

The Belarusian nuclear power plant poses a problem to Lithuania

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On 12 May, the Parliament of Lithuania acted on the initiative of the political opposition – the Conservatives, the Liberals and the Greens – and appealed to the government to take action to halt the construction of the Astravyets nuclear power plant in Belarus, 55 km away from Vilnius. The parliament has insisted on the government officially informing Belarus that power produced in Astravyets will not be permitted to enter the Lithuanian power grid and will not be sold in Lithuania. The construction of the Astravyets nuclear power plant, initiated in 2001, has reached an advanced stage. Towards the end of 2016, Russia is expected to supply it with an innovative VVER 1200 type reactor made in Russia, with a capacity of 1.2 GW, which will be cooled with water from the Neris, the river which flows through Vilnius. Production is planned to be launched in 2018, and the second reactor is planned to be put into operation by 2020.

Commentary

- The Lithuanian government has been sending protests and notes concerning the Astravyets power plant to the government in Minsk since 2010, guided by an analysis of the Belarusian report on the investment's impact on the natural environment. Lithuania has demanded answers to many questions due to its concern about insufficient supervision of both the construction process and the future operation of the power plant. Belarus has been accused of violating the Espoo and Aarhus conventions concerning protection of the natural environment and cross-border consultations. Even though Minsk has rejected these accusations, the Joint Implementation Supervisory Committee to the Espoo Convention has admitted that Belarus is in violation of the safety rules in Astravyets, and the International Atomic Energy Agency, which has gone so far as to criticise the choice of the power plant's location, has announced it will carry out a few missions on site by 2018. Lithuania is also analysing whether the Astravyets nuclear power plant will have any negative impact on the plans to synchronise the power grids of all the three Baltic states with those in the EU and what impact this will have on the energy market in the region.
- The opposition's demand that Lithuania should take a tougher stance needs to be viewed in the context of the ongoing campaign ahead of the parliamentary election (scheduled for 9 October). The Lithuanian opposition has turned the Astravyets issue into a major

subject of domestic political rivalry. It would not accept the government's argumentation that it is already too late to block the Belarusian project. It is criticising the left-wing government's strategy on this project, which boils down to seeking support from the neighbouring countries to demand together that the EU intensify international supervision over Astravyets. In turn, the political left is arguing that its opponents bowed to the EU's pressure to decommission the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant in Lithuania too quickly, and this paved the way for Russia and Belarus to implement their own nuclear projects.

- The governing Social Democrats, who stand a great chance of retaining power after the election, have not made it clear whether they will block the energy flow from Belarus. Although it has refused to offer reserve capacity to Astravyets, which is a problem for Belarus, the Ministry for Energy and the Lithuanian power supply operator Litgrid are still analysing the pros and cons of decisions that will adversely affect the economic foundations of the Belarusian project. The government is acting cautiously, since Astravyets has become the main issue in relations with Belarus, and escalation of the conflict might adversely affect, for example, the interests of the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda, one third of whose capacity is employed for the needs of Belarusian transit.