

WISE / Greenpeace investigation into Belene EIA hearings conclude active manipulation

Advice to repeat hearings or not accept final EIA report

Ir. Jan Haverkamp, Ing. Petko Kovachev
Nikopol / Sofia / Prague, 14 September 2004

Introduction

On request of citizens from the town of Svishtov and from the BeleNE coalition of NGOs in Bulgaria, CEE Bankwatch, Greenpeace and WISE, a short investigation was executed into claims of manipulation of the hearings within the EIA procedure for the Belene nuclear power station in Bulgaria.

On the basis of first hand witness statements, the authors conclude that the National Electricity Company NEK and involved authorities have severely manipulated the process of the hearings. The outcome of the hearings cannot be seen as representative of the opinion of involved stakeholders. During the hearings, critical remarks, suggestions and opinions were structurally obstructed in the process. Techniques used to accomplish this include: Extremely biased statements in the available EIA documentation, as well as a large number of factual untruths; the mentioning of untrue facts during the hearings to a lowly educated public; bringing a large number of people from outside the region to one hearing in order to prevent the local population to express its opinion; attempted manipulation of speaking time; limited announcement of hearings; minimal preparation time; intimidating presence of authorities; and bad translation.

CEE Bankwatch, Greenpeace and WISE demand from the Ministry of Environment of Bulgaria that because of these manipulations, the hearings will be repeated in a fashion that excludes the previously used manipulation techniques. This in order to give the projectant the possibility to profit from critical remarks that fall outside of its own view. Without such a process, the EIA is basically flawed. If these hearings will not be repeated, CEE Bankwatch Greenpeace and WISE advice the Ministry of Environment of Bulgaria not to accept the final EIA report.

Greenpeace and WISE furthermore call on the European Union to closely monitor the decision procedures around the Belene Nuclear Power Plant and avoid a decision based on information manipulation. Nuclear power is not a technique to be handled lightly.

Jan Haverkamp, expert consultant on nuclear issues in Central Europe, interviewed for CEE Bankwatch, Greenpeace and WISE around 50 first hand witnesses of all the different hearings that took place within the Belene EIA. These hearings took place in Nikopol, Belene, Pleven, Svishtov, Sofia and Turnu Magurele (Romania). The report was written together with Petko Kovachev of CEE Bankwatch, who participated in the Sofia hearing and conducted a further series of interviews with participants from other hearings.

Nikopol, Belene, Pleven: lies about employment places

Because the employment situation in the towns of Nikopol, Belene and Pleven is highly problematic, the organisers of the EIA hearing focused in their presentation on the benefits in the form of jobs. According to eye witnesses, organisers told the audience that thousands of jobs would be created in each of the towns. In the different towns different numbers were mentioned, ranging from 7.000 to 14.000 during the building and 1.500 during exploitation.

Reality is that the amount of working places to be created in the region as a whole will not exceed several hundreds. Most of the work related to the NPP requires skilled workers that are not available in the mentioned towns, where unemployment hits mainly a lowly educated part of the population.

This falsely created image was confirmed by representatives from the Nikopol local authorities.

The use of heavily inflated employment figures during hearings constitutes an act of active manipulation.

Svishtov: two buses of people from outside of town, refusal of speaking time to Svishtov citizens, manipulation of facts concerning official town council decisions

The hearing in the town of Svishtov was distorted by the fact that the hearing organisers organised two buses full of people from outside of town to come to the hearing. These people actively blocked possibilities of concerned citizens from Svishtov to speak during the hearing. During a session of the author with the mayor of Svishtov and key functionaries from the municipality, this story was confirmed. As a result, many Svishtov citizens did not get a possibility to speak out during the hearing. This included scientific staff and professors of the Svishtov Economic University, officials from the municipality, local NGOs and ordinary citizens.

In the EIA report, it was furthermore stated on the basis of manipulated formulations of two municipal resolutions that the municipality of Svishtov would be in favour of the Belene project and had called for its continuation. That this is a completely false statement and a manipulation of facts was expressed by several of Svishtov's local authorities as well as NGOs, including Svishtov's mayor Stanislav Blagov. In reality, the municipality of Svishtov adopted several declarations against the completion of the Belene NPP. The false statement was repeated during presentations by NEK staff during following hearings in Sofia and Turnu Magurele (Romania) – in spite of sharp protests from the side of the Svishtov municipality (including its mayor) and NGOs.

The act of staging attendance, as well as the act of actively deforming crucial information constitute acts of active manipulation.

Sofia: low profile announcement and attempts to manipulate speaking time

The hearing in Sofia was not published in mainstream media. Because of that the attendance of the hearing was low.

During the hearing, the hearing organisers tried to severely limit the speaking time of the attendees. In Sofia, the Minister of Energy and Energy Resources participated personally in the EIA hearing. He placed himself amongst the representatives of the investor (NEK) and made a speech at the end of the meeting. In this way he imposed pressure on the participants, which is in violation with the Bulgarian EIA legislation.

The limited publication of the event and the obstruction of proper process during a hearing constitute acts of active manipulation.

Turnu Magurele (Romania): difficult accessible information, lies and low quality translation

Because the Belene NPP is built virtually on the border with Romania, the Ministry of Environment demanded on the basis of the Espoo convention also an EIA hearing in Romania. This was organised by the Romanian Ministry of Environment. The Ministry gave interested parties only access to the full EIA report in the English language over its web-page. This document has a magnitude of 43 MB, which means that it was only accessible for those with a broadband Internet access. The smaller non-technical summary (still 7 MB) was not made available to the Romanian public, nor any material in the Romanian language. This report wants to applaud the availability of the entire report, which was before refused to this author, but it wants to note that the non-

availability of Romanian material and the necessity for high-tech equipment for the only existing material makes access limited.

More problematic was the fact that during the hearing pure lies were presented. This included amongst others the repetition of the lie that the municipality of Svishtov is in favour of the project, as well as the lie that NGOs in Bulgaria are in favour of the project. The organisers even had brought in Mr. Boiko Pavlov Rajghev of the International Centre for Coordination of Ecological Information on the Danube River (ICCEID). In spite of its impressive name, the organisation is a small local Belene group that cannot speak on behalf of any other organisation in Bulgaria. Mr. Rajghev functioned already in the EIA report as “proof” that Bulgarian NGOs were in favour of the Belene project. This was strongly denied from many sides, including a coalition of national and local Bulgarian NGOs, including all major national ones, as well as Greenpeace and WISE. Mr. Rajghev was brought by NEK to Turnu Magurele, where he repeated his statement that NGOs in Bulgaria are in favour and announced that environmental NGOs opposing the project are part of an “environmental mafia”.

The use of false information and the introduction of extreme minority views as representative views to a public that cannot check these claims constitute acts of active manipulation.

General problems for the EIA hearings in Bulgaria and Romania:

The time given for studying the EIA report was set on the legal minimum period of one month. This period is within the EIA law explicitly introduced as a minimum, which is a guiding time for the most simple EIA procedures. The EIA report in this case consists of over 1.500 pages of text. It may not be expected from relatively lay-people and their representing organisations to be able to study this material to its full extent in such a short period. In this case it must be concluded that the quality of public participation was severely impaired by this minimum studying time.

Information within the 30 km zone was only spread in the local media in the towns of Nikopol, Belene, Pleven and Svishtov, but not in the villages. The inhabitants of many villages within 30-km zone were not informed about the EIA hearings at all, thus having no chance to participate or send comments and questions.

There were no hearings in other towns within the 30-km and 100-km zones. This includes the towns of Veliko Tarnovo (regional centre for Svishtov), Rousse (regional centre, situated opposite to Turnu Magurele on the Danube bank), Levski (within 30-km. zone), and others with an average number of inhabitants of 5.000 – 50.000. The Romanian capital Bucharest is also situated within the 100 km zone. No hearing took place here. Inhabitants of all these towns were also not locally informed about the existing hearings.

Conclusion and recommendations

When analysing the techniques used by the organisers of the hearings (disinformation, procedural obstructions, attendance by external organised “public”, defamation, limited spreading of announcements, the use of extreme minority views as representative, intimidating presence of authorities, limited information spreading), the parallels with staged meetings from the area before 1989 in most communist Central European countries are striking. It must be concluded that the hearings because of this manipulation could not fulfil their purpose of giving the project team additional critical information that should lead to improvement of the project.

The author therefore recommends that either the hearings will be done once again and without any manipulation, possibly organised by an external experienced consultancy, or that the Ministry of

Environment of Bulgaria will not accept the final EIA report because it is based on manipulated information gathering.

The author recommends the Ministry of Environment to start an investigation into manipulation of the EIA hearings by its organisers.

The author calls on the European Union to closely and critically follow the decision process around the Belene Nuclear Power Plant in the framework of Bulgaria's accession negotiations. If the mentioned manipulations are to be symptomatic for the Belene decision procedures, this could have serious consequences for the nuclear safety situation in this part of Europe.

For further information:

Ir. Jan Haverkamp

Consultant on issues concerning nuclear energy in Central Europe

mobile telephone: +420.603 569 243

e-mail: jan.haverkamp@wisebrno.cz or jan.haverkamp@diala.greenpeace.org

Ing. Petko Kovachev

CEE Bankwatch

mobile telephone: +359.888 420 453

e-mail: petkok@bankwatch.org

Information on the case of Svishtov can be obtained from Mr. Blagov, mayor:
obshtina@svishtov.com