

THE EIA PROCESS OF THE BELARUS NUCLEAR POWER PLANT. A FACT-SHEET

- Although the EIA process is still open, Belarus is constructing its first nuclear power plant (NPP) on the Ostrovets site in the Northwestern part of Belarus, located approximately 25 kilometers away from the state border with Lithuania, and approximately 50 kilometers away from Lithuanian capital Vilnius. The population in Vilnius is over half a million.
- The NPP project foresees construction of two nuclear reactors of type VVER-1200, supplied by Atomstroyexport (Russian Federation), with total capacity of 2400 MW. The operation of the first unit is due to start in 2018 and the second one – in 2020.
- Lithuania has been in contact with Belarus regarding the NPP project since 2008 and has been raising questions regarding the site selection for the construction of the NPP; assessment of alternatives; geological aspects of the site; assessment of the impact to Lithuanian environment and population during normal operation and in the case of accidents; cooling of the NPP, impact to the river Neris and to potable water in Lithuania; planned emergency preparedness and response measures; independency of responsible institution for nuclear safety, participation of Belarus in the EU comprehensive risk and safety assessments (“stress tests”) of nuclear power plants; nuclear waste management issues, etc. These questions are directly linked to safety and well-being of Lithuanian environment and population, however, they remain unanswered up until now. Despite that, works are going on.
- Belarus has failed to properly complete the EIA procedures, while proceeding with NPP construction works. The Ostrovets site for NPP construction was chosen and the preparatory works on the site started in 2008 – before the start of EIA procedure. Belarus sent the notification, in line with the Espoo Convention, to the possibly affected Parties only on 24 August 2009. Access to information and possibilities for Lithuanian population to participate in decision-making during the EIA process has been restricted due to the lack of cooperation from the side of Belarus: Lithuania was not provided with EIA documentation in due time, the quality of translation of the EIA report was of extremely poor quality, proper public hearing event and bilateral experts’ consultations were not arranged.
- In June 2011, Lithuania made a submission to the Implementation Committee of the Espoo Convention, expressing concerns about the compliance of Belarus with its obligations under the Espoo Convention with respect to the NPP in Ostrovets.
- **On 15 April 2013 Implementation Committee of the Espoo Convention adopted findings and recommendations regarding Belarus. 6th Meeting of Parties of the Espoo Convention, which convened on 2-5 June 2014, in Geneva, endorsed the findings of the Implementation Committee and requested Belarus to take steps in order to improve implementation of the Espoo Convention.**
- **Findings of the Implementation Committee of the Espoo Convention¹, endorsed by the Meeting of Parties on 2-5 June 2014 in Geneva² concluded that:**

¹ For comprehensive consideration of information, please refer to the report of the Implementation Committee of the Espoo Convention ECE/MP.EIA/IC/2013/2.

² For final decision of 6th Meeting of Parties of the Espoo Convention, please refer to the report ECE/MP.EIA/20.Add.1

- Belarus was in compliance with article 2, paragraph 2 (*legal establishment of the EIA procedure*) and with article 3, paragraph 2 (a) and (c) (*content of a notification*);
- **Belarus was in non-compliance with article 2, paragraph 6 (*public participation*), with article 4, paragraph 2 (*the preparation of the EIA documentation*), with article 5, paragraph (a) (*consultation on the basis of the EIA documentation*), and with article 6, paragraphs 1 and 2 (*the final decision*).**
- **The Meeting of Parties of the Espoo Convention** also requested Belarus to continue the procedure of transboundary EIA on the basis of the final EIA documentation, to provide to Lithuania the final decision on the proposed activity taken in accordance with the Espoo Convention, to answer Lithuania's questions and take into consideration Lithuanian comments.

The Implementation Committee of the Espoo Convention, has analyzed and evaluated documents, information, facts and issues, related to Lithuanian submission about the compliance of Belarus with respect to the planned NPP in Ostrovets up until April 2013. A few developments that happened since then require special attention:

EIA documentation. During the bilateral Lithuanian-Belorussian Intergovernmental Commission meeting in Vilnius, on 28 May 2013, it was agreed that Belarus would update the EIA report according to the Espoo Convention and the Findings and Recommendations of the Implementation Committee and provide it to Lithuania together with the final decision on the site selection.

In June 2013, Belarus sent to Lithuania a 1000-pages-long EIA report. The Lithuanian version of that report was lost in translation: for example, in Lithuanian language the word *plant* has two meanings: (1) *flora* and (2) *factory*; however, in the report, when referring to a NPP, the word *plant* was translated as *flora*, instead of *factory*; Uzbekistan was mentioned instead of Lithuania, etc. Most of the sentences in Lithuanian language made no sense, as obviously, the translation was made using automated translation tool (*google translate* or similar). After comprehensive analysis of the English version of the EIA report, Lithuanian experts stated that Belarus presented to Lithuania an old version of the EIA report that was prepared in 2010, and which did not take into account the Findings and Recommendations of the Implementation Committee adopted during the twenty-seventh session. The report was not updated and did not include answers to the issues raised by Lithuania.

Public event in Ostrovets. Right after presenting the EIA report of 1000 pages, Belarus insisted to discuss it with Lithuanian public instantly – in two weeks' time. Lithuania asked Belarus to give reasonable time for the analysis of the voluminous document and afterwards to co-organize public hearings in Vilnius. Belarus refused the proposal and unilaterally decided to organize the event in Ostrovets (Belarus) on 17 August 2013.

According to the information published in the press, almost 200 people arrived in Ostrovets, most of them selected from Visaginas (mostly former workers of the closed Ignalina NPP) and only a small number of attendees were from Vilnius. Lithuanian citizens residing in places that can possibly be affected by the new NPP in Belarus faced serious obstacles in order take part in the event – they needed to have a passport for travelling outside the Schengen area and a Belarus visa, as well as to take care of transportation. Public sources in Lithuania noted that access to the event in Ostrovets was restricted (refusals to issue visas, instructions not to ask questions, the group of people going to the event was chosen selectively (most of them former workers of the Ignalina NPP, currently unemployed).

The possibilities for Lithuanian public to participate in the said event were restricted due the visa requirements, travel and time constrains. The residents of the capital of Lithuania Vilnius, which is considered to be in the area likely to be affected, were unilaterally deprived of the right to access the place of the public event without excessive burdens, despite the numerous requests by Lithuania since 2010 to co-arrange a public hearing meeting in Lithuania.

Bilateral correspondence. Since 15 April 2013, when the Implementation Committee of the Espoo Convention published the findings and recommendations, Lithuania and Belarus have been constantly exchanging letters, however, no progress could be recorded. In order to clear up the mismatches regarding the project of NPP in Ostrovets, on 10 September 2013 Lithuania prepared a summary of remaining essential questions; However, despite the attempts, outstanding issues that Lithuania has been raising since 2009 remain without answers.

Since 2013 Lithuanian Ministry of Environment in the bilateral correspondence with Belarus has 7 times officially suggested arranging a public hearing event in Lithuania for Lithuanian public, unfortunately, Belarus has been ignoring all the invitations. Instead of proceeding with the EIA procedures, Belarus proposes to arrange public hearings only at the post-project phase, which is currently premature, as the project phase is not finished yet.

Despite, that the EIA procedure with Lithuania is still open, in the period of October 2013 – February 2014 Belarus issued licenses and decrees authorizing the construction of the two units of the NPP and the construction works are in full swing.

Lithuania has been raising these issues at bilateral Lithuanian-Belarus meetings at all levels: during the 6th Nuclear Safety Convention Review Meeting in Viena (Austria), in March-April 2014; during the visit of Vice minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus in Vilnius (Lithuania), in May 2014; during the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania in Minsk (Belarus), in July 2014; a bilateral meeting in Minsk (Belarus), in September 2014; during bilateral meeting of Prime Ministers of Lithuania and Belarus in Mogilev (Belarus), in November 2014, etc.