

PRESS RELEASE, 07-05-2002

British Know-How to Strengthen Germany's Oldest Minority

London - For the first time since WWII, a Sorbian delegation will participate in a press conference in the British capital. The briefing on 7th May 2002 at the Foreign Press Association has been organised by a joint British-German expert team. The culturally vibrant but economically depressed Lusatia region, home to the smallest Slavonic nation for more than sixteen hundred years, is under threat from large-scale open cast lignite mining. In particular, the struggle for the Sorbian village Horno has captured public attention as a focal point for the most crucial questions in Europe. How may technological advances be put to use to lower unemployment, alleviate environmental pressure, and ensure the protection of minority rights? British and German private enterprises; such as London based HALO ENERGY and the Berlin landscape architects firm 'Schumacher & Herrmann', are working on the answer.

Britain illustrates one side of the solution. Most of its former coal mines have been already closed down and it enjoys the advantage of liberalized energy markets together with the lowest unemployment rate in Europe. The other side is provided by Germany's burgeoning renewable energy industry. With already over 120, 000 jobs in this sector and a current annual turnover of 8 billion euros, anticipated shortages in skilled workers could be alleviated by instituting alternative energy strategies in the mining regions. International press members and guests from influential British-German organisations will be briefed for the first time at the FPA about the situation in the Lusatia region, located in the federal states of Brandenburg and Saxony. The Sorbian "Domowina" organisation will be on hand to elaborate on the benefits of this model project.

As Domowina Chairman Jan Nuck notes: *"A quarter of our entire nation has been forced to leave their homeland due to coal mining activities. We have nowhere to go, while the transition to attractive technologies available for implementation alongside lignite is long overdue. Reforms and private enterprise are paramount for the survival of Sorbian culture. Thus initiatives such as the London based Halo Energy are our strategic partners."*

The Jaenschwalde power plant threatening Horno is Germany's single largest source of CO2 emissions (22 million tonnes per year). Lignite use could be phased out with progressive energy strategies in the interest of climate protection and the mitigation of local unemployment, which exceeds the eastern German average of nearly 20 %. Dirk Tessmer, a Frankfurt based legal expert, notes that the destruction of Horno would be illegal under German and European laws. Expropriation might be permissible only as the *"ultima ratio"* in case of *"greater common interests. This is clearly not the case in Horno, as there is only little coal to be found under the village and no jobs are threatened as a result of an entirely feasible bypassing operation."*

The one-sided reliance on coal-generated electricity has put the brakes on open competition in the region. Recently, the German Government released the Swedish state company Vattenfall AB, the new owner of East German mine operator Laubag, from over 180 million euros of old debts. These unexpected savings could easily be used to cover additional costs of bypassing Horno while successively diversifying energy operations. During the period of communist rule in East Germany, over 70 villages were destroyed by open cast coal mining in Lusatia alone, thus promoting dispersal of the Sorbian people despite constitutional guarantees of their cultural integrity. Despite these historical setbacks, the Sorbs have reason to look confidently into the future. Lusatia, having a combined Slavonic and German identity, a variety of natural resources and skilled people already working in knowledge based service industries, is well positioned to compete in the dynamic German, Polish and Czech border region.

Kito Lorenc, a distinguished Sorbian writer, takes a look at the bright side: "After all, we have somehow managed to survive since the decline of the Roman Empire. It is rather a pleasant thought that Sorbs will be among the first foreign delegates to hand over a Golden Jubilee present at Buckingham Palace and that our gift is a unique Sorbian Shakespeare translation."

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Note to editors:

The London based HALO ENERGY Think-tank communications consultancy for international renewable energy campaigns. Halo founder Ralph Kappler (MIPR, MFPA) has been providing strategic advice for a considerable time on major global initiatives. He previously directed the European Corporate Communications programme for British Airways and Datamonitor - Reuters Business Insights global financial services communication. DOMOWINA is the independent umbrella organization for Sorbs and Sorbian institutions. It supports the preservation and development of the language and culture of the Sorbian people. It advocates constitutional regulations for the protection and promotion of ethnic and linguistic minorities, as well as for the preservation of corresponding legal provisions and international agreements. It promotes mutual respect, tolerance and equality between people of different nationalities and languages, particularly between the Sorbian and German populations.

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