

A. Ažubalis to Belarussians : You can carry out experiments on a desert land but not next to us

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Lithuania does not object to the plans of Belarus and the Kaliningrad region (Russia) to develop nuclear energy, but disagrees with the fact that the nuclear power plants (NPP) are built close to densely populated areas of Lithuania and not in conformity with international safety requirements, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Ažubalis said in an interview to *Delfi*.

According to him, the initiators of these NPP projects do not care about people, and the aforementioned nuclear power plants are planned in violation of international safety standards.

Despite the confidence of the Russian company “Rosatom” that Lithuania can be forced to reconsider and to support their plans, A.Ažubalis stated that Lithuania would not turn a blind eye to the project in the Kaliningrad region. (*Delfi.lt*, 28 april 2011. Translated from Lithuanian)

What do you think about the plans of the Belarusian authorities to construct the nuclear power plant 30 kilometers from the Lithuanian border ?

My greatest concern is that the Belarusian NPP is planned just 50 km from the capital of Lithuania. Thus, in the event of an accident the whole of Lithuania may be paralyzed. It is true that in Europe there are examples of the nuclear power plants located just outside the capital, but these projects were agreed upon by all parties. This is a crucial difference.

Our essential position is that Lithuania is not against the aspirations of the neighboring countries to use nuclear energy ; we know perfectly well that Lithuania is also developing nuclear energy. However, not only the traditions of good neighbor, but also the international agreements oblige the country to make sure that its ambitions comply with security requirements and responsibility to society and the world.

Both Belarusian and Russian projects, implemented at the borders of Lithuania, the EU and NATO, are carried out in gross violation of the Espoo Convention and the Convention on Nuclear Safety.



Map Nuclear Energy in the Baltic Region

Essential legitimate questions of Lithuania concerning environmental impact assessment, either remain unanswered, or receive an incomplete answer. This is a pure imitation, which is supported by propaganda and information campaign stating that supposedly all Lithuania's questions were answered, and Lithuania was satisfied with these answers. We are making great efforts to highlight this lack of transparency not only the region but also worldwide.

The fact that experimental nuclear reactors will be used in the NPP construction is also indicative. No expert will convince me as a citizen, that these are "safer reactors". Until they are tested in practice - it is just a paper theory. The selected construction site in Astravets was not assessed by the IAEA experts. Although the evaluation process has not yet been completed, the construction has already started and this is impermissible in terms of the Espoo Convention. Therefore I would like it to say - dear sirs, "experiments on deserted land or on an uninhabited territory, rather than near the cities and close to our capital".

When I hear constantly repeated arguments from Belarus that their project is supposedly safe, I have an essential question - if it is really safe - then why are they hiding the information, refuse to listen to the experts and the proposed assistance ? This is the main indicator that not everything is all right and that we are all in great danger.

Belarusians have almost secured financing for the new plant, which will be built 50 km from Vilnius. At the same time in recent years, the Lithuanian Government's position was that the neighbours' plans were not serious and that they were only scaring us. In your opinion, wasn't such position a mistake ? What could Lithuania do to change the decision of Belarus, at least concerning the location of the nuclear power plant ?

Here I want to say clearly - we cannot forbid neighbouring states from building nuclear power plants. And we do not want to do this. From the moment they announced their intention to build the nuclear power plant, we had already raised the issues of proper site selection, nuclear safety complying with international standards and offered our assistance. We hoped for goodwill and responsibility from the Belarusian side.



Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Ažubalis. © DELFI (K.Čachovskio nuotr.)

However, during environmental impact assessment, reasonable doubt arose, and, currently, as I have mentioned, we see total disregard of the international legal conventions. Therefore, we raise this issue at all levels - in the EU, the IAEA and other organizations and forums.

What steps taken by Lithuania or the international community could now change Belarus's mind on building the nuclear power plant ?

First of all, this is not only Lithuania's concern, since nuclear energy does not recognize compromises, let alone borders. Owing to Lithuania's efforts, this issue has become a common EU issue, it was affirmed by the heads of the EU Member States in March's European Council : the more stringent requirements, the so-called "stress tests" are to be applied in the EU and the EU has demanded the same from the neighboring states.

At the last Review Meeting of the Convention on Nuclear Safety on 4-14 March in Vienna, attention was drawn to the need to provide comprehensive information on the nuclear power plants, to adequately assess the impact on the population and the environment, taking into account the possible cross-border impact and enhance the nuclear safety standards.

All this was achieved with the input of Lithuanian diplomats. And it is not finished. We have taken and will take all legal measures, I repeat - all measures to prevent the implementation of unsafe projects.

I believe that both Russia and Belarus hear the voice of the international community ; the question is whether they decide to ignore that voice.

Not so long ago, the U.S. expressed support for the Belarusian nuclear power plant. Whatever the reasons for this decision, it was not beneficial for our plans, or for the security of our country. Was this due to our foreign policy mistakes, an inappropriate strategy or adverse geopolitical circumstances ?

It has been repeated many times that, in principle, neither the U.S. nor Lithuania oppose the development of nuclear power in the neighboring countries ; each country makes its own choice of energy balance. The U.S. also supports the Lithuanian energy strategy and the development of the regional Visaginas nuclear power plant project. This was confirmed by the U.S. Department of State in an official statement during my February meeting with the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Deputy Secretary James Steinberg in Washington.

However, both the U.S. and Lithuania demand compliance with the highest international nuclear safety and environmental standards.

In your opinion, are the projects of nearby Russian and Belarusian nuclear power plants a consequence of an agreement or competition ?

We see no economic logic or need of the Kaliningrad region for the construction of such a thing, because there is currently excess power production even without the nuclear power plant, no electrical interconnections with other countries, except Lithuania, lack of the necessary power reservation capacities and sales market.

I also have not yet heard of an internationally recognized, reputable company expressing a desire to invest in the Russian and Belarusian nuclear power plants, although we know about an intense search for such investors. In my opinion, a lack of answers to the questions about safety and economic feasibility of the projects is one of the reasons of the failure.

In addition, it must be noted that the society discusses much more the Belarusian nuclear power plant and forgets that the planning of the NPP in the Kaliningrad region is also not transparent and not complying with the international requirements.

How may the construction of the Belarusian nuclear power plant affect the aspiration of Lithuania to have its own nuclear power plant and to find an international investor for this project ?

In contrast to the projects of the Belarusian and Kaliningrad NPPs, at the moment the nuclear power plant planned in Visaginas is, according to experts, the best NPP project in Europe. It is implemented in accordance with the highest international safety standards ; it has received a positive evaluation of the IAEA and other experts.

The Visaginas nuclear power plant is not only a Lithuanian project, it is a regional project in which Latvia, Estonia and Poland take part. The project has received political support, the necessary electrical interconnections with Sweden and Poland were built, power reservation has been provided, and the demand in the region is guaranteed. This is a project of European importance, and its implementation can not be influenced by another country's plans to develop nuclear energy.

Lithuania implements the Visaginas project responsibly, in accordance with the highest nuclear safety requirements (and requires the same from the others), does not compete with anybody or take compromise decisions in a hurry.

What measures will be taken to protect the Lithuanian people, in the event that the Belarusian nuclear power plant is built. For example, where will Vilnius be evacuated ?

Of course, we must consider and evaluate all the scenarios, including the worst case scenario, if the irresponsibility of our neighbors prevails.

In preparation of the NPP projects, evacuation plans are usually prepared and relevant bilateral agreements are signed. However, we still have not received from the Belarusian side full information about possible threats and risks ; therefore we can not provide appropriate solutions.

We can only regret the fact that the initiators of the neighboring projects, to put it mildly, do not care about the people. After all, we are talking not just about Lithuania, but also about the citizens of Belarus and Russia. Public discussions about the possible dangers are stifled ; even residents of the Astravets district are not allowed to express their opinion.

Would Lithuania agree in return to the change of Belarusian plans, to give up its nuclear project, which the Belarusians present a similar example of the NPP built near the border ?

The Visaginas nuclear power plant and the Belarusian nuclear power plant are two completely different cases which can not be compared.

The Visaginas NPP will be built on an old site, proven by time and research, instead of the

Ignalina NPP. Lithuania conducted additional seismic studies and the IAEA mission has recognized the site suitable for construction. We take all the actions transparently and responsibly, we are building not only for ourselves but for the whole Baltic region.

Speaking with Belarus, we emphasize the proximity not to the border, but to the densely populated areas, the capital of Lithuania, where all the state institutions are concentrated and where hundreds of thousands of people are living. So the question arises - what do we compare ?

In conclusion, I would like to return to the posture of our neighbors. Last week, we heard the Russian company Rosatom's position, that they will supposedly use the IAEA "to force" Lithuania to "agree".

I want to ask : to "agree" on what ? On turning a blind eye to non-transparent nuclear energy projects ? That will not happen.

I hope, that with the support of international community we will succeed - I do not want to use the word "force", I would say - convince them that it is always reasonable to adhere to international agreements and commitments, first and foremost for the safety of its own citizens.

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P.-S.

Lithuanian Foreign Minister