

## Someone to pay for today's businesses dirty sins

**When this article was written, it was not yet known that the Russian environmental regulator has approved the Environmental Impact Assessment and granted the permit for construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline through Kurgalskiy Nature Reserve (sanctuary) – protected area of international importance, as designated by two international treaties, Ramsar (1971) and Helsinki (1992) Conventions. What does it mean to all of us around the Baltic?**

*That is the way of the world that petty spongers accumulate around major and active leaders; they are always ready to grab a piece from the master's table. A bright example of this is the project of the Nord Stream-2 international offshore gas pipeline. A project of state level, it is, undoubtedly, important for the economy of the Russian Federation. However, there appeared second-rate officials who got the means to influence the way of its development. Someone got the need in gas for construction of a few new businesses in the near-port zone of Ust-Luga settlement. And they started to pull the pipe to the south of the Leningrad Region instead of the specially prepared corridor in Vyborgskiy District. In the result of this, the short views of local officials slowly but steadily are moving the flagship project in the direction of an environmental catastrophe: degradation of the major natural reserve of the Leningrad Region, the Kurgalsky wildlife sanctuary, where from the pipeline, according to the idea, will have its landfall into the Baltic Sea.*

What is the wildlife sanctuary of the Kurgalsky Peninsula? For the Leningrad Region, it is the same as the Valley of Geysers in Kamchatka or Yellowstone National Park for the American continent. To put it shorter, it is the brand. The sanctuary had always been made a parade of, as at school they put out for a show the best student to recite poems in front of a commission. Would you like to show the Russian nature to a British consul? Let's take him to the Kurgalsky sanctuary and show him the haul-out of ringed and grey seals. Is BBC interested in filming a documentary about wetlands? We send cameramen to the Kurgalsky peninsula. The Committee of Natural Resources of the Leningrad Region needs an article on the "Ornithological Klondike"? The Kurgalsky sanctuary with its gigantic seabird colonies will be of big help. This all is not to mention the popularity of the area of elite hunting during the Soviet and the most recent times: isn't it pleasant to do some shooting in virgin forest, at feather and fur game that was not hunted?

One would think that officials, as well as scholars, had their reasons to take a tender interest in this territory. Evidently, it really differs in quality as compared to other Special Protected Nature Areas (SPNAs) of the Leningrad Region or other sectors of the Gulf of Finland coast. The secret of its popularity is the pristine natural complexes and the immense number of flora and fauna species, including the rare ones. Russia has designated the sanctuary with the international status and thus confirmed its readiness to assume responsibility for safeguarding it to the humanity.

Sadly, the fate has played a cruel joke with Kingisepp District where the wildlife sanctuary is located. A whole squall of transportation facilities construction of the Ust-Luga Port had passed through this remote district: the port is located right near the sanctuary. Development of the area has happened too fast and with no control, without reference to social and environmental needs of the people here. The coal, gas, forest, and other terminals seemed to have exhausted the capacities of the coast. Nonetheless, ambitions of local businessmen, some of which are believed to be affiliated with local administration officials, remind of the whims of the old woman from Pushkin's fairy tale about the old man and the goldfish. In addition to the port, district planners decided to build an industrial park with an ammonia and LNG plants and other industrial facilities. And here you are, just in the right time, the Gazprom mega project of the third and fourth gas pipelines of the Nord Stream-2 loomed on the horizon. The pipeline will organically blend in the established industrial area, the local authorities decided; the regional authority supported their initiative (despite the fact that initially Gazprom intended to route the pipeline along the previous two strings, along the northern coast and not too far from the Finnish border). The only problem was that there was no space left on the seashore nearby Ust-Luga. And here the easy and obvious decision to slightly change Russian laws and lay the pipeline through the forbidden borders of the neighboring Kurgalsky wildlife sanctuary got ripe.

Actually, initially, the laws were to be changed not “just slightly.” The Nordstream 2 AG, established for this project, had made friends with the district and regional administrations and tried to lobby the RF Ministry of Natural Resources to incorporate amendments in the Federal Law on the Specially Protected Nature Areas. Those would have concerned all regional SPNAs of Russia, i.e., nearly 12 thousand territories or 119 million hectares of land and sea, an area of about two countries like Spain. The amendments have not been accepted but it turned out that the mystery was easily solved: it was enough just to amend the statute of the regional Kurgalsky wildlife sanctuary and allow laying linear objects in it. And exactly this was done. As compensation, the sanctuary expanded with two small segments. And for just in case, mushrooming in it was prohibited.

By the way, let us point out that the novelties in the Ust-Luga area are moving forward surprisingly easily, while the initiative is always coming bottom-up. For example, the project of turning the Kurgalsky peninsula into a regional Riviera with restaurants, bars, auto parkings, marinas and other entertainment facilities was quite popular in 2015. Authors of that idea were a group of alumni of the local drug addicts rehabilitation center; later on, they took seats in the local legislative assembly. Historical evidence shows that any guest worker with an influential sponsor can establish his/her laws here, and even the international conventions (the Ramsar and Helsinki Conventions) set no limits to them.

....That said, the scholars had warned the gasworks engineers not to intrude in Kurgalsky, a unique territory, back in 2012. Choose another route, at least through the neighboring Soikino peninsula where the number of protected species is less! Or, even better, take the project back to the Vyborg area. For the sake of the gas pipeline, a cut-through with a trench will be laid in Kurgalsky resulting in fragmenting the territory; hydrologic regime of Kader swamp will be destroyed; plant communities which have no analogues in the world will be “dismantled;” ancient dunes will be eliminated and spruce groves in the coastal zone will shrink. The fishery Narva Bay (the water area to the west from the Kurgalsky peninsula) will also be affected. Not to mention that accompanying facilities have to be operated, and this will lead to population growth and pressing on the nature. As the result, in 2017, while preparing materials on the Environmental Impact Assessment of the project, the gas people found other, more cooperative contractors among biologists. You can always find a specialist who would give a “proper” expert examination, even if it contradicts his/her own scientific publications; exactly this situation we can see at EIA. As one of the film characters used to say, “You came to Paris in order to upsell your spade, steady hand, and your resourceful mind.” Some excuse (if there is any excuse at all) to that could be found in the level of biologists and other scholars’ salaries: you cannot consider just 100 EUR or less as an adequate remuneration of intellectual work. Pauper votaries of science are ready for compromises against their own principles and compose false expert examinations, thus dehumanizing themselves.

Eventually, a state environmental expert examination of the EIA materials is presently taking place; it will decide to be or not to be for the pipeline in the sanctuary. The verdict will be reached on January 29. According to the Nord Stream 2 “devotees”, the decision had already been made and the sanctuary was sentenced.

In the meantime, the independent public environmental expert examination has come up with a different verdict. It was carried out by the ECOM Environmental Assessment Center, known for its victory over the Bronka Port which had attempted to encroach on one of the sanctuaries within St. Petersburg City borders. Specialists, many of whom have worked in the Kurgalsky wildlife sanctuary since their studentships, took part in the expert examination. The major experts’ conclusion was that the EIA materials contain intentional downgrading of the value of the Kurgalsky wildlife sanctuary as compared to the alternative route through the Soikino peninsula. The experts came up with tens of notes regarding completeness of the information. Examples of omissions appall: the Nord Stream 2 “devotees” did not notice nearly a thousand of Red Data Book species in the corridor of the route; they tried to give scientific credence to that operation of heavy equipment would not scare off white-tailed eagles nestling located within dozens of meters away from the route, they brought the data on tagging gray seals in 100 kilometers away from the route as a proof that they do not feed in the area of planned works. There is an obvious forgery of the data concerning the fishery importance of the Narva Bay (while this is a salmon area, besides the rest!). There also are really grave comments: the Nord Stream 2 researchers pointed out contamination of bottom sediments with benz(a)pyrene but did not even bother to consider its sources. It should be mentioned that bottom dredging will be performed for laying pipes, and any bottom contaminants will

go up with the suspended soils. There are a lot of concerns regarding the engineering/geological part of the project. Thus, EIA has no whatsoever description of the geological structure of the offshore segment of works. But what is mostly unpleasant, the Nord Stream 2 AG did not bother to come up with any program of environmental monitoring or control in the course of the construction and exploitation on either sea or onshore segments. Description of nature-protecting measures takes no more than one or two paragraphs of each section and contains no descriptions of any particular measures and methods. It is already clear that the future of the sanctuary does not concern the gas people's minds, despite the billions, allegedly, allotted for compensations. On the whole, the entire EIA document looks like a diploma work of an off-campus student: it is composed of generic sentences. It has no numerical indexes whatsoever, and instead, the phrase about the "local" and "insignificant" impact of the project is repeated as a mantra. A pity, that the readers of the article cannot familiarize themselves with the content of the EIA document as it is in Russian. We will bring only one example: in the documentation section, it is said that purification of the waste waters (ground waters) will have place in the water drawdown system of the objects to be constructed. However, technical parameters of the waste treatment facilities to be constructed are not shown, neither is indicated their producer. Meanwhile, company's survey had revealed a lot of "nasty surprises" in the ground waters (high concentrations of lead, aluminum, manganese, phosphates, ammonium ions, etc.). If respective authority does approve this rotten document, this will be the date which will live in infamy.

The independent experts' conclusion is deplorable. "Implementation of the prospected activities will inevitably lead to the loss of key habitats of the flora and fauna species, including direct elimination of thousands of plant species included in the Red Data Book of the Russian Federation and the Red Data Book of the Leningrad Region."

Actions of the Nord Stream 2 AG deserve special attention. The company claims an open dialogue; while things are being already pre-decided, it organizes round tables, and pseudo-scientific meetings where it tries to break the environmental opposition standing for relocation of the pipeline route away from Kurgalskiy, find as many supporters as possible, separate public to diverse components, and complicate the situation. Along with that, it is believed that company's dedicated staff crawls through the social networks wedging into all possible communities and shaping the public opinion by 'gas' brainwash. Such behavior irritates with its obtrusiveness: the Nord Stream 2 AG is a commercial project and its promotion in the network is, in the gist, just an ordinary spam and trolling. The company's website has lots of video clips with prominent nature defenders telling about the Nord Stream 1 as being environmentally safe. Communication-wise smart but cynic, the clips are edited in such a manner that it looks like the Nord Stream 2 is also absolutely cloudless, while the video clips show also inveterate opponents of the project. Such an "innocent Swiss trick."

While the Nord Stream 2 AG is performing European politeness and abiding to the democratic foundations, Governor of the Leningrad Region A. Drozdenko has artlessly named "public enemies of Russia" all those who are trying to save the sanctuary's nature. He had never mentioned however that the "public enemies of Russia" do not protest against the whole pipeline but only against the barbarian route for it. One way or another, two facts should be mentioned. First, the Nord Stream 2 AG Company, while established by Gazprom, is registered in Switzerland. That means that the fate and future of Russian natural resources and a "brand" reserve is determined by residents of another state. Their views about our nature, accented (or interpreted) are of particular interest at the above-mentioned "scientific" gatherings and roundtables. Secondly, the very same Governor swore in a year-old interview that there would be no pipeline in the sanctuary. In the recent issue of the local *Vostochnyi Bereg* newspaper we can read a new revelation: "I can tell you bindingly: it will be constructed!" A true example of a monarch's word: I can give it, I can take it.

Still and all, why there is such a lot of noise around the one and only natural area; why independent scholars and public activists spend their time in fighting? Sea eagles and coastal grasses, are, do doubt, beautiful, but there also is the concept of ecosystem services. Break-in of the biological productivity of an ecosystem, the hydraulic regime, and local climate of a territory will impact in the long-term prospect the GDP level, people's health and quality of life. And, notably, it impacts a much broader area than just Kingisepp District. No one knows, if it will be for our grand- or great grandchildren to pay for today's businesses dirty sins.