

## Safety of nuclear installations in Belarus

Thirty years after the Chernobyl accident in neighbouring Ukraine, Belarus is building its first nuclear power plant (NPP). The first unit is set to become operational in 2018 with Russian assistance. However, as the project advances, safety concerns are mounting.

### Belarus to realise nuclear power aspirations with help from Russia

The [aftermath](#) of the 1986 [Chernobyl](#) disaster in Ukraine – which [contaminated](#) nearly a quarter of Belarus but remains a [taboo](#) subject in the totalitarian system to this day – stalled Minsk's own budding nuclear aspirations for decades. In 2006, however, the government [approved](#) plans to build Belarus's first NPP. Ostrovets, some 50 km east of Lithuania's capital, was chosen as the site in 2008, [confirmed](#) by presidential decree in 2011. In 2009, Minsk announced that Russian company Atomstroyexport would be the general contractor. The first concrete was poured in 2013. Russia is to deliver an innovative VVER 1200 reactor by the end of 2016. It will be cooled with water from the river Neris, which flows downstream through Vilnius. Unit 1 is to be operational in 2018; unit 2 in 2020. Two more units are proposed for operation by 2025.

#### *Nuclear energy – the answer to Belarus's energy dependence on Russia?*

Belarus is acutely [dependent](#) on Russian energy. Some 90% of Belarusian gas imports come from Russia. Belarusian heavy industries use energy-hungry Soviet-era technologies, and Belarusian citizens have become used to artificially low energy prices. Against this backdrop and in anticipation of the commissioning of the Ostrovets NPP, President Alexander Lukashenko in April 2016 [urged](#) citizens to choose electric energy over oil and gas whenever possible, pointing out that 'gas and oil will be more expensive, while electricity will become cheaper'. While Minsk claims that the NPP will reduce the country's energy dependence on Russia, critics argue that Belarus – whose state-run economy is [struggling](#) – will remain dependent on Russia: the NPP is not only being built by Russian companies, Moscow is also [financing](#) the [US\\$22 billion](#) project.

#### *The construction of Ostrovets NPP sparks international concern*

While all domestic opposition to the NPP is [muted](#) by Belarus's autocratic president, Lithuania is openly [accusing](#) Belarus of violating the United Nations' [Espoo](#) and [Aarhus](#) Conventions, by failing to complete an environmental impact assessment, notify Lithuania about the project and inform the public about the impact on the river Neris and on drinking water in Lithuania. In 2014, the parties to the Espoo Convention found that Minsk had [failed](#) to meet some of its obligations in the construction of the NPP. In March 2016, the body [suggested](#) that an international inquiry commission help resolve the dispute. Following an incident on 8 April (confirmed by Minsk on 10 May only), Lithuania [renewed](#) its calls for stress tests, urging the International Atomic Energy Agency to ensure compliance with international safety requirements.

Following the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident, the European Council in March 2011 [requested](#) stress tests of all EU NPPs. In this context, Belarus [agreed](#) to conduct nuclear reactor stress tests for its future NPP, using the [European Nuclear Safety Regulators Group](#) model. In its 2013 resolution on [EU policy towards Belarus](#) (2013/2036(INI)), the European Parliament called on Belarus to 'enforce the highest international safety standards and a truly independent environmental impact assessment for the construction and operation of all power plants' in compliance with the Espoo and Aarhus Conventions, and following its 2011 pledge to undertake stress tests.

Under the [2015 Action Programme for Nuclear Safety Cooperation](#), the EU contributed €1 million to strengthen the capabilities of the Belarusian Nuclear Regulatory Authority, MES/Gosatombdзор, in the field of nuclear emergency preparedness and response.

In its February 2016 [conclusions on Belarus](#), the Council reaffirmed that good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation were key to enhanced EU-Belarus cooperation, reiterated the importance of ensuring nuclear safety beyond the borders of the EU, and called on Belarus to cooperate with the relevant international authorities.

