

The Russian Anti-Nuclear Movement

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Summary

The disaster at the Chernobyl reactor gave birth to the Russian anti-nuclear movement, which managed to gain a certain degree of influence and prevented the construction of a series of nuclear power plants. The economic troubles of the 1990s led to a reduction in the number of construction projects. This deprived the anti-nuclear movement of its *raison d'être*. At the same time, it too was affected by financial difficulties, in particular the lack of donations, which continues to be an issue today. During the presidency of Vladimir Putin, the Russian nuclear industry experienced a massive resurgence—however, individual projects such as the one in Kaliningrad show that the Russian anti-nuclear movement can still play a role today.

Chernobyl as a Turning Point

The anti-nuclear movement in Russia (or, at the time, the USSR) emerged a few years after the massive nuclear disaster at Chernobyl on 26 April 1986. This catastrophe, which is regarded as the worst accident in the history of mankind, harmed millions of people and irradiated a huge territory of fertile land. Chernobyl destroyed many of the myths surrounding the nuclear industry. More information became available, and the general public became aware that nuclear energy is dangerous, as well as being *de facto* dispensable, since it can be replaced by alternative energy and technologies for enhancing energy efficiency. By 1988, a number of groups had emerged in the Soviet Union that were actively engaged against nuclear testing and the construction of nuclear plants.

The Active Phase and Successes of the Anti-Nuclear Movement, 1988–1992

During the most active phase of the anti-nuclear movement in the Soviet Union and Russia—from 1988 to 1992—over 100 nuclear projects were prevented on the territory of the Soviet Union. These were not just reactors, but also infrastructure projects linked to the planned power stations and other nuclear enterprises. This social activism succeeded in stopping nearly all of the nuclear plants under construction in Russia, either temporarily or permanently. After active protests, the planned construction of nuclear plants in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, as well as of nuclear heating plants (*Atomnye Stantsii Teplosnabzheniya*—AST) in Gorky and Voronezh were stopped (the AST project was to generate not only energy, but also usable heat; the idea was to pipe the radioactive reactor coolant water into the surrounding residential areas for district heating). Furthermore, construction freezes were imposed on the following projects: Block 4 of the Balakovsk nuclear plant in the Saratov region; Block 4 of the plants at Beloyarsk near Yekaterinburg; Blocks 1 and 2 of the Rostov plant; Blocks 3 and 4 of the Kaliningrad plant; Block 5 of the Kursk plant; Block 1 of the South Ural plant; and Block 1 of the Kostroma plant.

The nuclear industry likes to claim that construction of nuclear plants was only stopped during the late 1980s because of the difficult economic situation and not because of the protests. In this context, the case of the Balakovsk nuclear plant is worth examining in more detail. After vociferous protests in the 1990s, the regional parliament decided to stop construction of Block 4 of this power station. However, in 1992, this reactor was connected to the grid despite all of the economic difficulties at the time. The nuclear industry *de facto* illegally completed construction of the fourth block and began operations in spite of the regional government's decision. This shows that the nuclear industry managed to find the means to build reactors even during the most adverse periods, if it really wanted to.

The Nuclear Industry's "Rollback"

In the mid-1990s, as the wave of protests subsided, construction of the Rostov nuclear plant was resumed. Today, it has two power-generating reactors. Shortly thereafter, construction continued on the Kalinin power station, even though the government's environmental expertise had returned a negative verdict. As a condition for completion of Blocks 3 and 4 of this plant in Tver' district, government inspectors demanded that an alternative water source be found to cool the reactors. However, President Vladimir Putin demanded a quick reactivation of the nuclear program, which significantly boosted the continuation of the project.

Block 5 of the Kursk nuclear plant (an RBKM model—the same as the Chernobyl reactor) was not completed, due to technical reasons linked to a lack of capacity in the power grid. In the Kostroma region, a referendum was held in 1997 in which the population voted against construction of the nuclear plant. However, more recently, Rosatom has been considering restarting the project. The same is true for the South Ural nuclear plant. The project was stopped by a referendum in the city of Chelyabinsk in 1989. Nevertheless, Rosatom is now considering a continuation of the project. Several years ago, work was restarted

on the BN-type (fast breeder) Block 4 of Beloyarsk nuclear power station. Including delays, total construction time for this reactor currently stands at 26 years.

Rosatom and Democracy

Just as in the late 1980s, many Russians today believe in inalienable fundamental principles such as freedom of speech, freedom of information, and a healthy environment. However, democracy in Russia only exists in an embryonic state, and firm guarantees of fundamental democratic principles are still a long way off. This means that it is very important at this point to keep the nascent process alive. The nuclear industry has nothing positive to contribute to this effort. Having been developed during the Cold War and in the context of the arms industry, one of the fundamental tenets of civilian nuclear energy is secrecy. The Cold War is over, and an era of transparency and risk prevention has begun. For the nuclear industry, this means, for instance, that the population must be informed about the potential dangers involved in transporting material as part of the nuclear fuel cycle. While it has been 20 years since Russia's fundamental political transformation, the nuclear industry with its idiosyncratic penchant for secretiveness has so far failed to adapt to the democratic changes. For the future of the country, this means that either the nuclear industry will survive and the fundamentals of democracy will remain a fond dream, or nuclear plants will stop threatening our future.

A good example of how nuclear energy leads to violation of human rights is the case of Captain Aleksandr Nikitin. He was arrested by the FSB for allegedly passing on secret material on the nuclear elements of the navy's Northern Fleet to foreigners. In fact, Nikitin, a retired captain of the Russian navy, was working together with a Norwegian ecologist on a report about the dangers caused by the Northern Fleet's nuclear waste. Nikitin spent about one year on remand in an FSB jail. The results of the investigation were passed on to the public prosecution service on 1 July 1998. All of the information listed in the Norwegian report on nuclear waste and processed by Nikitin had been previously published in freely accessible newspapers in various countries. Nevertheless, the FSB spent years prosecuting Nikitin for revealing state secrets. On the other hand, FSB members involved in the investigation of Nikitin violated multiple constitutional rights guaranteed by the Russian Federation on several occasions. Nikitin was made to pay for his attempt to show how egregious nuclear problems in Russia are. Fortunately, he was acquitted.

In a similar case in the late 1990s, however, the outcome was significantly worse. Grigory Pasko, a journalist with the Pacific Fleet's newspaper, was prosecuted

and indicted for distributing information on radioactive waste storage. He was sentenced to several years in prison.

The Anti-Nuclear Movement Since the 1990s

Due to economic difficulties, the environmental movement dwindled in size during the 1990s. The anti-nuclear groups were dependent on support by the population, and when that support ceased, many organizations dissolved. Since almost no new nuclear plants were built in the 1990s and the state had no funds for new construction programs, the majority of anti-nuclear groups also lost their raison d'être. This factor also contributed to the decline in numbers among the anti-nuclear grassroots movements.

Nevertheless, the environmental movement managed to mobilize hundreds of organizations throughout Russian society in 2000, when a new threat arose. The nuclear industry, struggling with liquidity problems, proposed that a new law be passed permitting the commercial import of spent nuclear fuel—the most dangerous kind of highly-toxic waste. It was claimed that this business could generate US\$20 billion within ten years. The first reading of this draft law was held at the State Duma at the end of 2000, with more than 90 per cent of lawmakers voting in favor. After hundreds of public groups had engaged in just a few months of campaigning against this legislative proposal, more than 40 per cent of Duma delegates changed their stance. Unfortunately, the law was accepted, but the opponents were only three votes short of the quorum needed to reject it. At least the environmentalists managed to secure a significant tightening of the procedure for importing nuclear waste compared to the first draft of the law. This was one of the reasons why the entire proposal for importing nuclear waste to Russia ultimately failed.

Surprisingly, despite the decline in numbers among the Russian anti-nuclear movement, the events of the year 2000 revealed that it remains strong enough to influence politics.

The Anti-Nuclear Movement Under Putin

After coming to power in 2000, Russian President Vladimir Putin immediately busied himself with the task of cutting back the influence of various groups that might have prevented the "power vertical" from extending its authority. Accordingly, he was very concerned with the influence of social movements. In the following years of his term in power, Putin promoted more stringent laws against non-governmental organizations and enhanced state control. This development dealt a serious blow to the anti-nuclear movement.

As a supporter of nuclear energy, Putin began a campaign to "re-conquer" the international market in nuclear technology in order to create a major business oppor-

tunity for the Russian nuclear industry. In 2008, the Russian government approved a plan to construct new nuclear plants in Russia. Under this scheme, between 20 and 40 new plants could be built over the following 20 years. Protests ensued in about a dozen Russian cities. A survey published on the eve of the plan's approval showed that 78 per cent of Russians opposed the construction of new plants in their region.

Despite severe pressure from the government, the anti-nuclear movement in Russia continues to be active. Between 2005 and 2009, one of the leading anti-nuclear groups, "EcoDefense!", organized a joint campaign with German environmentalists against exports of radioactive waste from a uranium factory in Gronau (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany) to Russia. Due to this campaign, Rosatom and the Urenco company dropped their plans to transport nuclear waste to Russia. Groups from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, and Tomsk took part in the campaign. It was doubtless one of the biggest and most significant successes of the anti-nuclear movement in the 21st century. In autumn 2010, "EcoDefense!" played an important role in preventing a nuclear waste transport from the Rossendorf research reactor to Russia.

Another example was the campaign against construction of the nuclear power plant in the area of Nizhny Novgorod. According to opinion surveys, about 70 per cent of the population were opposed to the nuclear plant (the survey was conducted before the disaster in Japan). In the city of Murom, 20km from the site of the planned power plant, a local movement has been in existence for several years that has managed to delay construction of the plant. This movement was also responsible for organizing a demonstration of 5,000 people in autumn 2009—one of the largest protests against nuclear energy in Russia in the 21st century. The event was largely ignored by the Russian national media, although it was a unique event for the country. Of course, the boycott by nationwide government-controlled mass media has an effect on the development of the Russian anti-nuclear movement—it is growing a lot more slowly than would otherwise be the case.

In Kaliningrad, where Rosatom and the regional government would like to build a nuclear power plant for exporting electricity to the EU, environmentalists are trying to get a protest campaign started; however, these efforts are meeting with greater pressure from the government. According to surveys, 67 per cent of the population are opposed to the construction of the power plants. An initiative has been founded that plans to call a referendum against the nuclear plant. This group has twice submitted requests to conduct a referendum, both of which were refused. The plant is opposed not only by environmentalists of the EcoDefense! group,

which has a strong membership in this region, but also by the regional political opposition. In 2009–10, the local representatives intended to hold public hearings on the planned nuclear station in several regions of the Kaliningrad district. However, under pressure from the regional heads of Rosatom, the plans for public hearings were abandoned. Nevertheless, the opponents of the project are determined to continue their resistance.

On the Kola Peninsula, environmentalists have been protesting for several years against continued operation of the old first-generation reactors in the Kola nuclear plant. Two of the plant's four reactors have reached the end of their scheduled runtime. Nevertheless, Rosatom extended the runtime of the reactors without commissioning any environmental study, as the law would have required. In parallel, environmentalists succeeded in winning subsidies for wind power, which might replace the old power plant—two wind power projects have already been realized in this region.

Outlook

The anti-nuclear movement in Russia has good chances of once more becoming a mass movement as it was in the late 1980s. Surveys reveal that nearly 79 per cent of Russian respondents are opposed to the construction of new reactors. Between 52 and 57 percent are in favor of abolishing nuclear energy altogether, illustrating the extent of society-wide support for the anti-nuclear movement. In any case, the coming three to five years will be interesting times and may be crucial for the prospects of a Russian nuclear phaseout.

The greatest challenges for the anti-nuclear movement are the lack of funding (the general public is still unwilling to donate money to the environmentalists), the lack of resources, and the obstacles that the government creates to prevent any further development of this movement. To the extent that these problems can be resolved, and in particular if better access to funding can be ensured, the anti-nuclear movement will continue to grow.

In conclusion, it should be noted that one important difference to the situation in the 1980s is that the state authorities today are aiming to prevent even the mere discussion in society of the dangers of nuclear energy. Around 30 years ago, when the anti-nuclear lobby came into existence as a mass movement, the state was simply not prepared for such a development and had no way of opposing the movement. Today, things are different. Nevertheless, if these obstacles should encourage the activists, as was the case at the end of the 1980s, the anti-nuclear movement will experience a renaissance in the coming years.

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