

We have a gas pipeline!

// “Nord stream 2” as a new word in environmental protection

At the end of June, Nord Stream 2 AG, the company constructing the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, acknowledged the presence of four protected plant species in the territory allocated for construction in the Kurgalsky reserve. Despite the fact that independent experts had repeatedly spoken about these species, officially they were “unexpectedly” discovered only when the construction project had already received an approval of the state ecological expertise. However, against the backdrop of a heated debate on foreign policy, in which US President Donald Trump organically blended, almost no one cares about the fate of the unique natural territory except a handful of scientists struggling to preserve it.

“Nord Stream 2” is an expansion of the Nord Stream gas pipeline project. It should ensure transportation of 55 billion cubic meters of gas per year directly to European consumers. Since its construction in the long term will allow Gazprom to abandon the transit of gas through Ukraine, the project inevitably became a popular topic of the pan-European political agenda. Ukraine expectedly opposed its implementation. The United States, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania supported the protest. In early July, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine called on the European Union not to allow the construction of a transit gas pipeline “threatening the energy security of Ukraine and the whole Europe”. During his visit to Belgium on July 11, US President Donald Trump sharply criticized the position of the German authorities on the Nord Stream 2, while Finland and Sweden, as well as Germany, already permitted the construction, and Denmark is next in line. Under these circumstances, any criticism of the project within Russia is viewed as “treason”, which in no way contributes to a normal discussion about the quality of the proposed design.

Thus, according to almost unnoticed the information posted on June 25 on the official website of the Nord Stream 2 AG (a subsidiary of Gazprom company and the designer of the “Nord stream 2” gas pipeline), the preconstruction environmental monitoring confirmed the presence in the area allocated for construction on the territory of Russia of four additional protected plant species. It was also stated that these species would be transplanted. It is almost impossible to realize the significance of this fact without knowing the history of the problem. Although it does not specified in the report, it seems that these species are part of protected flora listed in the Red Lists of the Russian Federation and the Leningrad Oblast. The presence of these species in the future construction area was not recognized by representatives of Nord Stream 2 AG during the previous year despite the arguments of the staff of the Botanical Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences (BIN RAS) and other independent experts.

Who counts them?

For scientists and environmental organizations, the main problem with the “Nord Stream 2” project is the decision to build a new gas pipeline not along the existing “Nord Stream” pipe, but along a new route through the Narva Bay and the territory of Kurgalsky state reserve. Back in 2012 when preliminary research started, the specialists of the Botanical Institute, who worked for many years on the territory of the reserve, noted that any construction here could cause irrecoverable damage to unique ecosystems. However, in 2017 it turned out that both Gazprom and the government of the Leningrad region considered this route, which was positioned only as one of the possible, as the main one.

#INSERT 1#

How much does the law cost?

In July 2017, the government of the Leningrad Oblast made changes to the Regulations on the Kurgalsky reserve, permitting the construction of line facilities there and thereby legalizing the laying of the gas pipeline through the natural area of preferential protection. In December, the Regulation on a wetland area of international importance "Kurgalsky Peninsula" was also changed. The ban on changing the hydrological regime of the territory and on dredging disappeared from the document. In February 2018, Nord Stream 2 AG and the government of the Leningrad Oblast signed an agreement on cooperation in the implementation of the company's Strategy of Environmental and Social Initiatives for the Russian Site. To implement the Strategy, a budget of about 30 million euros (more than 2 billion rubles) was allocated. Despite the lack of an explicit link between the two decisions mentioned above, this figure could be a useful guide for large investors in the changing realities of Russian legislation.

Representatives of NS 2 AG assure that the decision was made only after a comprehensive assessment of all possible cases of coastal crossing, based on the survey of the shoreline of the Gulf of Finland and the study of all potential routes, conducted for five years. Grigory Wilczek, the head of the Russian permission group and EIA of Nord Stream 2 AG said at public hearings, "Studies on the proposed route have become the most detailed and complete of all that have ever been conducted in the area. They made it possible to significantly increase the knowledge base on the southern part of the Kurgalsky reserve and the adjacent water area of Gulf of Finland."

However, at the stage of discussing the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) materials, it turned out that the engineering surveys of designer company and the hired subcontractors did not find a number of rare plant species listed in the Red List of the Russian Federation and the Red List of the Leningrad Oblast. Despite public statements of representatives of NS 2 AG that the surveys involved the best experts, which thoroughly studied the route of the planned gas pipeline, there was no information in the project documentation about half of the protected plant objects growing on this territory.

"And it's not about single specimens, but about the numerous locations of at least four protected objects of flora and a number of specialized and indicator species of biologically valuable old-growth forests, detected both directly in the area allocated for construction and in the area of indirect influence of the future gas pipeline," says Senior Researcher of the BIN RAS Elena Glazkova supported by other independent experts, who conducted surveys in the reserve. "For example, there are many *Hottonia palustris* plants (note: a rare plant listed in the Red List of the Leningrad Oblast); they are quite large and one must be blind not to find them."

The absence of information on rare protected species in the EIA materials gives grounds to suspect the developers either in incompetence or in the intentional data manipulation. "We talked about these "non-existent" species at all public hearings and official meetings. The botanists hired by Nord Stream 2 were sitting there, and no one has ever told us that we were wrong and that there were no such species in the area," noted Elena Glazkova.

Nevertheless, after the Federal Autonomous Institution "Glavgosexpertiza of Russia" approved the project documentation dated May 15, 2018 and gave permission on June 7 to build the Russian section of the gas pipeline, Nord Stream 2 AG recognized the presence of additional protected species in the future construction area. Perhaps, complaints sent by scientists in early June 2018 to the Federal Service for Supervision of Natural Resources (Rosprirodnadzor) and Environmental Inter-district Prosecutor's Office influenced Nord Stream officials. However, at this stage even the recognition of the presence of previously "unnoticed" protected plant species in the area affected by construction and exploitation of the pipeline does not change much in terms of further implementation of the project.



Protected species growing on the territory of the Kurgalsky reserve. Nord Stream 2 AG did not find them during the long-term detailed studies in the area allocated for construction of the gas pipeline. And there they are...

1 – Water violet (*Hottonia palustris* L.), the Red List of the Leningrad Oblast; 2 – Oblong-leaved sundew (*Drosera intermedia* Hayne), the Red List of Leningrad Oblast; 3 – Bird's-nest orchid (*Neottia nidus-avis*), the Red List of the Leningrad Oblast; 4 – Aulacomnium moss (*Aulacomnium androgynum*), the Red Lists of the Russian Federation and of the Leningrad Oblast.

(The images provided by the staff of the BIN RAS: Elena Glazkova, Nadezhda Liksakova, Irina Stepanchikova)

Cheaper but not safer

The data of independent experts, reflected in the negative review of the public environmental expertise of the project documentation carried out by the St. Petersburg Expertise Center "ECOM" and in numerous complaints sent to the controlling bodies (Prosecutor's Office, Rospirodnadzor) proved to be extremely inconvenient for Nord Stream 2 AG at the stage of project approval. In fact, these data called into question the thesis repeatedly voiced by NS 2 AG managers that the route through the Narva Bay is the most favorable in terms of minimizing the impact on the environment.

#INSERT 2#

It will become better with the gas pipeline!

The Kurgalsky reserve is one of the most valuable natural areas of preferential protection of the Leningrad Oblast. There are unique dune landscapes that cannot be found anywhere else in the region. Both flora and fauna of the reserve are unusually rich. There are 800 species of vascular plants, 250 species of birds (which is 85% of the entire avifauna of the Leningrad Oblast; 180 of these species nest there), and 45 species of mammals. The water area and the coast of the Narva Bay within the boundaries of the reserve are one of the most important places in the Gulf of Finland; they serve as migration stopovers for water birds, protected not only by Russian but also by international legislation, in particular, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance.

Considering the arguments justifying the choice of the route, presented in the information materials on the website of the company, it is easy to see that most of them have little in common with the environment. Thus, the main reasons for the refusal to lay a new pipe along the already existing Nord Stream gas pipeline (this route was initially considered as the best option in terms of ecology) are associated with a high density of construction and, as a result, a shortage of free sites to accommodate the gas pipeline infrastructure, the inability to meet the requirements for minimum safe distance to the boundaries of settlements. In addition, alternative route gives an opportunity to save some funds by incidental gasification of Kingiseppsky District of Leningrad Oblast. The route through the Cape Kolganpya is 39 kilometers longer and requires more dredging. Moreover, it crosses navigable waterways and affects facilities of the Ministry of Defense, which implies the need for additional approvals. At last, this route indirectly affects one and passes through two natural areas of preferential protection, but in the absence of specific data on these sites, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about their value and the harm that constriction would bring to the environment there.

In translation into corporate language, all the above arguments mean that other routes involve more subjects and, accordingly, approval of project documentation requires more time. It also means additional expenses for land purchase, paying of compensations, and higher costs of the construction. Unlike the land users, rare species cannot go to court. The law does not protect them if the authorities (the government of the Leningrad Oblast, to be precise) formally responsible for the preservation of the natural territory actually withdrew from performing their duties. It means that the route through the Narva Bay is, first of all, much cheaper than the other two. In such cases, environmental considerations are pushed into the background by default. However, the trans-Europe construction is drawing attention of foreign institutions; under these conditions Nord Stream 2 AG have to exclude possible claims for the negative impact on the environment.

Good PR and poor management

In 2017-2018, representatives of the Nord Stream 2 AG made many efforts to convince both Russian and European public opinion that the impact of construction works "in the ecologically sensitive zone of the Narva Bay" would be minimized, and the territory of the reserve, where the gas pipeline would be located, is less valuable than it really is.

On the video presented by NS 2 AG, the head of the Permitting department Simon Bonnell and environmental and social manager Antonio Santaniello dressed in naturalist style are briskly walking in waders along the proposed route of the construction, telling that the reserve with the gas pipeline can become even better than without it. This bold assertion can be considered as some sort of “know-how” in the environmental protection, because its logical development implies the need to build similar facilities in all natural areas of preferential protection. However, given that the bonuses of such manager ranks usually depend not on the number of the Red List species they preserved or the number of meetings they held, but on shortened terms of approval and on reduced costs of construction, such hyperbole is quite reasonable.

No wonder the communication of representatives of NS 2 AG with mass media eventually began to resemble guerrilla warfare. It turned out that the company organized separate events for loyal journalists and for those who can ask uncomfortable questions. For example, about the data on the number of protected species and population sizes, which id different even in the documentation provided by the company itself. The differences were found even in the EIA materials presented at the public hearings in September 2017 and in the same materials provided for public environmental expertise. Or about the works in a natural area of preferential protection; the company called them “geotechnical studies”. These works started in April-May of this year before the permission for construction was granted.



1-5 – screenshots of the video posted on the company's website <https://www.nord-stream2.com/ru/dlia-pressy/video/42/>

6 – photo of a gangway on the Kader swamp in the Kurgalsky reserve (provided by Elena Glazkova)

Experts of the BIN RAS conducted another survey of the reserve in May this year and found operating construction vehicles, contrary to the promise of Nord Stream 2 AG not to carry out any works during the nesting period of birds. There also was a gangway laid on the Kader swamp along the route of the future gas pipeline.

However, according to information presented by Nord Stream 2 on June 25, at that moment, no construction works were carried out within the Kurgalsky reserve. The company is engaged in obtaining permissions for transplanting the found specimens of protected flora, despite the fact that experts have already considered and rejected the developed program of transplantation. According to opinion of Elena Glazkova, most species growing in the area allocated for construction cannot be subjected to transplantation due to their biological characteristics. Moreover, in accordance with Article 259 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, the destruction of habitats of organisms listed in the Red List of the Russian Federation, which caused the death of populations of these organisms, is a criminal offense. However, under the pressure of political factors, the situation can develop unpredictably. Although for a natural area of preferential protection, in the case of implementing a negative scenario, even a very good PR will not be able to compensate for bad management decisions.