

## **Nuclear Religion: the Story of a Referendum**

### **Referendum on the future of nuclear in Bulgaria on Jan. 27<sup>th</sup> 2013**

The history of a referendum on nuclear energy in Bulgaria tells a broader story on campaigning in a complex environment

#### **Chronology of the absurd: capitalism in a socialist manner**

The controversies around building a new nuclear power station in Bulgaria have been attracting public attention for decades. The conflict dates back to 1981 when a decision to construct a second nuclear power plant (NPP) near the city of Belene was made. Works started in 1982, but were stopped in 1990 because of public pressure.

The political changes in 1989 illuminated the long hidden facts about nuclear pollution and the Chernobyl accident. These led to waves of protests all over the country demanding a halt on many dangerous and polluting projects. What was key in suspending the construction of the Belene NPP was: first – the negative opinion of the project by the Bulgarian Academy of Science, and second – the lack of funding due to the economic crisis that swept Bulgaria at the time.

In the last years we have witnessed a series of attempts to revitalize the project, along with the proposals of changing the investors and the technology. These led to over 1 billion euro in the form of “investments”, which in fact were nothing than losses for the taxpayer’s pocket. In 2012, the government stopped the project since it wasn’t able to attract investors and was not profitable for the country. The opposition’s reaction to this decision was to ask for a national referendum on the future of nuclear energy in the country.

#### **The referendum**

The first referendum in the democratic, post-socialist history of Bulgaria was not an expression of citizens’ rights and freedom, but was entirely political. It was initiated by the leaders of the Bulgarian Socialist Party which has economic interests in the project and needs to legalize the over 1 billion euro already spent for the construction of the power plant during the Socialists’ governance. The question for the referendum was “crafted” in parliament by the ruling center-right party GERB making it absolutely ambiguous. Citizens were asked: **“Should we develop the nuclear energy sector in the Republic of Bulgaria by the construction of a new nuclear power plant?”** Such a framing meant that both an affirmative and a negative answer would leave space for speculative interpretations and thus the nuclear lobby would be successful in any case. The

powerful lobby included those that had agreements for the construction of the Belene NPP on the one hand, and economic groups that wanted to build a 7<sup>th</sup> unit in the already existing Kozloduy NPP on the other.

### **Complete media control**

The debates surrounding the referendum were, once again, kidnapped by politicians. Views that oppose nuclear energy were muted. The anti-nuclear initiative “Green Alternatives” was denied registration by the governmental referendum commission and hence its representatives were not granted access to the official public debates. In fact, there were no voices that were critical of nuclear power allowed in this debate. There were almost no arguments about the risks and fundamental problems with nuclear energy such as waste, corruption, lack of transparency and disregard of safety regulations.

### **Nuclear religion: myths as a means for manipulation of public opinion**

The facts that Bulgaria has the poorest energy efficiency index in the EU, spending 5.6 times more energy per production unit while having a 40% surplus of produced energy were kept quiet about.

There were lies that Bulgaria is facing an energy deficit and will need to import electricity from Turkey. Economic and technological myths about “clean, cheap and safe” nuclear energy were mobilized with a full force. The consultants from HSBC have calculated that the Belene NPP will produce at 15 euro cents per kWh, which is four times more than the current price from the Kozloduy NPP and was not reflected in the debate. Instead, simplified slogans of the type “Nuclear energy is cheap” were deployed with the aim to achieve mass disinformation reminding of socialist-era propaganda.

Nationalism was also involved in the debate with geopolitical myths about energy independence of the country and promises that Bulgaria will become an energy hub in the Balkans. All of these sounded absurd to the experts, having in mind that we are 100% dependent on nuclear fuel imports from Russia and use Russian reactors.

### **Goliath defeats David**

The fees charged to access mass media for expressing alternative views were so high that the anti nuclear movement was not able to publicize its concerns. This is why “Za Zemiata”, together with the “Green Alternatives” movement decided to chose a different strategy – a direct access to citizens. 15,000 modest and cheap leaflets were distributed with arguments against nuclear power in Bulgaria. The arguments were backed by the cost-benefit analysis of nuclear

power produced within the EJOLT project, official governmental reports and academic papers. The supporters of the NPP project were meanwhile pouring millions of leaflets with speculative and populist assertions countrywide. In such unfair playground it was not possible to talk about a fair referendum.

### **When faith speaks, the mind is silent**

According to a survey conducted by Eurobarometer in 2008, the Bulgarians are the most uninformed citizens in the EU regarding nuclear energy and at the same time are its biggest supporters. Abusing the ignorance, political parties have captured the referendum as a pre-elections campaign opportunity and encouraged the citizens to vote for or against the government and not for or against nuclear energy development in Bulgaria.

Bulgaria has a huge potential of energy saving. The construction of huge monopolizing power plants is just intensifying the energy dependence of the country. The government ought to work for the decentralization of the energy system, namely to seek out local solutions for the households, the municipalities, the regions.

### **The results**

The results of the referendum on January 27 are hard to interpret: 61% said “yes” and 38% “no”. Solely about 1,500,000 went to vote (20.2% of the last parliamentary elections’ turnout), which is way **below the required 4,350,000 to make the vote valid**. The reason for the low voting activity is people’s disappointment with the abuse of the referendum by political parties. The denial of about 80% to vote clearly shows the unwillingness of the Bulgarian citizens to legalize the construction of a new NPP and to spend billions for old and unsafe technology.

One month later, on February 27, the Parliament took a final decision for the end of the "Belene" project. Since most of the votes at the referendum were positive, it was decided to extend the life of reactors 5 and 6 and initiate the construction of a new reactor at the Kozloduy NPP.

## **Looking forward**

The mass street demonstrations against high electricity prices in February 2013 and the subsequent resignation of the Bulgarian government are indicative of the key role energy will play in policy making and public debates. Green alternatives, such as decentralization of production and energy efficiency are yet to be put on the table and discussed. The big question is: how successful will the environmental organizations be in articulating clearly their position among various citizens' movements and thus be able to effectively contribute to the alternatives for the Bulgarian energy sector in the future.

The danger remains that political parties abuse the civil protest against high electricity prices by manipulating the public with the old myths about cheap nuclear power, which brings us back to the beginning of our nuclear story...

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Sources:

NPP Belene – studies and positions of the Bulgarian Academy of Science for the 1990 – 2010 period. And “Energy in Bulgaria – developments and social costs” for the 2009 – 2030 period.