

Belarus May Destroy The Last Large European Swamps

Belarus is on the verge of breaching one of its serious international ecological commitments. If the government plans to extinguish Belarusian swamps goes ahead, this could have implications for the rest of Europe.

This summer, the Belarusian government launched a new initiative on energy generation, which will lead to the extinction of the last large swamps in Belarus. These swamps are the only natural territories of their kind in the European temperate climate zone, which were not disturbed by human activities. The Government Decision №794 of 17 June 2011 approved peat extraction in some areas including eight natural bogs in the country. In effect that would lead to extermination of that peat.

The new peat extraction project has been initiated by the Energy Ministry. Their reasoning is simple – Belarus is seeking for new energy sources as Russian gas and oil are getting ever more expensive. In Soviet times, Belarus was well-known for drying the bogs and producing peat fuel. It is not surprising that in times of harsh economic crisis, the idea of using old solutions seems so attractive. In particular, the Energy Ministry considers peat as the main way to provide energy for cement works. This cement will be needed urgently when the Chinese investment plans to build new facilities in Belarus will be implemented.

The author of the new peat extraction program, Dr Ivan Lishtvan of the National Academy of Sciences, argued that out of 4.4 billion ton of peat in Belarus 3.3 billion tons might be extracted for energy needs. Besides non-protected peatlands, he proposed to include peat bogs located both in

national protected areas and in internationally-known reservations such as the Biarezinsky Biospheric Reservation, the National Park “Belavezhskaya Puscha” and the National Park “Prypiatski”.

The Ministry of the Environment is strictly against the new program, and its employees have clearly protested against it even in media. That came as surprise because open quarrels between government institutions in the media are almost unheard of. Yet the place of the Ministry of the Environment in the official hierarchy and in the governmental decision-making process is a very low one. Therefore, the ministry cannot overrule the decision after it was taken at the top of the hierarchy.

Interestingly, all estimations underlying the project are questionable. Another scientist, Aliaksandar Kazulin of National Academy of Sciences says that the country does not have such large peat deposits. The last study made by the Academy and the Environment Ministry based on the Google satellite images proved that the area of Belarusian swamps estimated by the Energy Ministry was largely exaggerated. Previously the researchers had estimated that there might be about 1.4 billion hectares of undisturbed swamps. Now they believe there are just 862.6 thousand ha – 59% of which are seriously disrupted by neighboring peat extraction and melioration. Accordingly, the unextracted deposits make up not 4.4 billion tons but only 160 million tons.

In Minsk, those working on the protection and re-wetting of peat lands have been utterly shocked when learning about the Government's decision. Firstly, some of the areas to be dried out and exploited are protected natural territories of international significance that are covered at least partly by three major international environmental conventions – the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, the conventions on migrating species and on biodiversity.

Secondly, some of the protected areas are included in a large-scale project on peat bogs regeneration carried out with significant contributions by the UN and other foreign donors. The money has been given to the government under the condition of sustainable bogs' use in the future. Among the targeted areas there are the peat lands of "Dakudauski" and "Morachna" which have been regenerated recently as part of a UNDP/ Global Environmental Facility (GEF) project. USD 1 million given by international donors, including the money of the Federal Republic of Germany, were spent on the project.

Violating international ecological commitments does not seem to be a wise step at a moment when Belarus is internationally isolated and ostracized by its European neighbors. Ecological projects are some of the few that the international community is ready to support in Belarus even when the political climate is as chilled as it is under the given circumstances. It is in the interest of the European countries to protect and regenerate Belarusian swamps – which are unique in Europe – as they contribute to a better climate in the whole region. The donors are, however, not likely to continue the projects when it gets clear that climate regeneration is clearly not on the priority list of the Belarusian government.

Moreover, the money coming to Belarus through those large projects constitutes an inflow of the bitterly needed hard currency. Given the fact that the project means are linked to the condition of sustainability, Belarus might be about to ruin further chances to profit from international money. For those working on the projects it is hard to imagine any further cooperation with Belarus if their work will be destroyed for the purpose of gaining cheap energy.

The consequences of the new program will not only be felt on the level of international cooperation but also throughout the country. In addition to threatening rare species, the climate in Belarus will become drier. Although up to now Belarus was famous for its excellent freshwater deposits, they depend on

the swamps system, and cannot be sustained without swamps. The swamps prevent large-scale floods and they take in water after snow melt and big rainfalls.

Apart from those practical arguments, the annihilation of the swamps also contains a sentimental element for many Belarusians: They traditionally see themselves as “people from the swamps”, the bogs and wetlands play an integral role in the national consciousness. Large swamps are characteristic for Belarus, a country that possesses neither sea access nor mountains. Belarus without swamps is unimaginable for many Belarusians and will deprive them of one the few specifics that can be a competitive advantage for the development of tourism in Belarus.

Although in private, those Belarusians knowing about the government plans complain about them, they are far from staging a protest or establishing a civil action committee as it would be the case in other European countries in a similar situation.

It seems that the new energy policy is just another example of arbitrary decision-making by the Belarusian government. If the government – which does not report to anyone but the president – had thought twice or undertaken serious inter-ministerial consultations on the matter, it would have been clear that more is at stake than just a few swamps. In the face of the crisis, the government again fails to seek new ways but stays with old Soviet models and recipes.

However, not all is lost – the extraction of peat has not yet started. Hopefully, the government will understand in time that it risks losing international support and money as well as selling the country’s ecological future for some cheap energy.

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