

Barriers to Effective Public Communication on Nuclear Issues in Russia.

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Institutional and legislative features, short history of democratic experience together with modest communication activities within nuclear industry are among most substantial barriers to effective public communication on nuclear issues in Russia.

In the former USSR environmental issues emerged on the agenda in late 1980s and became the platform for many “protest” movements. At that time environmental issues served as a joint platform for economic and social demands. It was also the time when Chernobyl theme began to be heavily exploited. Since then environmental movements started the tradition for being highly politicised and standing in opposition to government and industry. Against this background further attempts of the nuclear industry to pursue public dialog were perceived with suspicion.

Nevertheless, one cannot conclude that general public is always in opposition to the nuclear industry in Russia. Two examples may illustrate this idea.

What show public opinion polls?

As economic difficulties sharpened, environmental issues have been losing their significance for public, though still declared among major concerns. It is a “good form” to declare one’s opposition to nuclear power. But these declarations fail when economic benefits are at stake. Public opinion polls show that people are in favor of nuclear energy if the region experiences energy shortages. For example, national public opinion poll conducted in 2001 showed that people in regions experiencing energy difficulties (Far East of Russia) support nuclear power more than those who live in energy sufficient regions with higher living standards (Central region of Russia).

Question/answer	% of answered	Region	
		Central	Far East
Some people say that nuclear power plants are substantially less dangerous to environment than coal/oil power plants or hydro energy plants. Other say that nuclear power plants are more dangerous to environment. Which of the opinions corresponds your own more?			
Nuclear power plants are less dangerous	41	45	65
Nuclear power plants are more dangerous	47	41	20
Fail to answer	12	13	15

Green ideas do not always lead to electoral success

Election campaigns also demonstrate that declarations of “green” ideas do not lead to electoral success. In 2003 Russian democratic party “Yabloko” failed to pass a 5-percent barrier to enter Russian parliament though it was a parliamentary party in 1995-2003 and heavily exploited anti-nuclear theme during two years before the elections (initiating the national referendum against spent nuclear fuel importation in Russia as one of the examples). In the same elections the single environmental political party in Russia – “Greens” – got only 35 325 votes, or 0,37%.

Among barriers to effective public communication on nuclear issues in Russia one should name legal and institutional barriers. While legislation declares public access to information and industry’s responsibility for providing environmental information, ways to implement law provisions are not concretized. Thus, public lacks opportunities to press authorities and enterprises for information disclosure and dialog on issues on the agenda.

The Constitution of Russia

Article 42

Everyone shall have the right to favourable environment, reliable information about its state and for a restitution of damage inflicted on his health and property by ecological transgressions.

Legislation declares that both nuclear power plants and federal nuclear authorities are responsible for public information. But there are no legislative or departmental norms that separate

or shift these responsibilities. Thus, gaps or inconsistencies in information provided by different actors within the nuclear industry are quite possible. These gaps provide platform for blaming industry for information concealment.

As a positive change, nuclear authorities declare transparency and openness to public dialog. Major documents include communication on radiation risk issues as one of the priorities in nuclear industry. However, for communication activities to mature, various internal documents are to be developed, personnel appointments to be made, and funds to be allocated. This needs time and effort, and it is not surprising that these activities usually stand last among other priorities such as safety improvements.

Institutional barriers also appear significant. For example, Emercom of Russia is responsible for providing people's safety in emergencies. Thus, PR departments at the nuclear facilities focus mainly on communicating safety issues under normal maintenance and exclude emergency communication issues. Without higher-level documents to pursue emergency communication, nuclear facilities face difficulties to allocate resources for these activities.

Sometimes it is poor communication from the nuclear industry that raises public's fears. Principles of crisis communication like "Say it first, say it all, say the truth" are not widely used or even shared by those who are in charge of communication activities from the nuclear industry side. Most examples show how not to communicate on nuclear issues than how to do it. Balakovo NPP information crisis is one of the examples (see below).

November 2004 - Balakovo NPP information crisis (Russia)

Balakovo NPP information crisis was mainly a concurrence of circumstances (exercises on the public emergency signaling system of the NPP were followed by emergency stop of the power unit). But lack of information about these events, time delay with information for general public (troubled about the possible accident) and inconsistencies in public information provided panic flight in several regions far from the NPP location.

Examples of inconsistencies

From Balakovo NPP press release: "At the power unit # 2 *planned repair* of the water supply pipeline of the turbogenerator is being conducted. Power unit # 2 was stopped 04.11.2004 at 01.24"

From Rosenergoatom press release: "04.11.2004 at 01.24 power unit # 2 was *stopped by automatic safety system*"

From Rosatom press release: "*Automatic safety system* worked timely. The *accident* did not affect electricity supply".

It seems that the lesson is obvious: lack of information at time when public concern emerges leads to more problems. But lessons of that kind are not learned easily and eagerly. The recent accident at a steel facility near Leningrad NPP showed that information came with a day delay. Steel facility located in 1 km from the NPP deals with the metal waste of the NPP. 15.12.2005 at 03.27 three workers suffered from hot metal poured out of the steel furnace. Scarce information reached the media only the next day. No wonder that without proper facts and details media started to distribute information about the incident at NPP.

Quite often nuclear industry blames media for improper coverage of facts and events. Meanwhile the origin of many mistakes can be found inside rather than outside. Mistakes found on NPP Internet sites provide examples how nuclear facilities may provoke further errors in mass media (see below).

Who is to blame for media mistakes?

One NPP Internet site gives data on the radiation background. Figures in the range of 0,06-0,1 are given without any values. One can suppose that it is Roentgen per hour instead of mSv per hour.

Other NPP Internet site gives incorrect translation of the value in English: 0,1-0,11 mSv/h instead of 0,1-0,11 mSv/h.

It may seem surprising but nuclear industry often fails to trade its own successes. Few efforts if any were undertaken to enlighten the fact that Russian NPPs are among the most safe in the world or to stress that standards for personnel radiation exposure doses in Russia are twice and a half tougher than in the USA. Nuclear industry rarely uses the opportunity to do extensive media

coverage of positive events or to exploit events that may attract media attention. For example, such an event as Nobel Peace Prize award to IAEA and the Director General could be more exploited in Russia for the goal of attracting attention to the successes of the industry.

Brief analysis of the recent statements of Sergei Kirienko appointed as the head of the Federal nuclear energy agency in November 2005 show that positive changes in public communication can be expected quite soon. New generation of managers (that Sergei Kirienko represents) tends to emphasize economic issues, which enjoy much more public interest and priority when comparing to environmental concerns. This was demonstrated when Sergei Kirienko announced the need to increase in the share of the nuclear energy in domestic electricity production from 16% in 2000 to 23% in 2020 according to the national energy strategy and linked it with the necessity to support economic growth. Positioning nuclear energy in terms of economic benefits is not easy, but, perhaps, it is the most effective way to communicate its further development both at national and local level.