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# PUBLIC OPINION SHIFTS TO THE FAVOUR OF NUCLEAR ENERGY DUE TO STEAM GENERATOR TRANSPORT

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## Abstract

In late August and early September of 1999, nuclear energy topics occupied a central place in the Slovenian media because of the transport of two new steam generators to the Krško nuclear power plant, and also due to the protest action of an Austrian Greenpeace group. Before these events, the public opinion in Slovenia was not in favour of nuclear energy and Greenpeace had a good reputation. In September it has lost much credibility because of their clumsy action of protest, and in just one month this caused a shift of public opinion in Slovenia towards support of Slovenia's only nuclear power plant. The Greenpeace protest action occurred during the transport of the two new steam generators to Krško. By replacement of the old steam generators the operation of the Krško NPP will be extended until 2023. The transport convoy travelled during the first half of September '99 across a considerable part of Slovene territory, passing by the capital of Ljubljana.

## Discussion

Over the last few years, the public opinion in Slovenia has not much favoured the use of nuclear energy, though many people were ignorant.

In September '99 the replacement of the steam generators for the Krško NPP took place. They had to be transported in a huge convoy from the Koper port to Krško, across more than half of Slovenia and the attention of the media started to focus on the event. On the first day of transport, the front pages of most newspapers were covered with pictures of the steam generator, and large numbers of spectators by the roadsides to see the colossus. The media coverage of this event certainly helped to de-mystify nuclear energy. People started to lose their fear of nuclear energy, and to inform themselves about the high technology used in a nuclear power plant.

Another push in popularisation was provided by the Greenpeace organisation and politicians from Austria, a neighbouring country. Austrian politicians have demanded immediate closure of the Krško NPP, which makes them very unpopular in Slovenia. The Austrian national standpoint gave strong incentive for the Austrian Greenpeace to start protest actions against the steam generator transport, and eventual Krško NPP upgrade and modernisation.

Early morning on the third day of the transport 13 members of Greenpeace chained themselves to the steam generator structure, and thus stopped the transport for three hours. Activists were all Austrian citizens; there were no Slovenian sympathisers supporting this protest action. Later Austrian Greenpeace also demanded a counter move from the Austrian government, as a response to the «brutality» of Slovenian police action during the arrest and unchaining of activists from the steam generator.

Before this nonsensical protest action by Greenpeace, this organisation had a good reputation in Slovenia. But in this action only foreign citizens participated and used an offensive approach to the NPP modernisation. This caused the Slovenian public and the media to oppose and criticise this action.

The shift toward a favourable opinion of nuclear power was enhanced in the same week, because of the statements made by Austrian politicians. Seeking for votes in the approaching elections, they put pressure on Slovenia to close the Krško NPP, and threatened counter measures. The Austrian minister of foreign affairs expressed his concern due to «the fact», that the «eastern technology NPP» (made by Westinghouse, an American company) does not meet the safety standards. The Slovenian media gave a hostile response to these unprofessional antinuclear statements.

Coincidence of the steam generator transport, the failure of the Greenpeace protest action, and the political demands for the closure of the Krško NPP as one of the central issues in the Austrian elections, was a big promotion for nuclear power in Slovenia. These combined events shifted the public opinion in favour of the extension of Slovenia's NPP operation. The latest poll showed that only 26.7 % of Slovenians still support the end of NPP operation, compared to about 50 % before these events took place.

## Conclusions

The Slovenian example illustrates the effect of a failed protest action by Greenpeace on the public opinion of nuclear energy. Greenpeace activists were not local people, but were foreigners, and this protest action was seen by the public and the media as an interference in the Slovenian internal affairs rather than a true protest.