

Belarusians awaken in protest against polluting factories

On 14 April almost 1,000 people in Brest protested against the construction of a battery factory. During the past year similar protests took place in Astravets, Brest, and Svetlahorsk; all against environmentally-harmful enterprises threatening neighbourhoods with dangerous factory emissions. However, as with other non-political protests, the authorities reacted in all of these cases with either silence or detentions.

Low production costs in Belarus attract foreign investors and potentially create new jobs. However, environmentally unfriendly enterprises in residential areas prove controversial. They discontent citizens and harm Belarus's environment. While the environment is increasingly becoming a central issue in Western countries, it looks like Belarus takes a backward step and encourages the construction of environmentally-unfriendly factories.

Environmental protests: a new target for repressions

Belarus's environmental profile continues to deteriorate. In addition to the widely-discussed [nuclear power plant \(NPP\) in Astravets](#), which envisages the preservation of nuclear waste on Belarusian territory, two more factories captured the attention of green activists. Both the Svetlahorsk pulp-bleaching factory, which uses dangerous bleaching methods, and the Brest battery factory, located less than one kilometre from a residential area, have disturbed residents with their emissions. In total, at least four big enterprises criticised by eco-activists intend to start functioning within the coming

years.

The Environmental Performance Index for 2018, a rating that measures the environmental performance of countries, shows that Belarus has lost almost 10 points (out of 100). One reason is that [harmful enterprises continue to receive state support despite civic protests](#).

| | Financed by | Main critique |
|----|------------------------|---|
| | China CAMC Engineering | Chlor-dioxide used for pulp bleaching is a dangerous and outdated technology; emissions in a residential neighborhood; costly and loss-enterprise |
| | IPower | Plumb battery factory to be located close to the residential area, emissions |
| ed | Belarus, Rosatom | Location close to the residential area; nuclear waste to be preserved in Belarus; poor equipment; accidents. |

Approval of new factory construction tends to happen without citizens' participation. Even though officials organise public hearings, these barely impact on an actual agreement between the authorities and investors about construction conditions. When citizens do demonstrate their discontent through public protest, the authorities suppress those initiatives by administrative or even criminal cases.

The pressure on environmental protesters has become a focus for green activists. In February, the Belarusian organisation

Ecodom informed the Aarhus Committee about an increasing violation of eco-activists' rights in Belarus. Belarus became the first country to violate the rights of its citizens within the framework of the Aarhus convention, according to a report in *Novy Chas*.

Svetlahorsk, Brest, and Astravec: a similar scenario

Protests in Svetlahorsk have been ongoing for more than two years, though they have brought few results. On 20 March the Svetlahorsk court declined an appeal from activists demanding additional eco-expertise at the pulp-bleaching factory that is already working under a testing regime. Activists, however, managed to prevent the removal of the regulation that allowed private citizens to file a case against enterprises.

Despite the involvement of green activists, lawyers and independent experts, officials remain reluctant to restrict the construction and highlight the creation of jobs and generation of money. At the same time, according to the activist Alena Masliukova from the human rights centre *Viasna*, the factory could have been built at a much lower cost with more qualitative and less harmful equipment. As a result, when fully-functioning, the factory will have to pay back with both money and produced materials.



Protests in Brest, Source: dw.com

Similar to Svetlahorsk, the Brest factory construction was neither discussed with citizens nor environmentally friendly. Local authorities and representatives from the factory have organised public hearings to inform citizens of their decisions, but have not sought any public opinion.

When hundreds of people started to come to a weekly meeting, the authorities reacted with ignorance. The authorities placed two of the activists, as well as bloggers Siarhei Piatruhin and Aliaxandr Kabanau, under criminal investigation. As human rights defenders claim, they face fabricated charges.

The Belarusian NPP, which has just started to test its first nuclear reactor, remains the most difficult project to influence since large investments have already been made. As in the cases of Brest and Svetlahorsk, despite the efforts of activists and international pressure from environmental organisations and neighbouring countries, the authorities have never considered adapting the energy policy. They have ignored the potential from wind-turbines or solar batteries. Since the beginning of construction at Astravets [at least 10 accidents have occurred, leaving three people dead.](#)

All these cases of factory construction have a similar

scenario of state-society dialogue. First, citizens protest against the location of the factories in residential areas and the old-fashioned materials or means of production, usually involving investors from China or Russia. Second, protests involve groups of citizens who don't usually engage with public matters, such as families with children or teachers. And finally, in all the cases, the authorities show themselves reluctant to openly comment on the construction, which usually becomes a case when the state receives new investors but doesn't want to disappoint citizens.

How can Belarus improve its environmental record?

As in many spheres, there exist few chances that protests can influence policy all the while the authorities publicly silence the problems. Parallel to the construction of environmentally-damaging factories, there are a number of interesting eco-initiatives emerging in the country that receive neither attention nor public support. For instance, a small project (*pavetra.online*) measuring air-pollution in the Mahiliou region and the first packaging-free store in Minsk, "Zero Waste".



Map of renewable energy plants in Belarus. Source: Greenmap.by

Last year's protests against these factories reiterate the inability of the authorities to listen to citizens' voices when it comes to the construction of such enterprises. Disregarding the environmental perspective, the Belarusian factories and the economy as a whole lose their chance to show themselves modern and competitive.

International criticism is unlikely to bring a change in Belarus's policy of earning money by hosting dangerous enterprises, which prove profitable for foreign investors. Yet neighbouring and some post-Soviet countries have started to change their approach towards the environment; Georgia recently introduced a complete ban on plastic bags.

Belarus would benefit from green investments and ties with eco-friendly countries (like Sweden, Germany or Netherlands that actively promote green energy and other policies in their countries). These countries might invest in small projects involved in testing for air pollution or similar.

Instead of becoming a platform for foreign investors heavily

polluting projects, Belarus could host eco-startups and become a regional hub demonstrating its successful environmental performance. Such an approach would rather stimulate citizens participation than bring them to the streets.