

## The Nuclear Power Plant in Astrava, Belarus

M\_. Speaker, I rise to address concerns brewing in Lithuania and other Baltic states about the construction of a nuclear power plant. This plant is 12½ miles from the Lithuanian border and in sight of Vilnius, Lithuania's capital and largest city. I speak here not only as a friend of the Baltic peoples and as a descendant of Lithuanian immigrants, but also as Co-chair of the Baltic Caucus and Chairman of the Subcommittee on the Environment. And like all of my colleagues here, I am concerned about ensuring the security, integrity, and safety of nuclear projects in Europe and around the world.

### **Background**

- It was not long ago that we were concerned about the effects of other nuclear power plants in Belarus. It was the planned site of a Soviet nuclear power plant until the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, which contaminated a quarter of Belarus.
- But by 2019, Belarus is supposed to house a different Moscow-run nuclear power plant, this one run by the Russian state-owned company Rosatom.
- This project is very environmentally sensitive. Both Lithuania and Belarus have agreed to discuss such environmentally sensitive projects near shared borders as part of the Espoo Convention.
- Building a nuclear power plant is hard, especially when it's a country's first. That's why the International Atomic Energy Agency's recommended a six-step review process meant to prevent disasters like Chernobyl's and the more recent one in Fukushima, Japan.

## Problems

- But Belarus has chosen to skip four of the six steps, including crucial steps that ignore the people and land of Lithuania.
- There is real concern that the main purpose behind the project is to grow Russian influence and power, especially over energy in the European Union.
  - The president of Belarus said that the Astrava plant and another Russian plant are “a fishbone in the throat of the European Union and the Baltic States.”
- Nuclear power plants in sensitive areas should be discussed within the Espoo Convention.
  - Nearly all of Lithuania is within 300 kilometers of the plant, which means that if disaster were to strike, long-term food consumption in the country could be severely affected.
  - The country’s drinking water could also be affected, since the plant is supposed to draw rivers from a river that supplies drinking water to Lithuania.
- But incidents are occurring that cast doubt on Belarus’s commitment to working with neighbors and ensuring the plant is safe.
  - In 2016, six serious incidents occurred, and Belarus has failed to be upfront with Lithuania about any of them.
  - A 330-ton nuclear reactor shell was allegedly dropped from about 13 feet last summer.

- Belarus did not reveal anything about the incident until independent media reported it, and then downplayed it.
- Earlier, a structural frame at the site collapsed after workers, apparently under time pressure, filled it too quickly.

### Points of Concern

- Building a nuclear power plant requires care in construction, according to the most stringent standards, with the utmost transparency, and for the best reasons.
- This plant fails all four counts.
  - It is in the *wrong location*.
  - It has been *irresponsibly handled*.
  - Instead of transparency, we have *stonewalling* and *obfuscation*.
  - Instead of making the most economic sense, this plant seems to make good geopolitical sense, and for Russia, not for Belarus.

Let me be clear, M\_. Speaker. No one here objects to the safe, secure design, construction, and running of nuclear power plants. But the people of Lithuania are firmly opposed to irresponsible attitudes towards nuclear power, particularly so close to their most populous city. This concern makes sense. As chairman of the House Subcommittee on the Environment and a longtime observer of Eastern Europe, M\_. Speaker, I can assure you that the people of the United States have no better friend than the people of Lithuania. Lithuanians have the right and the responsibility to ensure their and their children's environmental security. They should not be expected to accept inadequate or misleading information about a serious, environmentally sensitive project

right on their borders. The government of Belarus should respect the commitments it has made, including with its neighbors. Until these issues are resolved, M\_. Speaker, I cannot fault the Lithuanian people for their concern about the Astrava nuclear power plant. I share their concerns. I hope Belarusian will calm their fears by allowing in international experts and representatives. Belarus should also comply with the International Atomic Energy Agency's recommendations for the design, construction, and running of safe nuclear power plants. Thank you, M\_. Speaker, and I yield back the balance of my time.

#### **Background materials**

- <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/iaea-mission-concludes-site-and-external-events-design-seed-review-in-belarus>
- <http://gizmodo.com/the-first-nuclear-power-plant-in-belarus-is-a-dangerous-1785024428>
- <http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/2017/02/23/a-preventable-nuclear-threat-you-most-likely-dont-know-about/>
- *Materials from Lithuanian Ambassador*