

Referendum in Tuapse? Citizens favour direct democracy in their efforts to solve local development issues

The case

The Environmental Watch on North Caucasus has been supporting concerned citizens in the Black Sea port of Tuapse, Krasnodar Region in their efforts to organise referendum on a significant development issue. This form of direct democracy was favoured by an initiative group of citizens of Tuapse. The local people were concerned about plans to open a big terminal for bulk cargoes, mineral fertilisers and agrochemicals, within the urbanised territories. The enterprise is called Tuapse Bulk Terminal Ltd. and belongs to the Eurochim Company. The proximity of the living quarters and the technological level of port facilities make the cargo handling an environmental and health hazard.



The change process

A big protest rally against the terminal was held on 15 May 2010 demanding the resignations of local municipal leaders. An initiative group of citizens filed a request at the Tuapse Regional Election Commission trying to register for holding a local referendum on the issue of the terminal construction. The commission declined to register them. After studying and analysing the legislation of the Russian Federation the initiative group came to the conclusion that it had to file the request at the Tuapse Municipal Election Commission. On 29 June 2010 thirteen citizens of Tuapse, through their empowered representative Evgeniya Tretiakova, filed a request for holding a local referendum in the city at the territorial Municipal Election Commission in Tuapse. The request was addressed to the chairman Mikhail Ermolin and the question for the referendum was: 'Do you think it is necessary to prohibit the placement of terminals for handling of agricultural chemicals on the territory of the Tuapse urban municipality, Tuapse area?' The initiative group also consulted the Federal Law 'On the general principles of organising local government in the Russian Federation' and found grounds in it to address the head of the Tuapse urban settlement Alexander Chekhov with a request to assist them in organising and holding the referendum. The attempts to organise a referendum expressing the view of the public and its concerns about the safety and future of its citizens were not successful. After the big rally however plans for the terminal were put to a halt.

The business interests had the support of the local administration. A protest rally scheduled for June 5, 2011 - World Environment Day was foiled by the local authorities then re-scheduled again and again. At the well known meeting of

environmental activists with Russian President Medvedev in Moscow on 8 June 2011, the director of Greenpeace Russia Sergey Tsiplionkov gave him a message from EWNC describing the situation in Tuapse as critical in terms of environmental problems and asking him to intervene and help ensure the constitutional rights of citizens to a healthy environment. The letter described vividly how the terminal was constructed right in the city centre, less than one hundred meters from the blocks of flats and next to the coastal promenade. It went on to stress that the terminal under construction and an oil refinery complex created a veritable environmental crisis. The message was supported by 7000 signature on 474 pages which were handed to the president.

On 21 June 2011 the president instructed the regional administration to organise consultations with environmental NGOs and the public as well as public hearings on the projects for construction and especially the environmental safety measures.



The deadline for the task was 1 October 2011 but Eurochim opened the store facilities at the terminal in July and started operation in August. The EWNC was subject to a vigorous smear campaign in the media. No real public hearing of the project and its environmental section was held. In addition to that the authorities continued their efforts to sow discord among the environmental organisations.

The outcome

The Tuapse regional public organisation 'Chisty Gorod' (Clean City) held a session in August to review the situation and openly declare its stand against the construction of the terminal. The issue was put on the agenda because the administration in Tuapse region repeatedly claimed on many occasions that Chisty Gorod allegedly supported the Tuapse Bulk Terminal. The session made a list of problems with the legal standing, environmental audit and documentation of the terminal, outlining the next steps in addressing the issue. The meeting unanimously re-confirmed the commitment of the public organisation to continue work on the organisation and holding of a referendum on the future of the terminal.

Lessons learned

The public environmental organisations have shown remarkable persistence in their efforts to uphold and defend the public interest in the face of strong opposition and pressure from the authorities and vested interests. The leader of the political party Yabloko S. Mitrokhin this August gave one more formal letter to President Medvedev addressing the issue of the Tuapse terminal in the context of mounting public discontent and growing pressure on public organisations' activists and protesters demanding his intervention. The letter dwelled at length on the numerous violations of the law by the authorities.

After EWNC