests of Gazprom Corporation.

2. As visual impact studies conducted both by independent experts and specialists commissioned by Gazprom have shown, a building of this height would be clearly visible from various points in the historic center of Saint Petersburg. The municipal law “On the Boundaries of Historical Preservation Zones and the Modes of Land Use within the Designated Zones”, however, protects the city’s historic views. Construction of this building would thus be a gross violation of this law.

We demand that federal and Petersburg municipal laws be observed and that construction of Okhta Center over the height of 100 meters at the designated site be forbidden.

Name and Surname:

E-mail:

City:

Occupation:

Commentary:

NB. This petition campaign was launched on the eve of the latest scheduled public hearing on the project and after the Petersburg Municipal Land Use and Development Commission reviewed Okhta Center’s application to waive the 100-meter restriction. On August 12, the commission sent the application to its district committee for further review. The public hearing is scheduled for 9 a.m. on September 1. Most activists and critics of the project see this as a deliberate attempt to keep them and other members of the greater public away from the hearing: September 1, after all, is the start of the school year in Russia, a day considered nearly sacred by many Russians. In any case, scheduling the hearing for a weekday morning in itself is enough to prevent a good number of people from attending.

In addition, the organizers have violated Russian laws on the conduct of public hearings by not giving timely and accessible notification of the event. They have also threatened to turn away at the door journalists whom they have not accredited (notification of the necessity for this accreditation came practically the same day the

accreditation process ended) and Petersburg citizens who don't live in the district that contains the proposed construction site. (All these violations are detailed, in Russian, at: <http://ecoist.livejournal.com/101326.html>.)

It is worth noting that the last public hearing on the project, which took place in the summer of 2008, was also marked by irregularities. The hearing's organizers (Okhta Center and the administration of the Krasnogvardeisky district) hired several hundred people through a third party to pose as "supporters" of the project at the hearing. Activists and journalists who embedded themselves as "extras" at the "casting call" for the hearing discovered this plot before the hearing took place. Forewarned of this attempt, activists from several groups took to the stage as the hearing commenced to prevent it from going forward. (In addition to protesting the use of paid extras, they also claimed that the hearing was illegal because the organizers had violated the law on due and proper notification and scheduling of public hearings.) A tense standoff between activists and hearing organizers (with vocal support from their paid extras) ensued; it ended when the organizers summoned a squad of OMON riot police that had been waiting outside the building where the hearing took place. The police officers physically removed the activists from the stage, arresting several of them in the process. The hearing went forward. When it ended, the project's "supporters" raced out of the building to a nearby park, where they had been told "casting" directors would pay them the several hundred rubles (anywhere from ten to twenty euros) they had been promised for their "support." Scared by the presence of press photographers and cameramen, however, the casting directors quickly made arrangements to pay them the following day at another location. Although this mockery of democracy was reported in the local press and thoroughly documented by activists, no criminal charges were filed against the responsible parties.