



AER Conference of Black Sea Regions

15-6 February 2010
Paris

Water Management in Odessa City

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In the era of web-communications it seems that we may have access to any resource, except one – natural resources. Yes, we may click the button to reach info about, for example, water, but we will never have access through IT to the water itself. As the old proverb goes: You can put your boots in the oven, but that doesn't make'em biscuits, or let us say in a French manner – croissants. So, to have water, not only just information about water, we need to use it properly outside our computerized offices. So, we need to act.

As we all know, water management is the activity of planning, developing, distributing and optimum use of water resources under defined water polices and regulations. As far as I will be talking about my native City of Odessa, let me ask myself: Are we – meaning civil society, citizens of Odessa, local authorities and state power – managed to provide water management in a successful way and efficient manner to meet Odessa people needs and interests in the beginning of the XXI century? Answering, I would say – doubtful.

On the one hand, we have no visible lack of water resources, its availability and access to sources: we have Black Sea and rivers around, including the main drinking water resource for Odessa and Odessa region – the river Dnistr. By the way, having no need in wide-scale irrigation systems' building and enjoying availability of water resources without suicidal season drought and summer heat, the eastern Slavs have escaped the slavery stage of evolution more than one thousand years ago. Coming back to the modern Odessa, we also have the well-developed city infrastructure of water transportation and distribution among the citizens and their buildings, as well as business-centers and industrial parts of the city.

On the other hand, the quality of the drinking water and the quality of the infrastructure, including water pipe-lines, filter-stations and tubes underground the city is unsatisfactory. From water quality depends human health, recreational resources of the region, tourism development, its scope of services and other economic activities. As it is clear now, I would like to continue with the drinking water problem, because this is the most essential problem for Odessa when talking about water management.

Since 1800, the tank for storing rain water collected from roofs was set in every yard of Odessa. Thus Odessites could save considerable sums on buying water. Until 1873, the city drinking water used to be sold. One barrel of water cost 5 rubles. In 1873, a unique

water supply, the most powerful in Russia, was built in Odessa. Since its start, a barrel price of water has fallen to 5 cents, 100 times less. Since then, almost a century and a half Odessa water pipe has been supplying the city with Dnistr water.

Unfortunately, nowadays, the natural and artificial pollution of the river Dnistr, which includes inorganic nutrient substances, household sewage waters and agricultural discharges, makes Odessa inhabitants worry about their health if drinking water from the tap. It is known, that the main pollutant of the Black Sea, still, is river runoff, including Dnistr river. For example, the discharge of sewage waters into Dnistr from the territory of Ukraine makes more than 3 cubic km. They contain thousand tons of biogenic substances, thousand tons of organic matter, thousand tons of oil products, thousand tons of detergents, tons of fugitive phenols. The concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorus decrease as well.

We do not know if the filter and sanitary water stations at the place of extracting river water into the city pipe-lines work properly under all necessary technical and sanitary requirements. The lack of real information and statement by local authorities that drinking water almost corresponds to all the acute standards is suspicious. I do not want to judge whether local authorities or its political opponents are right, but I blame city power of all times of doing nothing to improve the situation. Want it or not, trust your chemical and bio analyses of the water or not, but it is a well known fact and widely spread belief in Odessa shared also by City Hall servants that the drinking water in Odessa is dirty. All my relatives as well as all my colleagues and friends never drink dramatically chlorinated water from tap at least if it is not boiled. I do not drink water from tap personally since the mid-80s when I was a child and everybody from adults around said that it is prohibited. Even boiled water is not reliable because of hard metals inside.

What kind of immediate solution can be expected in the following uneasy situation, when beating bad ecology on the river side has the long term shadow perspective, modernization of the filter and sanitary stations is quite an expensive mission for the city budget, and all this is accompanied by absence of reliable information on the level of risks coming from the water ways? Not accidentally such a sad picture made our local authorities react on such a dramatic situation and attitudes of the majority of the Odessa community.

To manage the drinking water problem somehow in Odessa, it was decided to extract underground spring water which Odessa soil is rich of in the mid-90s. The 15 as we call it in French manner buvettes, pump-rooms in English, were built all around the city to ensure access of citizens to the spring waters. This is a well organized complex of facilities, including the bar of taps and administrative building with pumps to bring water up from about 100 meters. Formally it is free of charge and you can have unlimited access to the taps with your bottles or tanks in your hands from 6 in the morning until 11 in the evening. Informally, such buvettes have been built by city budget for the money of tax-payers. So, nothing is free.

The main problem is that not everybody can afford to use spring water on every-day basis and in a required amount not only for drinking and cooking, but also for taking shower and washing. Of course, when saying dirty water we do not mean it is black or brown one, it is like regular water, but using it may cause some health difficulties in a short period of time. To protect themselves, people are trying also to use special home

based filters and making money on water filters is quite popular business with good profits nowadays in Odessa.

Another problem I would like to touch upon is the problem of a Soviet old pipe-line infrastructure. Its depreciation rate to some estimation is above 85%. It means that this is a direct signal of bad water management in the city. The tubes are licking, thousands and thousands of liters are going out the system into the sand and other ground waters the whole year long. Basements of buildings sometimes are full of water, what ruins them slowly, but irreversibly. It is not an unusual picture in Odessa, when you see streets and yards full of water like if waterfalls are around. The tubes are damaged and open to any threat of break-down, especially during the winter time and freezing temperatures.

Needless to say, that technical services are trying to deal with such accidents to stop water fountains from time to time by the method of patching holes, but no one started the fundamental process of modernization and innovation of pipe-line ways all over the city so far. This is a private company in the city which is responsible for keeping its obligations concerning proper water management, including modernization issues. The city opposition blames private company in failing to make satisfactory conditions of water management. The claims are reasonable. Loosing water and critical overspending of water resources also has a financial side: in most cases this are citizens of the city who appeared to be the payers of the water losses, including water, which is evaporates from the tube holes.

The solution is clear: the consumers, both physical and judicial are interested now in special water counters are being set at their homes and offices. But all this is not a strategic solution.

Another signal for local authorities to pay more attention to the sea water management and seaside protection in the time of global warming suddenly appeared in early January 2010. It was almost the first time in the history of modern Odessa when the sea water appeared on the streets of the city. Water overcame the protection line in one of the industrial parts of the coast near the main harbor during the heavy water storm with the waves over 3 meters what is quite rare situation for the Odessa coast. The authorities of the private company which owns the territory of the well-known Soviet plant said that the protection line technically was not calculated for such height of the waves, so, it was just an accident.

Tsunami all over the world also may be treated as an accident, but increasing number of them from year to year says it must be done more in protecting coastal lines so tsunami is not just an accident anymore, but the new reality of the nature which people are ready to deal with.

On the one hand, cars which were swimming while crossing the dangerous part of the motorway in the salt water is quite exotic picture for Odessa. Obviously, the traffic was blocked and cars had to take another bypass road. On the other hand, Odessa people know quite well, that there are some dangerous parts of the city where drainage systems are working unsatisfactory when after heavy rains the level of the water on the streets are up to 30-40 cm what also blocks traffic for many hours.

So, in this focus water management is something which stands near the problem of city

and traffic management and citizens are never ready to be paralyzed in the long lines because of water on the streets. The flood protection touches also upon the issue of buildings in the water. Fortunately, Odessa city is not subject to flooding rivers or constant sea water attacks, but some parts of the city may find themselves in the epicenter of real floods because of heavy rains or damaged pipe-lines.

Another sad news came from the side of Odessa lymans, which Odessa is surrounded by from almost all sides. Starting from 1834, the most famous is lyman Kyualnik which produces well known in the former USSR mineral water with the same original name and therapeutic mud which is being used in medicine. Popular sanatorium is being situated on the shore of the lyman almost in the city line and now it is under risk of facing lack of natural mineral mud. Unfortunately, the level of lyman waters decreases dramatically because of not only pollution, warming and evaporation, but also because of illegal sand excavations, what may threaten availability of the Kyualnik lyman to reproduce unique and useful mud. Do not forget that Kyualnik lyman is also Odesa region history, cultural heritage and natural attraction for all Ukrainians and many foreigners from abroad.

The quality of the sea water on Odessa beaches and attempts of the city authorities prolong the coastal zone by adding sand on beaches is another long and sad story I prefer not to touch.

To conclude: Having unlimited access to water, Odessa water system has unlimited possibility of loosing water what is not European way of doing water management in the city which pretends to be the most European city of Ukraine. Economy, modernization, innovation, environmental protection - this is the slogan of proper water management for Odessa in the years to come.

