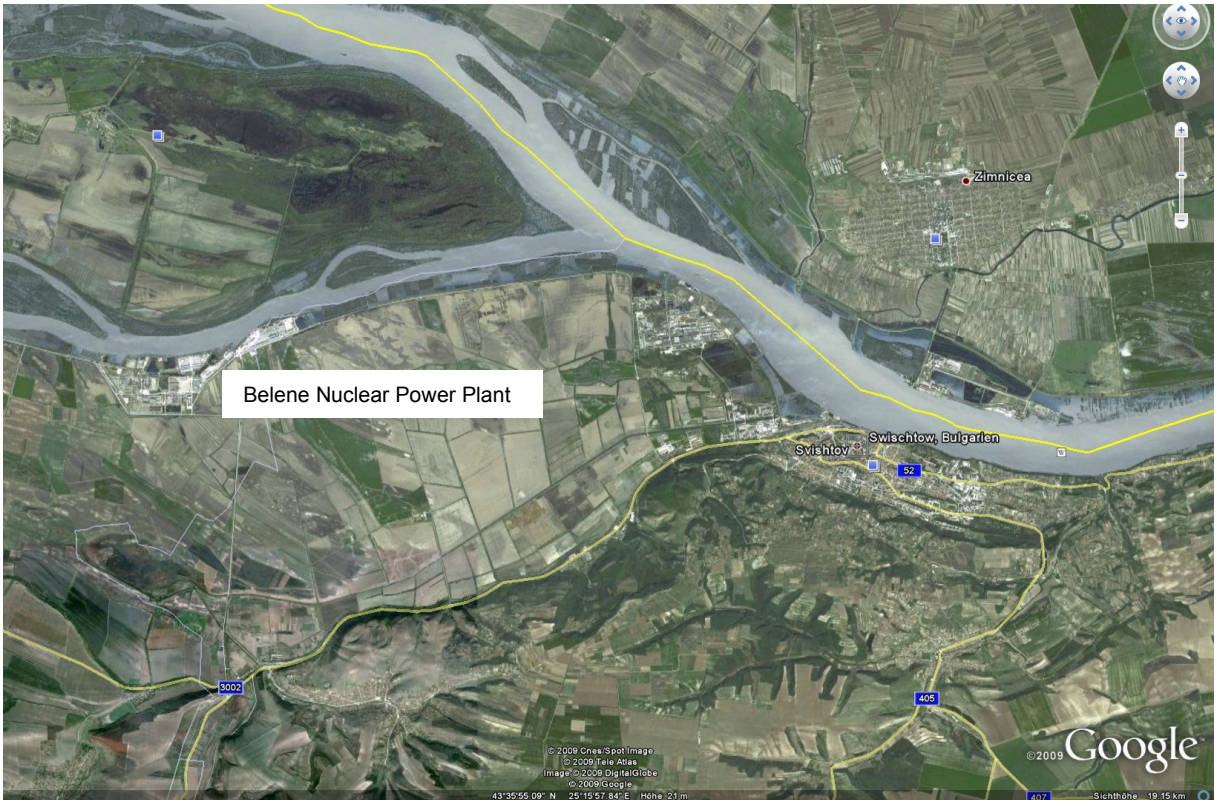
Antinuclear Summit Belene in Bulgaria in August 2009

The NGO Summit in Belene took place at the right time, never before a nuclear power plant project came so quickly and so heavily close to failure. The new government led by prime minister Boyko Borrisov put the project of constructing a nuclear power plant at Belene on a hold, mainly due to cost issue. Instead of 4 billion euro, which was the official prize tag announced by the former government, the new energy minister talks about costs amounting to reach 10 billion euro. The main obstacle for cancelling this NPP are the contracts which already were signed with the Russian NPP supplier Atomstroyexport – the threat of a “very cold winter for Bulgaria” was already dropped by Russian politicians.

On August 27 we started our summit. At a press conference in the press centre of Sofia I wondered shortly which Bulgarian pop star the dozens of journalists and camera men are waiting for to make an appearance, until I realized that the 20 or 30 journalists in the big room are expecting us to start. After one hour of press conferencing we answered a few more questions and took off with the bus to Shvistov – a Bulgarian small town approximately 25 km away from the NPP Belene – both located directly on the Danube.

People gathering mussels in the Danube river.



BeleNE is an NGO coalition of around 20 Bulgarian NGOs, which has been organising the resistance against the construction of the NPP Belene in the past years. End of August, 27 – 30, supporters came to a major protest event – Global 2000, Greenpeace, Urgewald/Germany, Calla from the Czech Republic and many other NGOs from whole of Europe. Many young people crossed over from Romania, which is just on the other side of the Danube. We met Albena Simeonova, a charismatic woman who is tirelessly fighting the nuclear power plant – and keeping together the bunch of environmentalists of BeleNE. She shows us around on her organic farm which she owns in the close neighbourhood of the NPP site.

The well in her garden was built by her grandfather, before the communists killed him at the infamous labor camp for political prisoners in Belene in the 60ies. Even nowadays this island of the Danube serves as a prison, reachable only via a bridge and closed to the public.

Back to the present time: Right now the mayor of Shvistov (11 km away from the NPP) is holding his opening speech of our conference, followed by the first speaker Mr. Georgi Kastchiev. He was for many years heading the Nuclear Regulatory Body of Bulgaria and gained a very profound knowledge of the Russian reactor type VVER and the Bulgarian safety culture. In addition to the risks arising form the high seismic hazards in the region, he considers this nuclear power plant project as irresponsible and demands this project to be cancelled. Currently he is working at the University of Vienna at the Institute for Risk Research.

These pictures show the heavy damages caused by the 1977 earthquake in Shvistov, which killed 120 people

We find a taxi driver who is ready to take us to the NP site, however, he speaks mostly or to be more precise, only Bulgarian. With this bright yellow taxi we are on the road to Belene, hoping we will be able to get close enough to the site to take pictures of the construction site inspite of the usual “no-picture taking” and “everything-else-forbidden” policies, which are characteristic for all NPP. 15 km of road holes, sun flower fields and horse carts in

the flat landscape later we made it: numerous buildings stretched out on both sides of the street in the late summer heat.

No living soul to be seen. Here and there one single truck delivers some concrete ramble from the other side of the kilometres long area. This ramble obviously stems from the demolition of buildings. We seem to be observing a construction site in reverse mode: Current activity at the site consists of taking apart the buildings which were erected during the first attempt of construction an NPP at this location. Meanwhile even most of the components, like steam generators, were returned back to Russia already. Back in 1992 completion of Belene was stopped for environmental reasons, also the Soviet Academy of Sciences declared the area to be unsuited for a nuclear power plants because of high seismic activity. Also this second go now foresees using Russian reactor technology, however of the newest type, the AES-92. It is so brand new, that is not in use anywhere yet, so no operational experience is available. One exception there is, which is China, where a so called AES-91 was built in Tianwan. But there is very little to no information on this reactor and its construction; this makes us wonder, how the EU Commission or the German would-be-investor RWE arrived at their conclusion, that this reactor would be safe. We requested information from the EU-Commission, from RWE board members several times; information on this „mystery reactor“ seems hard to get by, probably the only reactor blueprint got lost somewhere between Moscow and Essen.

At walking speed we drive around the fenced-in site, taking pictures through the fence: rotting cargo containers, administrative buildings, new installations for assembling, some older equipment like the cranes received a new coat of paint of bright yellow – like those where the reactor is supposed to be standing already for years. A rusty watchtower is looking down on us.

Though we did not enter the NPP site, which is fenced in with barbed wire, a white car stops a few meters away. The two men who got out, made furiously clear, that the signs banning photographing also apply to us. Since we do not intend to provoke any encounter with plant security or local police, we jump back into the car and take off for Belene town. After a short walk over the square, quiet a surprise is awaiting us: Two police men stood next to our taxi: the plant director had informed the police about our visit and had us followed to Belene! The police politely informed us that we were not allowed to take pictures of the plant and demanded to be shown the pictures in the camera. Luckily we were able to show the newest pictures, which caught our impressions of the small town and the friendly people we met there!

The policemen were not into following this up and having their mission accomplished, they quickly disappeared. According to our Bulgarian lawyer the plant management did not have the right to have us followed all the way to Belene, taking pictures on a public road not being a legal offence according to Bulgarian law.

When I informed Albena Simeonova about our unpleasant encounter, who was busy with the preparations with our field trip of all conference participants to the NPP Belene, I found that the plant management had informed her, that the planned visit to the site would not be possible. We also had to count on the plant security looking after us when we get there for our action. Media and plant security and personnel have already been waiting for us, when we arrived at the site in the afternoon with several dozens of activists.
We enrolled our banners and two NGO representatives demanded to be let in and talk to the management.

Because no one was let in, all activists go to the fence and look for it: They look for the 400 million euro which dis into the NPP Belene so far. Where did the money go? Nothing more to be seen but some metal scrap from the 1990ies!

By now we are clearly under surveillance. The ladies and gentlemen who are obviously plant security and sitting in their parked cars, claim to be working for local TV. However, they never leave their cars to do some reporting. We decided to head for the information centre;

which it is towering above the road into the landscape. But, here we are not welcome either as the information centre seems to be closed all the time. The security people who are watching us, make a guess and suggest, that the information centre might be only for officials? Transparency ends at the barbed wire the nuclear power plant is fenced in with.

At the end the million dollar question: Whose quote is this?

“Go out there to Belene, you will hardly see more than a grass field. Over 400 million Euro were spent on consultants to tell us, how to turn grass into concrete and back again. Every five or six years grass was turned into concrete and back again.” (31 August 2009, Mr. Simeon Djankov, Finance minister of Bulgaria).

The Bulgarian government is expected to take a decision on whether the construction of the NPP Belene will be cancelled during fall 2009.

Watch:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhJAyJlS5wc&feature=PlayList&p=788BCF45F10C85F2&index=0

and part 2:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5AawYSba2w&feature=PlayList&p=788BCF45F10C85F2&index=1

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