

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	China CAMC Engineering	Chlor-dioxide used for pulp bleaching is a dangerous and outdated technology; emissions in a residential neighborhood; costly and loss-enterprise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.

Belarusian industrial enterprises: authorities invest, citizens protest

The construction of a new factory in the town of Svetlahorsk sparked protests at the beginning of January.

Authorities' support for the pulp-bleaching plant in Svetlahorsk has ignored concerns about damaging health effects and residents' opinions. Environmental activists have little influence on the situation, meeting with disregard and being prevented from access to local people.

In pursuit of job creation and foreign investment in the economy, the Belarusian authorities increasingly ignore issues of environmental protection and public health.

Why is the pulp-bleaching factory near Svetlahorsk dangerous?



The Belarusian-Chinese factory near Svetlahorsk.
Photo: belapan

The constructors planned to open the pulp-bleaching factory near Svetlahorsk back in 2015. The plant became a joint project between China CAMC Engineering and the Svetlogorsk Pulp and Board Mill. It aims to process 2.5 million cubic metres of timber and produce 400 thousands tons of pulp per year. However, due to construction delays, the factory only started to work in January 2018.

The plant has already drawn much criticism from environmental activists. The NGO *Ecadom* describes the method of pulp bleaching used as dangerous. *Greenbelarus* writes that authorities prefer this method for cost-saving reasons and remain reluctant to conduct progressive industrial reforms.

Since Soviet times, Belarus has prioritised profit over environmental and health issues in industrial construction. The Svetlahorsk pulp bleaching plant will involve chlorine dioxide bleaching, which the EU banned back in 2006. This type of pulp processing strongly pollutes the air and water through its use of poisonous materials, such as vitriol acid and methanol. The constructors and authorities disregard the fact that WHO statistics list Belarus in [third place in the world](#)

[on the death from air pollution per 100,000.](#)

Citizens' voices fall on deaf ears

At the end of 2017 discontent about the factory's construction became visible again when testing work started. During recent years, construction workers have shared stories about construction violations and the poor quality of equipment, reports [greenbelarus.info](#). On 25 December, the residents in the village of Yakimava-Slabada, the closest residential area, protested and complained about the 'horrible smell and air' that the factory generates. In interviews with Belsat, an independent Belarusian television channel, people say that they have to go into the city (Svetlahorsk) for walks with their children to escape the smell.

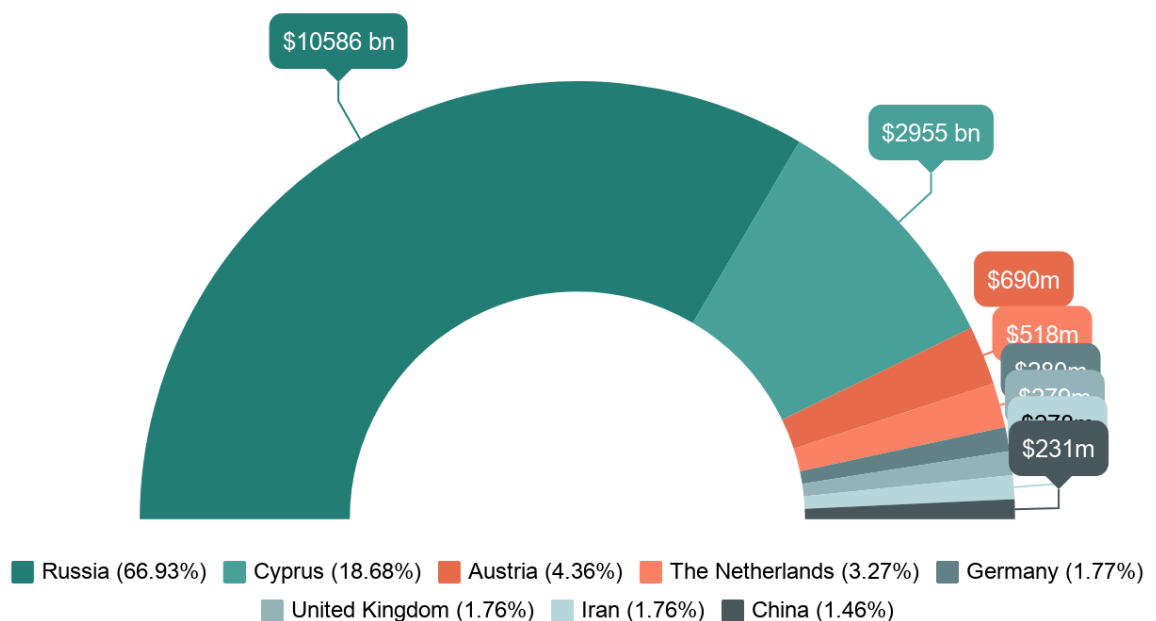
The reaction of the local authorities in the Svetlahorsk region complicates the situation. In 2012, when 10,000 citizens appealed against the construction of the plant, the authorities displayed a reluctance to compromise or agree to hold a public hearing. Since then, locals have applied to various agencies with complaints about the smell, environmental damage and smoke emissions from the plant. At the beginning of January, someone from the construction firm claimed that the plant operates with the latest technologies and that the smell should disappear within one month.

Environmental organisations wield no real influence, being restricted by state legislation and often working while unregistered. In 2013, the environmental organisation Ecadom filed a suit against the constructor building the pulp-bleaching factory. However, the court found that the construction complied with environmental laws. The NGOs Ecadom and Green Network have received few results from their [attempts to influence the construction of the polluting Belarusian-Chinese industrial park](#). Since the Svetlahorsk plant project will bring economic profits, the authorities

step back from any compromise with citizens and decline from reviewing the technologies used at the plant.

Why does Belarus continue to use dangerous industrial technologies?

Belarus lacks resources for economic development, and so the government banks on attracting foreign investment. Environmental-friendliness is a secondary consideration. One of the largest investors in Belarus remains the Austrian company, 'Kronospan', which invests in timber processing. In 2015 the company received four fines for environmental pollution according to t-styl.info. This was despite the fact that the population in the nearby town of Smarhon repeatedly complained about pollution of air and water by the factory.



Top-8 foreign countries investing in Belarus. Data: National Bank of Belarus

The economic interests of Belarusian authorities still dominate over issues of nature protection and human health. It allows the creation of new jobs and mitigates social tensions linked to unemployment and low wages.

It also puts extra money in the budget at the expense of taxes, and sometimes at the expense of exports by established foreign-owned enterprises. Western investors fear an unstable business environment in “Europe’s last dictatorship” and do not appear eager to invest in Belarus. Thus, the Belarusian government tries to attract investors from Russia and Asia.

More than a half of the total amount of foreign direct investments in the Belarusian economy in 2017 came from Russia (\$10.586 bn). The largest Chinese investment (\$1,5bn) in Belarus funds construction of the “Big Stone” industrial park. However, China is investing not only in the development of Belarus’s high-tech sector but also in environmentally-questionable enterprises, as in Svetlahorsk.

Profit vs. environment – what wins?



Solar farm near Brahin. Photo: TUT.by

While prioritising nuclear power and high-polluting plants, Belarus also works increasingly on developing its alternative energy sources. For example, the Belarusian company Velcom invested \$25 million in the construction of a solar plant at Brahin, the town most contaminated by Chernobyl.

The plant, opened in 2016, [became the largest environmentally-friendly plant in Belarus](#). The solar farm aims to bring more jobs to a region that offers poor conditions for agriculture while improving the environment.

In spite these positive developments, the share of high-polluting factories remains much larger. Looking for profits, both Belarusian companies and authorities ignore safety aspects of construction.

[Accidents at the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant](#) have caused death and injuries. In July 2016, an accident at the ammonia production factory in Hronda killed two people and seriously injured three others. Local authorities and constructors, however, conceal this information and avoid admitting the dangers, and sometimes even the accidents themselves. Many plants remain situated in urban areas, which seriously increases the potential damage in the event of accidents.

Despite the active participation of local citizens in protests in small towns like Svetlahorsk, so far the profit motive wins arguments for environmental protection.