

View from Moscow

New in Russia: renewables

| by Jeroen Ketting



On the first Wednesday evening of every month, members of the elite Moscow Business Club come together to exchange thoughts on a wide range of issues. I was recently invited to this get-together to provide a European viewpoint on the potential of renewable energy as a viable energy resource for Russia. That this issue would even be on the agenda of this exclusive club, where business, political and opinion leaders enjoy their glass of vodka and Cuban cigar in front of a wood-burning fireplace, is a telling sign.

Consciousness about energy is growing in Russia and interest in developments within Europe's energy sector is growing with it. When Russians observe European countries, they see vast wind-parks and wide ranging applications of solar panels, and hear about biomass and biofuel solutions. The problem is that, being distant observers, Russians mainly see the positive things and may overrate the importance of renewable energy. Not so clearly visible from Russia's vantage point are the government policies, tax incentives, subsidies, regulations and many years of public awareness campaigns, without which renewable energy wouldn't exist in the EU. Even less visible is that in spite of all this support, renewable energy only accounts for 7% of EU primary energy consumption (2005), including hydropower and biomass. Wind, solar and geothermal power make up less than 1%.

This crowd of genuinely interested Russian highfliers hoped I could tell them how "we" in Europe significantly reduced our dependence on traditional energy. I can't have made myself very popular when I argued that we shouldn't raise our expectations too highly with regards to renewable energy. I supported my unwelcome statement with two arguments. First, in spite of all our efforts, we in the EU are not meeting the renewable energy targets we set ourselves. There's no reason to expect that Russia, where support of renewable energy is still largely lacking, will be any more successful. The second reason is that instead of looking at alternative sources of energy generation,

Russia would do better to focus on reducing consumption. Strategic technological thinking in Russia still centres on capacity and quantity (a heritage of the Soviet period) whereas in Europe, one is more used to thinking in terms of efficiency and quality. Obvious measures aimed at reducing end user consumption, such as efficient lighting, thermostat valves and building insulation, are lacking in Russia's energy efficiency policy. Only rarely does one regard loss reduction in distribution (30% of Russia's heat is lost during distribution) as something worth striving for.

When I said that renewable energy use should only be considered after consumption and distribution are rationalised, everyone agreed, but they also realised that this is not what is done in Russia. With an estimated 30% savings potential, renewables in Russia should be merely seen as a way to reduce consumption, not as a substantial alternative for energy generation. Thanks to Russian hospitality, and the slightly vodka-induced atmosphere, my critical comments were taken in good stride and didn't do much to dampen the enthusiasm of those continuing the discussion. Russians are very smart in using the latest technology and know how make it work to their advantage. I hope that in their enthusiasm, they will thoroughly study all the aspects of renewable energy and energy efficiency in Europe and retain a critical eye to distinguish what works from what doesn't. But for that they will first have to leave traditional thinking behind and fully break from their Soviet past.