

Wind power and networking

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Selling wind energy to the world's largest oil producer is a tough job, particularly when many people don't know much about it.

But following a high-profile deal with Siemens the authorities are finally catching on, even if the man on the street still remains in the dark, according to Nikita Turkin, an investment manager at Wind Energy Systems.

“It's being discussed at high-level talks – but most people you speak to on the street, when you mention wind energy or renewable energy, their response is, ‘Why, when we have so much oil and gas?’” he said in a recent interview.

Turkin, having grown up in Britain and worked in London, brings the experience of a culture already looking at its carbon consuming habits.

Having worked in London's financial sector, it seemed like a “natural move” into a rapidly developing industry.

“It seemed like it was the sort of thing that would take off in Russia because it is so huge everywhere else in the world, and I’d done an internship in renewable design in real estate,” said Turkin.

With the political focus switching to modernisation, Turkin is the sort of Russian that President Dmitry Medvedev is seeking to attract back to the country after years of brain drain, during which scientists and businessmen headed in the opposite direction.

Government support

While Russia has one of the least developed wind energy systems in the world, a recently-signed decree tasked companies with making 4.5 per cent of the country’s electricity from wind power.

State-backed RusHydro is one of the highest-profile firms, with only a few other companies challenging.

Analysts say Russia’s huge landscape – with around 30 regions with steady winds, in particular on the northern coastline – gives the country massive potential for developing its renewable energy.

The problem, up till now, has been setting up a legislative base to develop wind energy, particularly with subsidies and planning permission needed to build wind parks.

“The longer you have government support, the longer you have all sides working together and the more it is going to take off,” said Turkin. “The government is now realising it is something they want to get involved in.”

To boost sustainable energy Russia will also need to find some way to align it with its heavily-discounted electricity tariffs.

While plans have long been in the works to liberalise utility prices, these were put on hold during the crisis, as the government sought to boost industry.

Not only is it difficult to attract Russians to wind power, but there are also difficulties in luring western investors to the East due to concerns over corruption and corporate governance. The majority of firms, however, have experience in emerging markets, Turkin explained.

“Most of the investors we talk about are already aware of doing business in Russia,” he said. “They know how the Russian market works and they are aware of the challenges and the opportunities.”

‘Secret Moscow’ project

Away from the wind power industry, Turkin has also set up his own pet project in Moscow and is willing to share some of the capital’s secrets, even in the wake of the spy scandal.

Following in the example of his friend Tiffany Philipou, who set up the Secret London website, he has now brought the idea with him to Russia.

In barely four months the “Secret Moscow” group has built up a network of around 1,100 followers on the scheme’s preliminary Facebook page; has opened a flourishing Twitter account; and is already ambitiously planning to launch a more interactive website to ease sifting through readers’ suggestions.

Joining in

“The big thing is to make it inclusive,” he told The Moscow News. “It’s not just about me, it’s about people sharing the places they know and like, and telling each other about cool places to go and things to do around town.”

And he admits that the next key step is to add active participants to the site’s many followers and broaden the range of recommendations available online.

“Ideally, we would like to create a community of people who are willing to share their experiences of the city,” he said. “We want to do to Afisha and Time Out what Wikipedia did to the old paperback encyclopedia. People love to gossip and share information on the new and exciting places to go to. We are just giving them an opportunity to do so.”

Personal recommendations

It’s not just an expat thing – to get under the skin of the city, Secret Moscow is eager to hear from more locals.

“Some of the most compelling ideas we have from those who really get into sharing ‘secrets’ with others,” Turkin added. “We’d love to see residents of Moscow share their personal recommendations – places or things they’ve been enjoying individually for years and want to make known to the world. We know Russians love social networking and we think there’s an untapped wealth of information that people are yearning to share.”

He adds: “We want to become the one-stop shop for people looking to do something a bit alternative on their weekend in Moscow.”