

Russian Reactors Abroad: A Tool of Soft Power

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The Russian state nuclear enterprise Rosatom has become the most active exporter of nuclear technology in the world over the past decade. Wherever the corporation operates, it presents atomic energy development as indispensable for climate action and national sovereignty. Yet beyond building reactors, Rosatom establishes an integrated model of political and societal influence, often entrenching censorship and eschewing democratic oversight.

When Russia's state nuclear corporation Rosatom signs an agreement to build a nuclear power plant, it exports far more than turbines, containment domes, and fuel assemblies. Alongside engineering contracts and state-backed loans comes a broader ecosystem: educational programmes, public diplomacy platforms, youth initiatives, science centres, cultural partnerships, and communication strategies designed to shape how nuclear energy is perceived.

Over the past decade, Rosatom has become the most active exporter of nuclear technology in the world. Its reactors are under construction across Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. But its expansion cannot be understood purely in terms of energy capacity or industrial success. Rosatom has evolved into a vertically integrated actor that offers governments a full package: construction, financing, fuel supply, operational management, training, and long-term service agreements. Embedded within that package is something less visible but equally strategic: soft power influence.

In many host countries, nuclear cooperation is accompanied by programmes aimed at cultivating "public acceptance," shaping youth perspectives, and aligning local institutions with Rosatom's long-term presence. In political environments where civic space is limited or fragile, this model can intersect with authoritarian governance structures, narrowing public debate and marginalising dissent. Rosatom presents its activities as supporting development, sovereignty, and clean energy. Critics argue that its approach often produces long-term dependencies – technical, financial, and political – while reshaping the civic landscape around major infrastructure decisions.

Weak independent oversight

Rosatom actively promotes itself as a global leader in corporate social responsibility. It highlights awards for sustainability and transparency and emphasises adherence to international anti-corruption standards. Its official narrative presents nuclear energy as a driver of national modernisation and energy independence.

Yet a closer look at where Rosatom operates reveals a pattern. Many of its flagship international projects are located in countries governed by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, or in states with severely constrained civic space. These political environments are not incidental. They are often conducive to large-scale infrastructure agreements that require limited public debate, minimal parliamentary oversight, and restricted independent review.

In Hungary, the Paks II nuclear project has been framed as essential for energy security. Early public protests were dispersed, and critics have long argued that the project advanced without meaningful public consultation. Despite tensions between Russia and the European Union following the invasion of Ukraine, Paks II has continued under sanctions exemptions, illustrating how deeply embedded nuclear agreements can complicate broader geopolitical positioning.

In Turkey, the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant is being built under a build-own-operate model, granting Rosatom long-term operational control. Workers protesting conditions at the site have faced police intervention, while environmental activists opposing the project have been arrested. Public access to detailed safety and financial information remains limited.

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In Kazakhstan, public hearings on proposed nuclear expansion have reportedly restricted critics' participation. In Bangladesh, the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant has been accompanied by allegations of corruption and concerns raised by civil society groups about emergency preparedness infrastructure. Rosatom has rejected corruption allegations and, in some cases, threatened legal action in response to claims.

The most extreme case is Ukraine. During Russia's occupation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, employees were detained, interrogated, and reportedly subjected to coercion and abuse. While this situation is not directly comparable to commercial nuclear projects abroad, it underscores how nuclear infrastructure can become entangled with state power in coercive contexts.

Across these cases, one pattern recurs: nuclear projects often advance in environments where independent oversight is weak and dissent carries political risk.

Manufacturing Public Acceptance

Rosatom's strategy does not rely solely on executive agreements. It systematically invests in shaping public narratives around nuclear energy. In multiple countries, memoranda of understanding include commitments to "form a positive public attitude" toward nuclear power. Around project sites, Rosatom supports networks of aligned NGOs, expert councils, grant initiatives, and public forums that present themselves as platforms for dialogue and consensus.

The messaging surrounding these projects often follows strikingly similar patterns across different regions. In Hungary, the Paks II project has been promoted as "key to Hungary's energy future" and essential for "energy security". In Turkey, the Akkuyu plant has been framed as a step toward "technological sovereignty" and "new energy for a powerful Turkey". In Bangladesh, the Rooppur project is regularly justified through the language of "energy independence" and the claim that development "cannot happen without nuclear energy". Similar narratives appear in Kazakhstan, where nuclear expansion has been promoted as a "path to stability", and in Egypt, where the El Dabaa project is framed as a matter of "national pride" and a source of "clean electricity". In Rwanda, nuclear cooperation has been described as a way of "leapfrogging to modernity," while in several African states cooperation

agreements are presented as tools for national development.

Large-scale events such as Atomexpo, World Atomic Week, and regional nuclear forums position Rosatom as a convener of global legitimacy. These gatherings feature government officials, regulators, and industry-aligned experts discussing nuclear energy as indispensable for climate action and national sovereignty. Independent environmental organisations and critical voices are often marginal or absent, while company-aligned NGOs and expert councils that operate under the language of dialogue, sustainability, and climate action are fully supported. Initiatives such as “Mission Impact” are presented as inclusive platforms bringing together youth, experts, and industry leaders to shape a sustainable future.

This narrative framing is consistent: nuclear energy is presented as clean, modern, and essential; alternatives such as decentralised renewables, energy efficiency, or demand reduction are rarely foregrounded. Over time, repetition across multiple forums and countries can create the impression of an emerging global consensus.

Rosatom’s Information Centres on Nuclear Energy (ICNE) represent another layer of this strategy. By 2026, 27 such centres operate across Russia and partner countries including Bangladesh, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, and Egypt. These centres function as high-tech educational spaces offering interactive exhibits, science competitions, youth festivals, and virtual plant tours.

Officially, they are designed to promote science education. In practice, they embed nuclear energy within local narratives of modernisation and progress. By linking atomic technology to national pride and technological sovereignty, they help transform complex industrial agreements into symbols of national achievement.

Exporting governance practices

Critics argue that Rosatom exports more than nuclear hardware. It also exports governance practices. Large-scale nuclear projects require centralised decision-making, restricted information flows, and strong executive coordination. In democratic systems with robust oversight, such projects can face lengthy public scrutiny. In more centralised systems, they can move forward with fewer obstacles.

Where civic space is limited, opposition to nuclear projects can be framed as anti-national or anti-development. In Bolivia, legal frameworks have restricted the operating space of NGOs critical of extractive and infrastructure projects. In Egypt, public protest around major state projects is effectively banned. In Myanmar, nuclear cooperation agreements have been signed under military rule, including memoranda referencing the promotion of a positive public attitude. Rosatom has signed cooperation agreements with nearly 20 African countries, the majority of which have repressive governmental systems.

The interplay between nuclear expansion and constrained civic environments raises questions about whether the technology’s governance requirements reinforce existing authoritarian tendencies. While Rosatom does not create these political systems, its projects often align comfortably within them.

Building a generation of atomic advocates

Youth engagement is perhaps the most forward-looking component of Rosatom’s soft power strategy. The corporation funds scholarships and educational programmes that bring students from partner countries to Russia to study nuclear engineering and related disciplines. Participants receive technical

training, internships, and access to professional networks that frequently lead into Rosatom-linked projects at home.

Within Russia, the Rosatom Corporate Academy and youth science competitions cultivate early identification with the nuclear sector. International youth forums such as the International Youth Nuclear Forum in Obninsk and the BRICS Youth Energy Summit reinforce this professional pathway.

Rosatom has also extended its presence into global youth policy spaces. Representatives associated with Rosatom-supported initiatives have organised and participated in side events at the United Nations Economic and Social Council Youth Forum and during UNFCCC climate conferences. In these arenas, nuclear energy is framed as central to sustainable development and decarbonisation.

Such engagement is presented as empowering young leaders. Yet it also embeds nuclear advocacy within influential international platforms where youth participation carries moral authority. Over time, this may help normalise a particular model of energy transition – one in which centralised, state-backed nuclear infrastructure plays a dominant role.

Rosatom's global expansion is not simply an industrial story. It is a political and societal one. By combining reactor construction, state-backed financing, fuel supply, long-term operational control, narrative management, and youth engagement, Rosatom has built an integrated model of influence. In many partner countries, this model operates within political environments where public scrutiny is limited and dissent carries risk.

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Nuclear energy projects, by their nature, create decades-long commitments. When those commitments are bundled with soft power instruments – public information centres, aligned civil society platforms, elite training pipelines, and international forums – the result is not merely energy infrastructure, but institutional alignment.

As nuclear energy regains prominence in global climate discussions, the governance dimension of these projects deserves equal attention. The question is not only whether nuclear power can reduce emissions, but how decisions are made, who shapes public understanding, and what forms of political dependency accompany the technology.

In the case of Rosatom, reactors are only part of the story. The rest is built through influence carefully constructed, globally networked, and designed to last as long as the plants themselves or even longer.

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