

The Chernobyl politics in Belarus: interplay of discourse-coalitions

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In this article, Chernobyl is approached as a concept to convey the meaning and sense not so much of a geographical place and the fact of an accident of a particular nuclear power plant, but of a socio-political problem that resulted from the accident on the Chernobyl NPP. Despite the shutdown of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, it still influences the social and political reality. Chernobyl appears in this article as a result of work of interpretation of the aftermaths of the Chernobyl disaster by different actors: state bodies, political parties, NGOs and scientific institutions. This article touches upon different discourses, story-lines through which the consequences of the accident on the Chernobyl plant are managed in Belarus from 1986 to 2008. Applying the methodology of the discourse-coalitions (Hajer 1995), a constructivist analysis of the Chernobyl politics is represented. The main idea of the article is to identify the discourse-coalitions within the Chernobyl policy, the actors and story-lines they utter. This article reveals the role of the discourse-coalitions within the nuclear policy in Belarus, challenged by the construction of a nuclear power plant.

Key words: discourse-coalition, Chernobyl disaster, Belarus, nuclear discourse

THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

On April 26, 1986, the fourth reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded. This resulted in emission of a significant quantity of radioactive matter to the atmosphere; in particular, iodine and caesium were released in significant amounts. The consequences of this explosion were of medical, ecological, social, and political nature and have impacted dramatically the territories and the population (Chernousenko 1991).

Over twenty years have passed since then, but the consequences of the Chernobyl accident are still present and perceived: the radiating contamination of the territories, the progressing cancer morbidity of the population (Yablokov, Nesterenko 2007). Due to the scale of the accident, not only the environmental and humanitarian issues, but also such issues as the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes scientific research and the socio-political situation in the most affected states which were Belarus, Ukraine and Russia were risen.

From the very first days, the accident at the Chernobyl plant, including its after-effects, appeared as an object of political *designing*: concealment of the trustworthy information about the scale of the accident consequences, acceptance of inadequate administrative measures to liquidate the consequences; carrying out scientific research and experiments could be considered as attempts of political actors to operate and frame the post-accident reality. Therefore, Chernobyl appears as a construction and as a set of social and political practices.

Chernobyl's impact on social and political life concerns also the issue of symbolization of the Chernobyl accident: transformation from the name of location where the NPP was situated into a set of images, symbols and signs transferring various senses and meanings. Chernobyl

became a “polysemous symbol” (Phillips 2004: 159) through which people try to understand, to make sense and to interpret the accident at the Chernobyl plant and its aftermaths.

Hajer defines an environmental policy-making as “the socially accepted set of practices through which we try to face what has become known as the ecological crisis” (Hajer 1996: 2). According to this definition, the Chernobyl policy is considered as a set of actions and measures for the liquidation and overcoming of the Chernobyl accident’s aftermath, and the Politics of Chernobyl is viewed as a set of social and political practices through which Chernobyl is focused and framed.

The Chernobyl policy remains one of the most significant and large-scale parts of policy-making in Belarus. From 1991, the Chernobyl policy in Belarus is realized through governmental programmes where the major actors are the government bodies such as the department on overcoming the consequences of the accident in Chernobyl within the Ministry of Emergencies, named “Goskomchernobyl”. In 1990, the assembly of the Supreme Soviet of the 12th convocation adopted the resolution about the measures to intensify the realization of the Government programme, and the title of the Chernobyl policy was changed from “liquidation” of to “overcoming” the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. This change allows to outline two different approaches to managing the Chernobyl after-effects and also different discourse-coalitions: the “liquidation” discourse-coalition and the “overcoming” discourse-coalition.

The policy of “liquidation” of the consequences was directed rather to elimination of the physical consequences of the accident, in particular to reduction of radiating pollution of the territories and doses to the population, and the policy of “overcoming” was oriented to regulation of social changes, in particular resettlement, social mobilisation and population health. Thus, the discourse of the “liquidation of consequences” is based on the idea of the possible elimination of the consequences of the accident at the Chernobyl NPP and supposes that the effects of radiation are *reversible* and could be physically liquidated by certain measures, whereas the discourse of the “overcoming the consequences” is focused on the idea of the *irreversibility* of the consequences of the accident which could not be completely liquidated; its influence could be only minimized by certain measures like resettlement of the population from the contaminated areas.

If the Chernobyl policy is embodied mostly by governmental institutions, the Chernobyl politics represents the area where political actions of other actors are possible. There are oppositional political parties, like the Belarusian Popular Front, which have initiated the Chernobyl March in 1989 and still participate in the definition of the Chernobyl issues in the political agenda; scientific institutions and scientists working on the consequences of the accident; public organizations dealing with affected territories and groups; and independent and state mass media illustrating scientific controversies and public debates on Chernobyl issues.

From the State point of view, Chernobyl represents a set of problems that the Chernobyl policy is trying to solve. However, some scientists, public organizations and politicians believe that Chernobyl requires redefinition. In the late eighties and early nineties, there were strong debates about the definition of Chernobyl among political parties, deputies of the Supreme Soviet, writers and scientists. And this is the question whether this “struggle for meaning” recommences at present. In other words, the aspect mentioned above can be seen as a dynamics of constructing Chernobyl not only as a policy but also as systems of certain senses and values. Schmid points out that “Chernobyl” functioned as an effective rhetorical device for opposing future nuclear projects and for challenging energy experts’ authority; it was also invoked to create solidarity and national unity and, thus, to authorize continuity and promote

normalization (Schmid 2004: 355). Chernobyl is framed not only as a semantic field, but also as a field of opposition, struggle, and control over definitions and meanings.

Different definitions of Chernobyl, suggested and supported by different political actors, become the bases that divide people into different groups and coalitions (Hajer 1995). To analyse the coalitions that appear within the Chernobyl policy, the concept of the discourse-coalition can be applied. The following concepts are important for this approach: “interactions of discourses”; “discursive hegemony”, and institutional context as a primary condition of discourse formation. “Discourse has been defined as a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations, which is produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities” (Hajer 1995: 60). Hajer defines discourse-coalitions first of all as “an ensemble of a set of story-lines”, also as an ensemble of “the actors who utter these story-lines” and then as an ensemble of “the practices on which this discursive activity is based” (Hajer 1995: 65).

MANIFESTATIONS OF DISCOURSE-COALITIONS

Talking about various discourse-coalitions within the Chernobyl policy, it is possible to point out the following periods of their interaction and interrelation: the period from 1986 to 1989 is the period of *domination* of the “liquidation” discourse-coalition; 1989–1991 is the period of *confrontation* of the coalitions of “liquidation” and “overcoming”; 1991–1997 is the period of *cooperation* of discourses on “liquidation” and “overcoming”; 1998–2000 is the *domination* of the “liquidation” discourse.

The discourse-coalition based on the “liquidation” idea appeared in the post-emergency period and initially was very controversial. A significant feature of the initial period was an almost total lack of official information. As Yaroshinskaya (2006) notes, during the first week after the accident “no information appeared, which resulted in panic among people”. Meanwhile, there were small notes in newspapers, titled “Sovmin (Council of Ministers) of the USSR warns”, which did not bear any information, except that it confirmed the fact of an accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant.

As a consequence of the decisions and actions undertaken by Soviet authorities, Chernobyl was shaped as a system of contradictions, false senses and meanings, misinformation spread by the state bodies. Thus, one more aspect of Chernobyl as a problem appeared; it was the problem of knowledge and information. The information space around the Chernobyl disaster was full of rumours and gossips, jokes and anecdotes about the situation, causes and eventual consequences of radioactive contamination. Jokes and anecdotes concerning Chernobyl, radiation and the affected territories became part of popular culture, were widespread and until now have remained part of national folklore (Kürti 1988). Thus, symbolically Chernobyl began to be associated with something that is not clear, forbidden, hidden and unknown. People had to deal with misinformation from the official sources, on the one hand, and with information coming from their personal experience or experiences of others, on the other hand.

The “liquidation” discourse is a discourse of “interdictions”, which restricts social activity, especially the everyday practices of involved population: hygiene practices, rules of behaviour for people living in contaminated areas. This discourse cannot respond to Chernobyl challenges: none can limit Chernobyl as it is not a place which can be fenced; its influence overcomes all physically possible restrictions, its influence is invisible and has not yet been perceived in full (Beck 1986; Anders 2002). Therefore, the Chernobyl policy is based on the

localisation of Chernobyl as the location around the plant, zones dangerous to dwelling and life, and has also a symbolic meaning. Attempts to get rid of Chernobyl, i. e. to liquidate the consequences, at the state level caused a deep penetration of Chernobyl into political and social practices. In other words, managing the post-Chernobyl reality by the state allowed Chernobyl to become the core of the political and social reality. For instance, a special state body (Committee on Chernobyl Affairs) was established; moreover, some commemorative actions (annual manifestations, monuments, thematic expositions, Chernobyl folklore) were organised and are still maintained.

The “liquidation” discourse is based on the idea of a possible re-construction of the pre-accident reality: the former way of life and relations between the state and society. In other words, the discourse of “liquidations of consequences” is a discourse of a safe society or, rephrasing Beck’s thesis, “no-risk society” (a society without risk). And referring to the Soviet context of politics of science, this thesis could be also presented as “a society which has overcome the risk”. The major rhetorical instrument of this story-line is radiation and the risk of radioactive contamination; as they are basic sources of danger and anxiety, they can easily be used for “designing” the post-Chernobyl reality.

During the period from 1989 to 1991, an alternative discourse emerged. It was promoted by some political transformations: the election of the People’s Deputies of the USSR in the spring of 1989 was organised under the new Law on Elections of the People’s Deputies of the USSR, expanding the possibilities of the promotion and election of candidates and the election to the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR in 1990.

Formation and development of the “overcoming” discourse became possible due to political and institutional transformations and was finalised during the assemblies of the Supreme Soviet of the 11th and 12th convocations. For example, in 1990 the assembly of the Supreme Soviet of the 12th convocation adopted the resolution about the measures to intensify the realization of the Government programme which changed the title of the Chernobyl policy from “liquidation” to “overcoming” the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. This change allows to outline two discourse-coalitions: “liquidation” and “overcoming”.

It is necessary to point out that the “overcoming” discourse was an anti-Soviet discourse and had some elements of nationalist discourse in it. For example, the use of the Chernobyl catastrophe in the political programme of the Belarusian Popular Front in 1989 in a way was to construct the national unity and to develop the anticommunist rhetoric. However, the basic element of the opposition to the “liquidation” discourse was the national scientific discourse which opposed the adoption of the scientific conception of “35 Rem”, elaborated by the Soviet scientists. With the acceptance of the Concept of Residing in the Territories Polluted by Radionuclides as a Consequence of the Accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in 1990, a new stage in the interplay of the “liquidation” and “overcoming” discourses-coalitions began in Belarus. This concept introduces the principle of *acceptable risk* according to which any, even the smallest, dose of radiation can have bad consequences for health. The story-line that uses the discourse-coalition of “overcoming” is based on the threat and risk of radiation to human life and environment. Following this story-line, consequences of the Chernobyl disaster could not be *liquidated completely*; however, some effects of the Chernobyl disaster could be *overcome*.

The period 1991–1997 can be defined as a period of cooperation of discourses-coalitions of “liquidation” and “overcoming” in the Chernobyl policy-making. It is a period of the development of the Chernobyl legislation, working out the first governmental programmes, public

scientific discussions and activity of public organizations. Thus, in this period important laws were put in force, such as the Law on the Social Protection of the Citizens Who Suffered from the Accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Plant and the Legal Regime of the Territories with Radioactive Pollution as a Consequence of the Accident at Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. Regarding scientific discussions, two things have to be mentioned. There are the debate that took place in scientific structures and in the mass media on the adoption of the Concept of Protective Measures during the Regenerative Period for the Population Living in the Territory of Belarus, Exposed to the Radioactive Pollution due to Chernobyl Disaster in 1995, and the work of a special commission on atomic engineering development in Belarus in 1998 and acceptance of the moratorium on building a nuclear power plant in Belarus. These two were the last examples of cooperation between two discourses-coalitions as later a shift towards the discourse-coalition on “liquidation” happened.

Despite the fact that currently the official Chernobyl policy in Belarus is carried out under the Government Programme on Overcoming and Minimization of Consequences of the Accident at the Chernobyl Plant, it is characterised by a return towards the paradigm of “liquidation of consequences.” This can be seen, first of all, in discursive practices of the official actors (executive bodies, President, and research institutions) who use the story-line of the discourse-coalition of “liquidation”: development and revival of the affected territories, reduction of scientific research, reduction of benefits for “Chernobyl” social groups and building a new nuclear power plant in Belarus. Thus, the discourse on “liquidations of consequences” became a discourse of political power whose strategy is to minimise the presence of Chernobyl in social and political practices.

THE FIGURES OF CHERNOBYL DISCOURSE

The decision concerning the construction of a nuclear plant was taken on January 15, 2008 at a session of the Security Council of Belarus headed by President Alexander Lukashenko. After that, the nuclear project obtained not only a strongly pronounced political design, but also a symbolical significance and legitimating power. First of all, this project is a source of legitimacy for the political power, and only in the second turn it is a source of energy.

The nuclear discourse reappears in Belarus in the field of policy-making at the beginning of the 2000s since the first initiatives on the construction of a nuclear plant in the territory of Belarus. Since 2006, the planning of a nuclear plant has turned from the energetic outlook of Lukashenko’s regime to the political project expressing not only the rational calculation but also the political will. The construction of a nuclear plant is a long-term project involving different public actors and answering not only the economic and political demands of Belarus, but also the political and geopolitical ambitions of President Lukashenko.

On the one hand, the project of a nuclear power plant successfully moves ahead and the public actors are mobilized to participate not only in the implementation of the most ambitious state project in Belarus, but also in the process of construction of a new semantic and symbolical space which would be the nuclear policy. On the other hand, as the project of a nuclear power plant goes on, the rupture between supporters and opponents of the realization of this project increases and sets up a collision of the discourse-coalitions of “liquidation” and “overcoming” forming the nuclear discourse.

The nuclear discourse and nuclear policy in process can be analyzed in the context of the previous discursive practices. In this case, the term of *package* (Gamson, Modigliani 1989) can be applied. This term can be designated as semantic frameworks, namely as a set of symbols

designing and transferring the basic meanings through linguistic structures (Gamson, Modigliani 1989: 3). According to Gamson and Modigliani, the nuclear discourse is expressed in the change of various semantic frameworks, namely *progress* and *energy independence*. The idea of progress, or the development of society and technologies, and also the idea of independence from other energy sources, in particular oil and gas, were the basic arguments of the nuclear discourse at various stages of the development of the use of nuclear energy. If to apply *packages* to the nuclear discourse in the BSSR and Belarus, it is possible to allocate the following semantic frameworks and the periods. In the BSSR, until 1986 it was possible to speak about the domination of the idea of progress in the nuclear discourse, with an accent both on safety of the use of nuclear energy and on the victory of humankind over energy of the atom. Since 1986, after the accident at the Chernobyl plant and up to the 2000s, in Belarus the anti-nuclear discourse or elements of the risk discourse of using the nuclear energy dominated to a higher degree. During that period, such decisions as abolition of the construction of a nuclear plant near Minsk and Vitebsk and the adoption of the ten years' moratorium on the construction of any nuclear unit in the territory of Belarus were taken. Since 2006, the building of the nuclear power plant has marked a new stage in the development of the nuclear discourse in Belarus. At this stage, it is necessary to note the domination of the semantic frameworks based on the idea of energy independence, with an accent on its economic and social necessity and also on the safety of exploitation of nuclear energy.

The symbolical framework formed by the Chernobyl policy induced the appearance of the nuclear policy in Belarus. In other words, the development of nuclear power was almost impossible in the conditions of implementation of the Chernobyl policy; therefore, the coexistence of the nuclear and Chernobyl policies in the Belarusian political sphere is improbable. The acceptance of the moratorium on building nuclear objects in the territory of Belarus for 10 years by the Belarusian parliament in 1998 was, on the one hand, the major condition of the implementation of the Chernobyl policy; on the other hand, this decision blocked the development of the nuclear policy in Belarus. For this reason, the domination of the "liquidation" discourse-coalition with the main rhetorical device of reducing the influence of Chernobyl on social and political practices to the minimum in the 2000s surrendered to the discourse of using nuclear energy safely.

The necessity of changes in the Chernobyl policy becomes the major element in the political discourse. These changes will allow the development of the nuclear policy in Belarus, and the "liquidation" discourse-coalition is the rhetorical instrument that allows the introduction of changes in the Chernobyl policy.

The discourse of President Lukashenko during the requiem meeting at Komarin on April 26, 2009 designated the basic priorities of the Chernobyl policy with the correction of the decision of the construction of a nuclear power plant. The head of the Belarusian state designated, first of all, that Belarus had entered a new stage of the Chernobyl policy: "The main goal is transition from rehabilitation to the development of the territories affected, with the obligatory preservation of all the necessary measures on radiation protection of the population" (Lukashenko 26 04 2009). In the context of development of the affected territories, the idea of revival, restoration of the former way of life in the affected territories is actively used in Lukashenko's discourse: "We will revive this land whatever the price. We will restore the country in this part, instead of groaning and crying. <...> Now it is important not just to minimize the consequences of Chernobyl, but also to create normal industrial and living conditions so that people can be sure of tomorrow" (Lukashenko 26 04 2009). The elements of risk and

biopolitics appear in Lukashenko's discourse in the context of the new policy as an argument confirming the necessity of the revival of these territories, but also as an argument illustrating that of prior importance in the Chernobyl policy is not the health of a person but the physical condition of the population: "In Braghin, more people are born than die already, indicating that the life in the region is improving" (Lukashenko 26 04 2009).

Besides, an important element of the biopolitical discourse is the discourse of categorization of the population. In the context of the new stage of the Chernobyl policy, there is no place for the former classifications and categorization of the affected population, which means that there is no place for post-Chernobyl social distinctions: "Without forgetting the tragedy of Chernobyl, we have ceased dividing people into Chernobyl and non-Chernobyl people. From this year, we start to revive the contaminated territories promptly" (Lukashenko 26 04 2009). This tendency of the Chernobyl policy can be interpreted as the future change of the social structure. Such groups of the population as "resettlers" and "liquidators" will disappear.

Elements of risk discourse are present in the discourse about the new Chernobyl policy in the form of a discourse about the safety of population during the revival of the affected territories: "Question number one will be the safety of our citizens. If you see where it is possible to plough, then plough. But it is necessary to strengthen control over the food produced" (Lukashenko 26 04 2009).

Concerning the institutional changes of the Chernobyl policy in Lukashenko's discourse, it is necessary to determine two basic tendencies. First, reorientation of financial resources and, as a consequence, of the governmental Chernobyl programme which were the basic instruments implementating the Chernobyl policy: "All the funds provided for Chernobyl programmes will be reoriented for the restoration of these regions". As already noted above, this change only confirms the assumption that Chernobyl in the policy-making will be reduced exclusively to the idea of restoration and revival of the territories which have suffered from the accident at the Chernobyl plant.

Secondly, an important institutional change in the Chernobyl policy could be the liquidation of the main governmental institution, Goskomchernobyl, a department on overcoming the consequences of the accident in Chernobyl within the Ministry of Emergencies: "Nothing will go on until we liquidate the department within the Ministry of Emergencies, and we submit those questions to the governors at the local level" (Lukashenko, 26 04 2009). The disappearance of the unique political structure of the Chernobyl policy testifies to the open strategy of the power connected not so much to the change of the institutional design of the Chernobyl policy but to the "liquidation" of all the signs of the Chernobyl policy, specifying the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster for Belarus. From this point of view, the existence of the Department of Nuclear and Radiation Safety and the Department on Overcoming the Consequences of the Accident at Chernobyl NPP becomes almost impossible.

The Chernobyl discourse not only interplayed with the nuclear discourse but also was replacing the nuclear policy in Belarus. After the withdrawal of the nuclear weapons and the announcement of Belarus "a nuclear-free territory" and also upon introduction of the moratorium on building nuclear objects in the territory of Belarus, the nuclear discourse and the existence of the nuclear policy became almost impossible. The implementation of the Chernobyl policy first displaced and then replaced the development of nuclear energy in Belarus, both from the political agenda and from the political discourse.

CONCLUSION

The interrelation between the Chernobyl discourse and the nuclear discourse is an example of an interplay of two discourses-coalitions (“liquidation” and “overcoming”) and can be characterized by the domination of the “liquidation” discourse-coalition. Exactly, the story-line of this discourse-coalition allows the development of nuclear energy. The Chernobyl discourse will gradually give way to the nuclear discourse; at the same time, the Chernobyl policy will concede to the development of the nuclear policy in Belarus. The simultaneous implementation of the Chernobyl recovering programme and the construction of a nuclear power plant in Belarus is practically impossible. These political projects lie not just in different but rather in opposite symbolic and semantic fields; moreover, they involve different public actors. With the beginning of operation on the first power unit of the nuclear power plant in Belarus, the Chernobyl policy will be practically stopped. And following the logic of the dominating discourse-coalition, the consequences of the accident at the Chernobyl plant will be completely *liquidated*. For this reason, since 1998 the elements of the discourse-coalition of “liquidation” have been claimed and have entered the political discourse, reflecting the strategy of the power to exclude Chernobyl from social and political practices.

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