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A new Chernobyl at your doorstep ?

[Lidia Kurasinska](#) 10 August 2017

Three decades after the Chernobyl nuclear accident in Ukraine, Belarus is building its first nuclear power station. Concerns about the project's safety aren't deterring the authorities.

Speaking near the site of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster on the 31st anniversary of the accident this April, Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko [remarked](#) that "both Belarusians and Ukrainians know that the Chernobyl catastrophe knows no borders", in reference to the fact that 70% of the radioactive dust created in the 1986 chemical explosion descended on Belarus. Following the same logic, the authorities of neighbouring Lithuania are trying to raise the alarm about Belarus's construction of its first nuclear power plant, which they believe to be the next nuclear disaster in waiting.

One of the major complaints concerns the choice of location. Set near **the small town of Astravets, less than 50km from Vilnius, the site also falls within an earthquake-prone area**. Lithuanian authorities [allege](#) that Belarus did not conduct a cross-border environmental impact assessment, in breach of the [Espoo Convention](#), and that **in an event of a large-scale accident at the nuclear plant, the Lithuanian capital, as well as a third of the country's population, could face catastrophic consequences**.

Chain reactions

Fears of a nuclear accident at Astravets are not baseless — they have been fuelled by a string of technical mishaps at the construction site, and a Soviet-like culture of secrecy.

According to Mikhail Mikhadyuk, the Deputy Energy Minister of Belarus, there have been 10 incidents, including three fatalities, since construction began in 2013. Mikhadyuk claimed it was a "[reasonable](#)

[figure](#)” given the scale of the project. However, the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry alleged that there were [six incidents in 2016 alone](#). One incident on 10 July 2016, when a [330-tonne reactor casing fell from a height of between two and four metres](#), drew particular condemnation. The accident was only acknowledged by the Belarusian authorities after it was reported in the local press two weeks later. Initially, the Russian state nuclear agency Rosatom, the main contractor for the project, denied the shell had been damaged, and agreed to replace it only following a media uproar. The handling of the incident drew comparisons with the Chernobyl catastrophe, where first reports of the disaster didn’t emerge until 36 hours after the explosion, and led to concerns about transparency and safety of the project.

Linus Linkevicius, Lithuania’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, [noted at the time](#) that “the fact that we find out about the incidents from their website or press (...) indicates a tendency to either hide certain events or try to understate them once they become apparent. For this reason, it becomes very difficult to earn confidence.” As part of Lithuania’s accession agreement with the EU, it agreed to start shutting down its own nuclear power plant at Ignalina from 2004.

This culture of secrecy, in which the project has been shrouded since its inception, cannot continue unchallenged

According to Andrey Ozharovsky, a Russian nuclear engineer and member of the Belarus Anti-Nuclear Campaign, Minsk has been [trying to silence activists and members of the public opposed to the construction of the plant](#). In an interview with openDemocracy, he claimed that the Belarusian government has tried to orchestrate public hearings on the project by preventing activists from joining in, and refusing to give the floor to those who managed to get in. Ozharovsky, who has been arrested twice in relation to his activism and [banned from entering Belarus for 10 years](#), noted that the activists who attempted to raise awareness of the dangers of the project have faced harassment and intimidation from the state.

Trust in the safety of the project has been undermined further following the publication of an [investigative TV programme](#) about Rosatom by Belsat, an independent Belarusian news channel headquartered in neighbouring Poland. Belsat revealed that, in 2012, the Russian nuclear corporation took over Atommasht Volgodonsk, a Soviet-era nuclear equipment giant, after it went bankrupt and was privatised. The move was intended to allow Rosatom to start producing its own equipment. The nuclear reactor for the Astravets plant (also referred to as BelNPP) was the first the revived Atommasht produced in 30 years.

An article on the company’s own website [appears to confirm](#) Belsat’s findings. It says that “during the post-Soviet period the enterprise almost lost its competences in manufacturing equipment for nuclear industry. Atommasht was incorporated in the machine-building division of the State Corporation ‘Rosatom’ in 2012. The recovery program of the production facilities for manufacturing of nuclear power plants equipment then has been launched at the plant.”

On its website, Rosatom [claims that VVER-1200](#), the reactor built for Astravets, “is a flagship nuclear reactor and a core product of Rosatom’s integrated offering”. The company states that “many modifications have been made to reactor internals (core barrel, core baffle, protective tube unit and sensors) to prevent accidents and extend the service life to 60 years” and that “VVER-1200 combines reliability of time-proven engineering solutions with a set of active and passive safety systems compliant with post-Fukushima requirements.” The reactor blocks will also be contained by an outer containment shell made of concrete and steel.

However, Ozharovsky stressed that he believes that new, untested reactors cannot be branded safe, despite manufacturers’ assurances, and pointed to an [unexpected technical fault](#) that shut down a brand new VVER-1200 at the Novovoronezh Nuclear Power Plant in Russia. Ozharovsky also noted

that both [China](#) and [India](#) refused to buy the VVER1200, the type destined for Astravets, for their own nuclear power plants, instead choosing units that had been previously tested.

Good-neighbourliness

To sweeten the deal, Minsk was offered a [Russian credit line of up to \\$10 billion](#) to finance the construction. Under the terms of the agreement, the loan from Moscow will provide 90% of the funding necessary to complete the construction, with Belarus having to foot only 10% of the bill. Russia will also be the sole supplier of fuel once the plant becomes operational. Although Belarusian authorities claim that the sale of energy from BelNPP will give the impoverished country a financial boost, there are fears that the project is being used by Russia to expand its influence in eastern Europe.

The Lithuanian authorities maintain that the Astravets plant is “[a geopolitical project devoid of any economic logic](#)”, given that Lithuania and Poland, both of which are wary of growing Russian leverage, have ruled out purchasing energy from the BelNPP in a bid to further synchronise their energy systems with Europe. The Latvian government, however, recently stated that the country will not introduce legislation prohibiting the purchase of electricity from Astravets. With other neighbouring countries still weighing their options, a collective refusal to purchase energy would undermine the project’s profitability given that one of the two units of the plant is intended to produce for export.

According to [Vladimir Slivyak](#), co-chairman of Ecodefense, a Russian environmental organisation, the main incentive behind the project might not have been a financial one. Speaking to openDemocracy, he said he believes that “the original idea behind the Astravets plant was to replace Russian gas consumed in Belarus by nuclear energy. As Russia wanted to sell more to the west, Moscow decided to build a two-reactor plant in Belarus : one would replace gas supplies from Russia, and the other would produce for export. But now, with Gazprom selling less abroad and with Belarus’s neighbours threatening boycott, the profitability of this enterprise is questionable.”

Slivyak added that “as with other Russian nuclear power deals, this one is widely believed by campaigners to be a geopolitical project aimed at making Baltic states dependent on the Russian supply. Once the Baltics resist, the whole project becomes useless.”

As part of its campaign to draw international attention to the violations of standards in the construction of BelNPP, Lithuania [drafted a resolution](#) to be adopted during the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly session, held on 5-9 July 2017 in Minsk. The draft urged the international community to demand that “transparent and independent transboundary environmental impact assessment is made and that risk and safety assessments (so called stress-tests) are carried out or the construction of the nuclear power plant should be suspended”. The resolution also called for an end to human rights violations and a moratorium on the use of the death penalty in Belarus.

Despite collecting the required number of signatures, the draft resolution was removed from the agenda at the initiative of Swedish Socialist MP Kent Harstedt. However, the [Resolution on the Situation in Eastern Europe](#), criticising the human rights records of the governments of Belarus, Russia and Azerbaijan, authored by another Swedish MP, Christian Holm Barenfeld, was adopted, fuelling [speculation](#) that Lithuania’s criticism of the BelNPP was a more sensitive issue for Minsk than the condemnation of its human rights violations, which could be deflected more easily.

According to Virginijus Sinkevičius, head of the Lithuanian delegation to the OSCE PA session, these assumptions are unwarranted. Sinkevičius told openDemocracy that he was surprised by the fact that Lithuania’s draft resolution was rejected, but he stressed that this meant the country needed to step up its efforts to galvanise the international community into action : “The EU must stick together on this question because the border the Astravets nuclear power plant is built on is not only a Lithuanian

border — it is also an EU border.”

[Jan Haverkamp](#), an expert on nuclear energy, believes Belarus’s failure to consult its neighbour before choosing the location for the plant was a grave omission — and one that will override Belarus’s efforts to show that it takes safety seriously. In an interview, Haverkamp stressed to me that Russia wants to be seen as able to build nuclear power stations outside of its borders, and the construction of the Astravets plant is being closely watched by Finland and Hungary, as both countries have signed agreements with Rosatom for the construction of their own reactors.

Dicing with déjà vu

The fate of BelNPP draws parallels with the Kaliningrad Nuclear Power Plant, located in the Russian province just six kilometres from the Lithuanian border and 60km from Poland. Plans to complete the construction of the plant, which began in 2010, were [quietly shelved three years later](#), after it emerged that both Germany and Poland, two of the biggest potential markets, ruled out purchasing energy from the unit. At the time, Polish media branded the project a Russian attempt at gaining energy and geopolitical dominance.

Concerns about growing Russian influence and a lack of accountability were raised further after Belarusian authorities [refused to grant permission](#) for a European Parliament delegation to visit the BelNPP construction site in April. Rebecca Harms, a German politician and member of the European Parliament, wrote on her website that the Belarusian ambassador in Belgium declined the request for administrative reasons, and [noted](#) : “We are disappointed that the visit has been postponed. We are ready to travel to Minsk and Astravets at any time if authorities are willing to meet us and to facilitate the visit on site.”

In a sign of growing concern over the safety of the project, Frans Timmermans, the Deputy Head of the European Commission, [urged Belarus to conduct a stress test at the Astravets site](#) under the supervision of international experts. In June, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe [adopted a resolution](#) calling to suspend the construction of the plant due to “numerous violations of international nuclear safety standards.”

Despite the fact that BelNPP is [in breach of four articles of the Espoo Convention](#) and the date of the planned launch of the first unit is set for November 2018, the recent Meeting of the Parties to the convention, which took place in Minsk, concluded without any decision regarding the project. Due to a [lack of consensus](#) over this and other issues, it was decided that an extraordinary meeting would be called next year. Ironically, the unproductive summit fell on the 20th anniversary of the entry into force of the convention.

Belarus’s own experience has shown that a nuclear accident can have far-reaching consequences with a cross-border impact

In the meantime, the EU must continue to take decisive action to address the grave nuclear safety breaches on its eastern flank, as well as the [allegations of harassment and intimidation against activists and members of the public critical of BelNPP](#). Given that the first unit is scheduled to become operational in 2019, and the second one a year later, the response must come promptly. The culture of secrecy, which the project has been shrouded in since its inception, cannot continue unchallenged, or else Europe might face another nuclear catastrophe. Belarus’s own experience has shown that a nuclear accident can have far-reaching consequences with a cross-border impact, and the safety risk posed by the BelNPP must be seen as a continental threat — not just a local dispute on the European periphery.

With the Chernobyl catastrophe still within living memory, Europe must not lose one more generation

to a nuclear tragedy.



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