

International Cooperation on Nuclear Waste Management in North-West Russia: a Weak Point in the Public Information Strategy

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During the years of the Cold War and the accompanying arms race, the former Soviet Union created an unprecedented nuclear fleet that was supported by a wide sea- and land based infrastructure. In the North-West Russia, a great deal of spent nuclear fuel and radioactive waste is accumulated at naval bases and shipyards. At present, many nuclear submarines located in the region need decommissioning. And the issues associated with safe radwaste storage are acute and require urgent countermeasures.

Illustrative is the situation in the Andreyev Bay where the largest in Europe storage facility for radioactive waste is located. Although the storage was built in the 1960s, is in need of modernization, and is inaccessible by rail, it remains operational. Reportedly, 21,000 spent fuel rods (equivalent to about 90 nuclear reactors) are stored in three concrete containers, which have been filled to capacity since early 1990. As a result of the termination of spent fuel transportation to Mayak in 1997, new deliveries of containers of spent nuclear fuel are stored at Guba Andreyeva out in the open and unprotected. Thirty-two such containers, which have been stored in the open, are leaking radioactivity².

Being concerned of security and environmental safety of the hazardous objects the national nuclear authorities and those in the neighboring countries have established special funds to dismantle nuclear submarines, modernize infrastructure for radwaste and SNF storage and upgrade the Kola NPP safety. Since 1998 the work on decommissioning and the environmental remediation of the region has received a new stimulus. Federal and special presidential programs were launched, as well as a number of international projects. For instance, since 2002, Norway/ Sweden/ the United Kingdom have initiated the assistance projects to speed up modernization of the storage infrastructure in the Andreev Bay. Along with the bilateral projects, other programs for financial and technical support are carried out in the Russian Federation through the TACIS program, the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership (NDEP) Nuclear Window and the Multilateral Environmental Program in the Russian Federation.

In accordance with a western approach, all these programs provide for early and meaningful engagement with the stakeholders. Among them, there are regional environmental movements, local authorities and the public. Bellona-Murmansk foundation and other environmental NGOs watch all the developments and claim their equal rights in discussion with nuclear professionals. The local government is convinced that nuclear is the most reliable energy source for the region, collaborates with nuclear authorities, and appreciates the international effort and financial support.

As a stakeholder, the local public is, to a certain extent, a surprise to the foreign partners. One could expect from the local community to be deeply concerned by a current radiation risk level and to require keeping abreast of the corresponding risk reduction efforts. But it is not the case. The public attitude is controversial. When asked, the inhabitants respond that they feel anxiety and need more information and knowledge. However, the media coverage analysis suggests that the health and environmental risk reduction are not among the actual information needs of the local community.

We can illustrate the above mentioned by the results of a survey performed by the Murmansk sociological center "Socium" in 2003 in the town of Zaozersk, being a few kilometers from the Andreev Bay³.

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² <http://www.nti.org/db/nisprofs/russia/naval/nucflt/norflt/zapadnay.htm>.

³ [http://socium.kolaland.ru/bos/bos061\(03-2003\).doc](http://socium.kolaland.ru/bos/bos061(03-2003).doc) (in rus)

Almost everyone in the town (86%) believes that radwaste availability poses a hazard⁴. At the same time, the part of respondents who have pointed to “radiation danger” as one of the two most important issues for townsmen makes up only 5-8%. Housing and communal services, living conditions and unhealthy environment, unemployment and economic difficulties were of higher ranks⁵.

The regional media content analysis⁶ has revealed almost the total lack of informative publications on radiation issues. In 1997-1999, one could find radiation-related articles in approximately 10% of all regional newspapers issues or less, to compare with 20% for a federal Russian newspaper and 30% for a Belarus national newspaper. About 80% of radiation-related publications in the Murmansk regional and municipal press reported of conferences, expeditions, international projects etc. and some 20% covered disastrous events like a nuclear submarine catastrophe (wreck of Kursk, K-159 and other) and memorial events. Radwaste issues were discussed 1-2 times a year; journalists mostly kept up with those developments that are fraught with a radiation risk **increase**. In the following years the tendency remained. For instance, a great hue and cry has been raised in Murmansk against a project on building a new nuclear waste repository at the Atomflot shipyard site, in the vicinity of the city, in 2004.

Although in recent years the media covers quite regularly an international cooperation on nuclear/radiation safety when reporting of the local government activities, only 11% of respondents answered “yes” when asked the question “Do you know of Swedish rehabilitation project in the Andreyev Bay?”

In fact, such a discrepancy between manifested public concerns and the lack of actual public interest in the current level of radiation risk and its reduction reflects a declarative nature of environmental values revealed in the Russian public. To illustrate, we can refer to the all-Russian survey carried out by Public Opinion Foundation (POF) in 2001⁷. Among issues of primary importance for them and their families⁸, the Russians more often mentioned material and domestic issues (75 %), namely: financial problems, salary and prices (53 %), health issues and medical care quality (13 %), housing problems (10 %) and public utilities issues (4 %). The issues dealt with study and work (13 %) and the family problems (2 %) worried the Russians as well. As to environmental contamination, they never mentioned it in their answers to the open question. The item did not seem to enter the frame of everyday life problems. Roughly speaking, environmental values are an attribute of a more well-to-do life. However, when asked directly as to whether the environmental status of their region worried them, some 90% of respondents were positive. At that, the respondents mentioned a variety of quite specific environmental problems of their regions, namely: water contamination (34%) and air pollution (33%), bad organization, dirty and unhealthy cities (13%), radiation (8 %), deforestation and dying-out of woods (7%), nuclear waste import and storage (4%) and dumps (3%).

Therefore, concern and dissatisfaction with environmental status are no more than a conformist response to the interviewer’s direct questions. Ecological issues seem to meet certain sympathy with the public but they do not take first positions in the hierarchy of actual vital priorities for the Russians.

Another proof for that is the public indifference to environmental NGOs activities⁷. A half of the Russians under the interview (50%) faced difficulties in responding to the question as to whether there were environmental organizations involved in environmental protection in their region; 30% gave an affirmative answer; and about 20 % gave a negative answer. Among the environmental

⁴ Answers to the question “Do you believe that radioactive waste availability poses a hazard?”

⁵ Answers to the open questions “What problems are most important to you as a townsman?”; “What are you personally most concerned of, threatened by?”

⁶ I. Zykhova. The public opinion on radiation risk by the example of Kola Peninsula . In proceedings of the 13th annual conference of Nuclear Society of Russia, 2002 (in rus)

⁷ <http://www.fom.ru>

⁸ Answers to the open question: “Please, name the issues that are primary for you and your family today”

NGOs, the "Green Peace", "the greens" were most often referred to. However, the participants of focal groups could say almost nothing about the activity of those environmental organizations. In fact, environmental organizations enjoy a particular "credit of trust" rather than actual public support. About 1/3 of respondents evaluated the activity of the environmental NGOs as positive; at that, the share of positive evaluations decreases by half, when it is a question of specific contribution of environmental organizations to the life of the region.

Bearing it in mind, one can judge that Rosatom's reactive approach to public information generally agrees with the level of social development. Rosatom provides the public with information mostly upon request. In case with the environmental NGOs, the more active they are, the more information they get from Rosatom. In recent years, the nuclear community, following the democratic developments in the society, became much more open. To demonstrate it, we can refer to the brochure and the multimedia program on a CD performed within the scope of the work sponsored by the US DOE and called "The Industrial North. Nuclear Technologies and Environment" (will be presented at the poster session). Another example: in 2004, the former Minatom's minister academician Romyantsev established a Public Advisory Panel for Environmental Safety Issues. Representatives from the most aggressive antinuclear movements got an opportunity to discuss most complicated environmental problems of the industry directly with the minister and top specialists, including safety improvement issues associated with the Murmansk region.

At the same time, Rosatom is not prepared for and not active enough in arranging wide public debates on knowledge-intensive problems of nuclear/radiation safety provisions. On the one hand, Rosatoms leaders seem not have enough reasons for that; on the other hand, there is no real societal demand for that.

However, an international cooperation aimed at improvement of nuclear\radiation safety implies a transfer of the western democracy approach to the public information activities, i.e. pro-active public communication. For example, the Public Consultation Plan for Strategic Environmental Assessment of the NDEP Nuclear Window set out the process by which Rosatom and the project team should provide information to stakeholders and the wider public on the strategic environmental assessment (SEA) being undertaken in concern with operations and decommissioning of the nuclear powered submarines in Murmansk and Archangelsk regions⁹. But a formal transfer of the procedures does not seem to be very productive. In June 2005, the public consultation meetings were held to review the draft SEA report in Murmansk, Severodvinsk and Moscow. In Murmansk, the public was represented by the Bellona-Murmansk activists. Neither local government nor the media attended the meeting. Such a low public interest to the issues at stake has surprised and upset the international partners, including Jan Olof Snihs, the president of the Swedish radiation protection agency (SSI)¹⁰.

As we have seen, the cause is deeper than just maladministration or wish to keep the issue secret. Indeed, professional discussions of the Rosatom and Bellona technical experts are not of an interest to the media unless something sensational is expected. Popularization and using plain language is not a panacea. Our experience of the TACIS information projects on Chernobyl shows that despite many-year efforts to popularize scientific views on the accident consequences people in the Chernobyl-affected regions remain ignorant while continue to clime that they are deeply concerned of radiation impact and need more information and knowledge¹¹.

As the international cooperation grows stronger, the more public information activities are planned. For the NDEP Nuclear Window activities, a Public Consultation and Disclosure Plan was developed; in accordance with TACIS program in 2006-2008 a public information centre for authorities and public awareness and acceptance of nuclear and radiation safety issues will be established in Murmansk in the icebreaker Lenin. However, there is a risk that these new activities

⁹ <http://www.ebrd.com/projects/eias/russia/sea/is0505r.pdf>

¹⁰ www.bellona.no/ru/international/russia/nuke_industry/co-operation/39287.html

¹¹ Report on Information Needs Assessment of the Chernobyl-Affected Population. ICRIN Survey in Russia (in rus). <http://www.chernobyl.info>

will also end with some kind of frustration if one proceeds from the assumptions of inadequate transparency and not active enough information policy of Rosatom only.

Obviously, education is the clue if one wants to have a well-informed public in this case. Therefore, environmental education and enlightenment of the population should become an essential part of any PR-strategy. No wonder that environmental NGOs understand high importance of ecological education. For instance, Bellona-Murmansk Foundation declares ecological education to be one of its main goals¹². However, both the PR-strategy for international programs and that for the Andreyev Bay developed specially by PR-agency Persona-PRo for SevRAO-enterprise¹³ somehow miss or undervalue a need for public education. This weakness should be overcome. And one of possible options is to joint efforts with the environmental NGOs. The above mentioned public consultations in Murmansk have shown that nuclear professionals can find a common language with Bellona experts. So, joint efforts in the public ecological education are of common interest and for the benefit of the community.

¹² http://www.bellona.no/en/about_bellona/28413.html

¹³ http://www.persona-pro.ru/pdf/naprav1_PR.pdf