

No compromise between Belarus and Lithuania on Astraviec NPP

On 15 November, Lithuanian Energy Minister Rokas Masiulis presented his country's new energy strategy. Although it is not stated directly, the strategy strongly implies that Lithuania will not buy electricity from the Belarusian nuclear power plant, which will begin operating in 2019.

In recent years, the issue of the Belarusian NPP has stifled bilateral relations and it seems that a compromise remains beyond the pale of possibility. Lithuania exaggerates the lack of transparency surrounding the Nuclear Power Plant's construction. It also sees the NPP as an obstacle to its goal of connecting with electricity transmission grids in Western Europe.

A nuclear power plant provokes strong feelings

Several years ago, Lithuania looked to be a major advocate for dialogue with the Belarusian authorities. Even in 2013, when sanctions were still in place, Belarusian Prime Minister [Mikhail Miasnikovich](#) visited a Belarusian-Lithuanian economic forum in Lithuania. Moreover, although few remember it, at the same time the Lithuanian MEP Justas Paleckis had [prepared a report](#) encouraging dialogue between Belarus and the EU.

But it now seems that Lithuania has made a U-turn. Despite the thaw in Belarusian-European relations, Belarus and Lithuania have yet to warm up to each other. For example, Minsk is now more likely to host [Polish official delegations](#), which had

previously been known for their tough attitude towards Alexander Lukashenka, than Lithuanian ones.

Lithuanian politicians are spending their time creating [an international coalition](#) against the Belarusian nuclear power plant. In doing so, they aim to ban the purchase of electricity from the plant to the European Union. The station, which Belarus began to build 55 km from Vilnius in 2013, has become a major stumbling block for bilateral relations.

So far, the only result of Lithuanian diplomacy are reflected in the words of Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid, who recently declared that 'in Astraviec, there is clearly a problem if all the costs, including environmental costs and risks, are not internalised into the price scheme. In that case Europe should not accept such energy on its market.'

Meanwhile, Poland, the beneficiary of a long standing offer to purchase electricity from the Astraviec NPP, has kept silent, as have other European Union countries. On 23 September, the State Secretary of Latvian MFA Andrejs Pildegovičs told the *TUT.by* news portal that Latvia sees 'The NPP's construction as a sovereign right of the Belarusian government', and he 'will not judge, condemn or question the reasonableness of the project.'

Why does Lithuania dislike the Belarusian power plant?

Most Lithuanian politicians stress that the safety of the construction is dubious. This is actually true, taking into the account the poor reputation of Belarusian official transparency. On 10 July, the reactor casing, weighing over 330 tonnes, [fell to the ground](#) from a height of two to four metres. The wider public became aware of this disaster only on 25 July thanks to pressure from public opinion.

So far, the construction site has seen about 10 incidents, leaving three workers dead. This came to light thanks to pressure from the Lithuanian MFA. As Deputy Energy Minister of Belarus [Mikhail Mihadziuk](#) stated in September, 'this is an acceptable figure given that the construction site employs more than five thousand people.'

Moreover, the Lithuanian government emphasises the proximity of the Belarusian nuclear power plant to its border – should there be an accident, Lithuania would have to evacuate Vilnius.

However, Lithuanian authorities are exaggerating some issues. Despite the Belarusian regime's problems with transparency, the government has proved willing to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In October, the IAEA mission spent 12 days in Belarus, eventually concluding that 'Belarus is committed to nuclear safety'. Previously, while visiting Belarus in April, IAEA Director Yukiya Amano had stated that 'Belarus is one of the most advanced nuclear newcomer countries.'

No compromise?

The Lithuanian authorities dislike the Belarusian NPP not only for safety reasons, but also because it undermines Lithuania's energy strategy, which aims to 'connect the Lithuanian power transmission system (jointly with the Latvian and Estonian systems) to the grids of Europe for synchronous operation by 2025.' So far, Lithuania remains strongly connected to the electricity transmission grids in Belarus and Russia, a dependence it wants to overcome.

Lithuanian officials see NPP construction as a Russian  project aimed at preventing that. On 15 November, Lithuanian Minister of Energy Rokas Masiulis said in a statement introducing a new strategy that 'the state will not

be safe until the power transmission system affects managers sitting in Moscow.' One month earlier, at the Lithuanian Energy Conference, Masiulis had announced that 'if Belarus proceeds with the Astraviec Nuclear Plant, we will put electricity links with Belarus out of operation'.

The Energy Strategy of Lithuania seems likely to come to fruition, despite the fact that the IAEA praised the construction of the Belarusian nuclear power plant, and the Belarusian authorities have begun to behave more transparently and responsibly. On 16 November, Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister [Uladzimir Siamashka](#) announced that Belarus would postpone launching the nuclear plant due to security concerns.

It seems that Lithuania's approach to the Belarusian nuclear power plant is already a foregone conclusion. The issue has become so politicised that Lithuanian politicians are even competing to speak against the NPP in Astraviec more sharply. Recently, Vytautas Landsbergis, one of the best-known Lithuanian politicians, called the construction of the NPP an atomic bomb against Vilnius.

The Union of Peasants and Greens, which won the elections in Lithuania last month, seems to see Astraviec in a similar way. Its politicians spoke out against the construction of a nuclear power plant in Belarus even before their election. Compromise, it seems, may prove impossible.

The Echo of Chernobyl

26 April is a very sad day in Belarusian history. On 26 April 1986 a disastrous accident took place at a nuclear power plant in Chernobyl, just across the border in Ukraine. It became one of the most horrible man-made disasters ever. Belarus suffered

from the radioactive fallout more than any other country.

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union Belarus has had to handle the whole array of social, economic and demographic repercussions of the disaster. The lack of financial resources makes it a difficult task. As a result, the Belarusian authorities try to minimise the scale of the problem.

As Germany is moving away from the use of nuclear power, Belarus started building its own nuclear power plant and considers adding one more in the future.

Belarus Suffered the Most

Over 50 million curies of radioactive material were released as a result of the accident. Its fallout encompassed a population of 17 million people, including 2,5 million children under the age of five. Even though the nuclear power plant was in Ukraine, the winds brought most of the radioactive fallout to Belarus. It quickly contaminated 23% of the country's territory.

Thousands of inhabitants of the polluted area had to leave. Thousands of rescuers who worked at the disaster's site suffered from immediate radiation sickness. Hundreds of thousands of people still suffer from the aftereffects of the accident.

Smaller areas in southern and south-eastern parts of the country became completely unsuitable for any human activity and still pose a threat of radiation spread. To monitor and research the situation there the authorities created Polesie State Radiation and Ecological Reserve.

According to international scientists, the increased cancer and infant mortality rates in Belarus suggest that the deadly effects of the Chernobyl disaster are still lingering.

Struggle with the Repercussions

After Belarus gained independence in 1991 it immediately faced the burden of financing numerous rehabilitation programmes. Some estimates said that every fourth rouble of the state budget had to be spent on those programmes. It became a real challenge for the newly independent republic and its weak economy.

One of the core questions that the Belarusians face is what to do with the contaminated territories. According to independent researchers, the polluted lands will remain highly radioactive for hundreds of years. Therefore, they cannot be turned back into agricultural and industrial use.

However, according to the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, the polluted territory has decreased 1,6-fold since 1986. In their opinion, now 14,5% of the Belarusian land remains contaminated and about 1,2 million inhabitants reside there. They think that the level of contamination is not critical and, therefore, recommend to intensify economic activities on these lands.

The government follows the recommendation of the Academy of Sciences. More and more products from contaminated areas appear in shops across the country. Moreover, Belarusian universities send their graduates to contaminated regions for post-graduation mandatory work.

Helping the victims of Chernobyl

Those who took part in the rescuing operations in Chernobyl and the inhabitants of the contaminated areas became entitled to a number of social benefits. For example, the rescuers became entitled to a 25% bonus to their pensions. Those who became physically disabled as a result of the accident got the right for free or discounted medicine and a free medical rehabilitation course every two years.

In 2007 the government announced its plans to trim the benefits package for those who suffered from radiation. It

provoked an outburst of resentment and protests among various Chernobyl organisations. But the authorities ignored the demands of the NGOs and victims of the Chernobyl catastrophe and limited the benefits.

In the aftermath of the tragedy numerous international donors started to initiate rehabilitation programmes in Belarus. They included provision of medication and medical equipment, technical assistance in the restoration of the contaminated territories and summer programmes for children from polluted areas. Foreign aid has been crucial in assisting the Belarusian government and society in their struggle with the repercussions of Chernobyl disaster.

However, due to political reasons the authorities have been very selective in their cooperation with foreign donors on Chernobyl-related projects. In many cases foreign funds and NGOs have been suspected of connections with the opposition. On such grounds the authorities restricted their possibilities of working in the country. As a result, people in the contaminated territories have lost considerable amounts of funding.

Plans for New Nuclear Power Plants Despite Lingering Fears

Public opinion surveys clearly show that the Belarusians still have a lingering fear of atomic energy. This is no surprise given the human and financial losses that the Chernobyl tragedy incurred on the nation.

However, in 2008 the political leadership started talking about the prospects of constructing a nuclear power plant in the country. Alexander Lukashenka then declared that atomic energy is very cheap compared to the prices of Russian oil and gas. In his opinion, a [nuclear power plant](#) will ensure Belarus's energy independence.

After numerous NGOs started to publicly protest against the government's plans the authorities launched a PR campaign to

popularise the idea of a power plant. But, as is usually the case in present-day Belarus, the government's campaign was very formal and did not really listen to the public opinion.

Later the authorities asked for a Russian loan to construct the plant. In November 2011 the loan [agreement was signed](#). Moreover, at the beginning of April in his talk with the Director General of the IAEA Lukashenka announced that Belarus could consider constructing a second nuclear power plant.

Thus, Belarus is about to enter another nuclear era even though the wounds from the Chernobyl disaster are still bleeding.