

## **Nuclear power in Poland: pro-nuclear propaganda with no counter-arguments**

### **Nuclear energy in communist Poland**

Poland's experience with nuclear energy, although not particularly extensive, is nevertheless interesting. The first small experimental reactors were turned on over fifty years ago in Świerk near Warsaw. They served as a training ground for an emerging body of national nuclear energy specialists. The government of the Polish People's Republic had set its sights on the significant development of this field in our country. After years of preparations, the decision to build the first nuclear power station in Poland was taken. This happened in 1982 - just after the imposition of martial law and a temporary stifling of the Solidarity movement. At this point, the most progressive members of society were to be found either in prison or in internment camps. The aforementioned undertaking was not, needless to say, accompanied by any form of public discussion, and especially not an open, civic debate. It is then not surprising that the technology chosen to carry out the venture was of Soviet origin. An area located around 40km from Gdańsk by the Żarnowieckie Lake was allotted to the project. The construction itself did not attract the attention of Poles, and so initially it did not raise widespread objections or opposition. The situation changed dramatically following the 1986 disaster in Chernobyl, today on Ukrainian territory. This event caused general panic among Polish citizens, and the initial lack of reliable information disorientated them and intensified their mistrust towards government. The first reports to appear in the mass media trivialised the disaster, and it was not until several days later that practical advice and recommendations regarding radioactivity counter-measures were issued. A preventative campaign to administer iodine in the form of *Lugol's liquid* was hurriedly organised.

The crisis situation exposed the then government's tendency to conceal inconvenient truths. Polish nuclear energy experts systematically downplayed the extent of the catastrophe, aided by the state-controlled media.

### **Public protests in the shadow of Chernobyl**

Despite all this, the Chernobyl disaster sparked off public protests. Those organised by the pacifist-environmentalist opposition movement "Freedom and Peace" were the most spectacular and decisive. Illegal street demonstrations promoted by Western media and Polish radio stations took place around the country, in Wrocław, Kraków, Gdańsk and Poznań among other places. Resistance, supported by catholic priests and independent scientists alike, was resolute. It consisted in opposition activists distributing illegal information regarding nuclear energy risks, for example. Protests were aimed not only at the construction of a power station in Żarnowiec, but

also at similar projects in Klempicz near Poznań, Darłów and Lublin. A strong public protest movement was organised in Wielkopolska region against the storage of nuclear waste in bunkers at the Międzyrzecki Fortified Zone.

Following the fall of communism, the government of prime minister Mazowiecki, with the active involvement of economy minister Tadeusz Syryjczyk, halted the construction of the nuclear power plant in Żarnowiec. Other plans for the development of nuclear power in Poland were also abandoned. The government's withdrawal was prompted not only by its recognition of the associated risks, but also by the high costs involved and the absence of a major need for this type of energy in a restructured economy.

### **Poland's energy policy for 2030 - nuclear back on the agenda**

In the autumn of 2008 prime minister Donald Tusk announced that the construction of nuclear power plants in Poland is a necessity. In January 2009 a plenipotentiary was appointed for the development of nuclear energy. The government expects the first nuclear power station to be in operation by 2020, and the second two years later. The Polish Energy Group (PGE), a large state corporation, is to oversee the investment. The group is expected to take a 51% share in the consortium responsible for the construction and operation of the power plant. Over the period from 2011 to the end of 2013, PGE will choose the final location. The consortium itself should be created by the end of 2010, and construction should begin by 2016.

The main official document legalising the budget expenses and all actions in the energy sector is the Polish Energy Policy for up to 2030, approved by government in November 2009 (PEP 2030)<sup>1</sup>. The document lists the arguments justifying the construction of at least two nuclear power plants with a power of 6000 MW. According to government experts, this is desirable for the following reasons:

- the need to diversify energy supplies
- the need to replace old power units
- the looming threat of an energy deficit
- climate protection.

Numerous nuclear energy-themed conferences are being organised of late, bringing together representatives from business and political circles. It is rare, however, to hear the voices of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mg.gov.pl/NR/ronlyres/5474D2C2-2306-42B0-B15A-7D3E4E61D1D8/58563/Politykaenergetycznaost.pdf>

opponents during these meetings. Subsequently, tax-payers' money dedicated to this end is starting to flow abundantly: preliminary calculations from the ministry of economy suggest that 450 million zloty will have to be spent between now and 2012 on implementing plans for nuclear energy in Poland, 210 million of which is to come from the state budget.

Support for the nuclear energy development plans is the dominant position among politicians. Political groups present in parliament have unanimously accepted the aforementioned solution. In the Sejm and Senat we hear no objection to plans for developing nuclear power. An unequivocal majority of Polish politicians who hold sway in the media support the idea of building nuclear power stations. On the national political arena only one group stands out – a small party with no parliamentary presence, the "Greens 2004" – which has systematically criticised nuclear energy over many years. Unfortunately, it is not in the measure to enter the main political current, nor can it make its position heard in the media in a substantial way.

Information coming from the business world indicates that only the positive side of nuclear power development is acknowledged in these circles. Planned private-public investment partnerships are seen as goldmines. It is difficult to meet sceptics who question government energy projects in such company.

### **Scientific circles - the dispute between physicists and environmentalists**

The views of Polish scientists vary and depend most of all on their research area. Nuclear power generally receives backing from those who can actively participate in its development, that is nuclear physicists and engineers specialising in related disciplines. Scientists from the Institute for Sustainable Development, on the other hand, are systematically opposed to it. We observe with interest successive statements, unique in scientific circles, issued by European Energy Institute member professor Władysław Mleczarski of the Technical University of Łódź, questioning official estimations of the costs of nuclear power and the safety of the French technology proposed for Poland<sup>2</sup>. Another interdisciplinary scientist, professor Krzysztof Żmijewski, shows an alternative approach to the subject, with an emphasis on monitoring energy use and energy saving. Scientists who are not environmentalists, however, do not publicly and directly oppose nuclear power.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hotmoney.pl/artykul/energia-polska-nie-potrzuje-elektrowni-atomowych-9698> and [http://www.chronmyklimat.pl/lang/pl/page/wywiady/id/15/stronicowanie/1/view/czy\\_polsce\\_potrzebna\\_jest\\_energetyka\\_i\\_adrowa/](http://www.chronmyklimat.pl/lang/pl/page/wywiady/id/15/stronicowanie/1/view/czy_polsce_potrzebna_jest_energetyka_i_adrowa/)

Grzegorz Wiśniewski, one of the leaders of the movement for renewable energy development (OZE), has pointed out that Polish political strategists intentionally underestimate the role of renewables. In his internet blog he writes: “The PEP 2030 postulates that the 15% renewables share in Poland’s final energy use for 2020, required by the climate package and by the 2009/28/WE directive, remains in force for 2030. Earlier proposals cited a 20% share for 2030 (which is the official monitoring indicator of the document coming into force), which was still, in view of the development of renewables worldwide and in the EU, quite a miserly offer...”<sup>3</sup>.

The campaign in favour of nuclear is clearly blocking the development of renewables. Government representatives deny this, but the government’s central document – the PEP 2030 – confirms the accusation, as pointed out by Wiśniewski.

Non-governmental environmental organisations together with the “Greens 2004” party count as the only organisations opposing the planned construction of nuclear power plants in Poland. The actions of public organisations in this field are characterised by relative inactivity and a lack of coordination.

### **Public debate – 9:1 for pro-nuclear propaganda**

Sadly, an analogy can be made between the decision of the leader of communist Poland, Wojciech Jaruzelski, in 1982 and that taken by the prime minister of a democratically elected government, Donald Tusk, in 2008. The similarity concerns more than the subject matter itself – the construction of nuclear power stations in Poland. Neither the first, nor the second decision was widely consulted on with the public. In the case of the second, the public debate between proponents and opponents announced by the SLD government back in 2005 did not take place. The process of familiarising the public and opinion-forming circles with nuclear, on the other hand, was carried out smoothly. Thanks to these actions, a large proportion of society came to believe that there is no longer anything to be afraid of.

In the current public debate around nuclear energy, those “for” are in a clear majority. The media message has evidently been dominated by nuclear physicists who support the development of nuclear energy in Poland. The statements of known politicians and scientific experts alike in the media, on radio and television completely overpower the few messages coming from opponents. I would estimate the ratio of “for” to “against” at 9:1.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://odnawialny.blogspot.com/2009/11/pep2030-oze-traca-atom-zyskuje.html>

Publications and media appearances show almost exclusively the positive side of nuclear energy. As for the drawbacks, the inevitable undesired effects (such as storing waste), and the dangers, little is said. The opponents rarely manage to get themselves heard in the more popular newspapers. Those following this issue, however, will undoubtedly remember an article against nuclear energy by the environment minister, professor Nowicki, which appeared in the *Gazeta Wyborcza* over a year ago. But examples of articles where journalists relate opponents' arguments remain sporadic.

The public is most influenced by arguments appearing in the media. Among these, some are evidently false. At the same time corrections or counterarguments are hardly mentioned, or not at all. Society is presented with a positive story line: we will fulfil the growing energy needs of the country by building nuclear power stations, which, apart from their high efficiency, have the advantage of not emitting carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Propaganda for nuclear energy is based on a few simple arguments:

- the threat of electricity shortages
- the modernity of nuclear power plants
- the environmental advantages of nuclear power
- the wide presence of nuclear plants in other countries, and the ambition of catching up with Europe
- the safety of nuclear plants
- independence from external energy providers and primary energy sources (meaning Russia)

Polish public opinion is strongly divided when it comes to nuclear energy. A large portion of society still remembers Chernobyl, although this has a weakening effect on the current situation. This is most likely due to two factors: time, and a new type of propaganda. Almost twenty years have now passed since the Chernobyl disaster - a more than sufficient period of time to cool strong emotions and for the fear of nuclear to subside. The proponents of nuclear energy have at the same time managed to successfully convince a major part of the public that "new" nuclear technology is completely safe – a blatant untruth. Differences between the modern technology, devoid of all dangers, and the older, soviet one are emphasised.

A survey carried out for Money.pl by SMG/KRC in September 2008 has shown that, among those questioned, there were more opponents of nuclear power stations (47.6%) than those who backed them (42.1%).

Meanwhile, a GfK Polonia survey based on a representative sample of 1000 people concluded that, over 14 months, the number of those in favour of nuclear plants has risen in Poland. In January 2008 they composed 33% of the group studied, and in March 2009 that number went up to 40%. The proportion of those opposing nuclear fell over the same period from 56% to 42%. The number of undecided rose from 11% to 18%.

The data suggests that public acceptance of the construction of nuclear power plants is undoubtedly growing.

### **Nuclear for and against**

The media generally uncritically conveys government messages. It seems that most journalists and media workers are either in favour of the construction of nuclear power stations or, not having their own opinion, serve the political elite. The spontaneous declaration of the editor of one of Poland's best radio stations can serve as an example: "If Poland does not build nuclear power plants, we will source our electricity from coal" (TOK FM, morning news, 4.12.2009). Such simplified and one-sided opinions quickly cement themselves in the public psyche.

Editors and journalists do not seek out people who present opinions to the contrary. Neither do they search through sources of additional information or counterarguments. On the other hand, the opponents of nuclear power development are not particularly active or well organised. They do not have enough clout.

In the nuclear energy debate, the rich stock of facts and estimations giving firm evidence against the construction of nuclear plants is very poorly utilised.

Let us remind ourselves that pro-nuclear propaganda is based around a few arguments. It is worth repeating them here, but this time in conjunction with counterarguments:

- the threat of electricity shortages

**counterargument:** this can be prevented by a series of actions in several parallel directions, such as: energy saving, gradual modernisation of our energy grid and of the whole economy, and a dynamic development of renewable energy sources;

- the modernity of nuclear power plants<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hotmoney.pl/artykul/kraj-polskie-elektrownie-atomowe-beda-groziec-drugim-czarnobylem-10659>

**counterargument:** 99% of currently operational nuclear power stations are technological relics, the lifespan of which is dangerously lengthened, exponentially increasing the risks. New nuclear technology is in the testing phase;

- the environmental advantages of nuclear power

**counterargument:** the operation of nuclear power entails the constant production of radioactive waste, which will litter the earth for thousands of years, constituting an ongoing danger to life;

- the wide presence of nuclear plants in other countries, and the ambition of catching up with Europe

**counterargument:** only two new nuclear plants are being constructed in Europe: in Finland and in France. Some highly developed European countries (Denmark, Austria, Italy) are managing perfectly well without nuclear. The Germans and the Swedes are backing out of nuclear power and developing their alternative energy technologies;

- the safety of nuclear plants

**counterargument:** the plants are safe until the day an incident happens. Serious accidents have taken place quite recently, in 2003 in the Paks nuclear plant in Hungary, and in 2007 and 2009 at the Krümmel nuclear plant in Germany<sup>5</sup>;

- independence from external energy providers and primary energy sources (meaning Russia)

**counterargument:** a new dependence on uranium providers will appear. The only way to avoid the threat of dependence is decentralisation and the diversification of energy sources.

This set of counterarguments can be completed by a few remarks. The costs of building a nuclear power station are incredibly high. The greater part of an investment with this scale of associated expenses turns out not to fit into the initially assigned budget during implementation. Organisational difficulties, usually resulting in delays and further cost increases, are another problem. On top of this, the economic balance of new nuclear plants does not take into account the costs of transforming and storing radioactive waste. The bill for this will be footed by current and future tax-payers.

An even more serious problem than that of costs is that many places on Earth will be littered with waste that will remain radioactive for thousands of years to come. This creates irreversible risks for life on our planet.

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<sup>5</sup> *Kernkraft - Der Krümmel-Monster*, Der Spiegel 29/2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-66055444.html> and *Energia Jadrowa. Mit i rzeczywistość*, Fundacja im Heinricha Bölla, Warszawa 2006, str. 14.

## Conclusion

The debate for which I hope there is still time needs completing with the counterarguments mentioned above. A discussion about nuclear power without full knowledge of the associated costs, the radioactive waste and the risks involved is dishonest. The fact that there is no talk of an alternative strategy of energy development is worrying. The absence of an open debate prevents us from reaching the right decision.

Those with valid counterarguments regarding the construction of nuclear plants should themselves make contact with the media, and through it with society and politicians. The opponents of nuclear energy must push for a public debate that will address little-known arguments, or those so far left unsaid, on an equal footing.

The biggest responsibility for taking the right decision finally rests on the decision makers, that is to say the politicians. Let us not forget, however, that they are neither energy specialists nor environmental experts. Their decision is determined not by those who are most in the right, but by those who are most convincing.

In a democratic country we can require politicians to respect a different protocol when it comes to decision making to that in an authoritarian state. This is why all citizens have a responsibility to make use of the available democratic procedures.

The sustainable development of our country is being decided today, and the choice of energy supply is a determining factor. A real threat exists that we will commit to a technology which is past its peak, and faces a future of neverending unresolved problems. Abandoning the construction of nuclear power stations in Poland could accelerate our country's entry into the truly modern current of developing an economy that uses alternative energy sources.

*Radosław Gawlik<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Radosław Gawlik is Polish politician, ecologist, he was a member of the Polish Sejm in the 10th, 1st, 2nd and 3rd Sejm Term. Vice minister of the Environment in the government of Jerzy Buzek. Director of the Eko-Unia Ecological Association ([www.eko-unia.org.pl](http://www.eko-unia.org.pl)), member of the Zieloni 2004 party.