GEORGIA TODAY

Social/Society

Issue #600
17.02.12 - 23.02.12

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Khaishi - Damming Evidence

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As I wrote a couple of weeks ago, there is plenty of activity around the proposed new hydroelectric station (HES) in Svaneti, the dam of which will completely flood the village of Khaishi and several others as well. On Saturday, Feb. 12 I attended a meeting about this and other possible HESs in Georgia.

This was an occasion when I was aware that my Georgian language skills have a long way to go, although I did manage to follow the gist of the entire proceeding. We met in the Kinos Sakhli (Cinema House) near Rustaveli Metro, and nearly filled it. This isn't to say too much, however, as it's not a very large hall. I hope that future such meetings will need more space.

There were representatives of various political parties (although not the President's party); the organisers (Green Alternative); communities already affected by HESs and those to be affected; as well as the public and the media. I had been informed of the meeting by a Facebook event invitation, and I wonder how many other people had come the same way. Then again - shocking confession - I don't own a TV, so perhaps the majority of guests had seen a TV advertisement which I had not.

Actually, given the emotional nature of the meeting - we're going to lose these villages, is it worth it? do we need this thing and its impacts negative and positive? - I expected a lot more of that emotion to surface. I was ready for lengthy shouting matches, as there were some proponents as well as opponents present, and this is, well, Georgia, not Norway. The South, not the North. Here, people's feelings are demonstrated loud and clear. There was only one short instance of shouting in the end, and I take my hat off to all present for their restraint. We had a good meeting with much useful information. More such meetings are needed.

The issues leave one wondering what is the clear best way forward for Georgia and her needs for both energy and a clean, unspoiled environment. The impressive Enguri HES already supplies much of the country's energy. It's there and functioning, so we can't do anything about it.

Do we need one or more similar plants? Do we need to export energy, say, to Turkey? Can we meet not only today's national needs, but those of the foreseeable future? At the moment, almost all of the country's electricity comes from hydro or, a far dirtier alternative, coal. What other possibilities are there? I have found myself thinking much about these things since the meeting.

Nuclear: well, there is already one atomic power station in the Caucasus, in Armenia, and it's of much the same type as fateful Chernobyl. Indeed, it badly needs, and is getting, maintenance to stop it from going the way of its infamous brother. A nuclear disaster, in this magnificently beautiful terrain, whether human-caused as Chernobyl was or by an "act of God" as the recent one in Japan was (we too are awake seismically), does not bear thinking about.

Wind? Solar? Both wonderfully green alternatives for power. Neither is impossible here, given the climate. Solar needs to become cheaper, though. Both have high initial costs for building or installing them, large "carbon footprints" in their manufacture, as it were. Wave power, from the tides of the Black Sea? This too is the subject of experiments elsewhere in the world. Again, very green once you've got it, but with a high initial cost and large carbon footprint to set it up.

Geothermal? (Drilling DEEP into the ground to tap the planet's heat and turn this into energy.) This too is high-carbon and very expensive at the start, then green once it's up and running. The Philippines, Iceland and El Salvador are all supplying 25-30% of national energy needs by this method.

There was also talk of the huge corruption surrounding the Enguri HES's construction decades ago, in Soviet times. And of the unique flora and fauna which will be submerged if another HES is built, some of which are extremely local and already "red-booked", that is, marked as threatened in other ways to some degree.

Curiously, there seemed to be no one present from Khaishi itself, or the other villages threatened by the Khudoni HES. Why? Marshroutkas run daily from Mestia to Tbilisi, even if one has no private transport. Their absence here left something big out of the discussion. I felt a bit ridiculous, not to mention frustrated, as one of only two or three identifiable possible Svans

ridiculous, not to mention frustrated, as one of only two of three identifiable possible Svans present (by my hat)!

There are more meetings planned; and it will be crucial for the residents who will be affected by Khudoni to be involved, if they are to save their communities.

Debate rages on. I will do my best to follow it.

Tony Hanmer's blogs are www.geosynchronicity.blogspot.com and www.geosynchronici-2.blogspot.com

He also runs the "Svaneti Renaissance" group at http://www.facebook.com/groups/116859958383396/ .

By Tony Hanmer
16.02.2012

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Top of Page

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