

# How to Benefit from Being Encircled by Soviet-Type Nuclear Plants



On 26 April 1986, a human error and the Soviet equipment caused the Chernobyl disaster – the largest technological catastrophe ever. For many days Soviet authorities attempted to conceal the scale of the disaster. The Soviet Union admitted that an accident had occurred only after radiation levels set off alarms at the Forsmark Nuclear Power Plant in Sweden. Instead of immediate evacuation, people were taken to the streets on the the May Day to celebrate the communist party with red banners and portraits of Lenin.

Because of the wind direction, the bulk of contamination ended up in Belarus which suffered more than any other country from the disaster. Chernobyl-type nuclear plants are more than just history. The territory of Belarus is literally encircled by Soviet-type nuclear plants. Just across the border are Smolensk and Kursk nuclear plants in Russia, Ignalina plant in Lithuania, and nuclear plants in Ukrainian Rivne and Chernobyl. The European Union authorities considered Ignalina unsafe and Lithuania had to close it down last year.

The Russian authorities do not think that their Soviet-type plants are too dangerous and Ukraine perhaps lacks funds to replace its own. The closure of Ignalina decreased energy dependence of Lithuania, which plans to build another nuclear plant on the border with Belarus. Russia also depended on Ignalina and plans to build a nuclear reactor in its Kalinigrad enclave. Vladimir Putin already signed a decree to begin construction. This will increase to seven the number of active and recently closed (but still dangerous) nuclear

plants close to the Belarusian border. Belarus has none on its own territory.

Belarus authorities has long dream of [building](#) its own nuclear plant and it is likely to appear on the Lithuanian border. Although Russia's assertiveness in using its natural gas and oil as strategic weapons may justify the rush to build more nuclear plants, it should not blind the decision-makers. The costs of building a nuclear plant are enormous and require heavy external borrowing. Purchasing and recycling radioactive fuel is also very expensive and Belarus will have to rely on Russia for that. And at some point, the nuclear plant will need to be dismantled which takes decades.

For instance, it will take 20-30 years to complete dismantlement of the Ignalina plant. If you add all these maintenance costs together, the nuclear energy is far from cheap. Chernobyl showed the world that nuclear energy is particularly dangerous in undemocratic and nontransparent societies. Belarus learned the [lesson](#) the hard way with human suffering of hundreds of thousands and hundreds of billions dollars in economic losses. Still many tend to forget that in the absence of full transparency and independent control mechanisms, nuclear energy is a too dangerous toy to play with. It is true that Belarus cannot control nuclear stations across its border and is exposed to any potential accidents.

The fact that it cannot do anything about it should be accepted and building its own station will not change it. Belarus is not exactly the [ideal](#) of democracy and good governance and the risks of a human error similar to that which caused Chernobyl are too high. If the Belarus nuclear plant sponsored, built, fueled and maintained by Russia it will make the country even more dependent upon its Eastern neighbor. Instead of exposing itself to more foreign debt and dependence upon Russia, Belarus should bargain with Lithuania, Russia and Ukraine and buy cheap nuclear energy from them. They will always have a surplus of energy to sell. And given

the competition between these countries, the price will be reasonable. Ripping the benefits of cheap nuclear energy without bearing the costs of maintaining nuclear plants would be a wise policy for a country which suffered so much from Chernobyl.

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