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A Nuclear Dictatorship

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Russia Profile

Alexander Lukashenko Might Need Help From the Very People He Is Trying to Avoid

The biggest victim of the radioactive fallout from the Chernobyl disaster would seem like the least likely home for a nuclear power plant. Characteristically undeterred by such reasoning, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko pledged to construct Belarus' first-ever nuclear power station by 2016 – the year that incidentally coincides with the thirtieth anniversary of the Chernobyl accident.

Most experts readily point out that Belarus is capable of neither building nor maintaining a nuclear power plant. And thus the ironic twist is that the most likely source of funding and nuclear fuel for the plant is the very country from which Belarus is trying to obtain energy independence. Another one of the very few, and pricier, options would be the United States, which temporarily stopped issuing visas to Belarusian citizens as part of the latest round of its diplomatic spat with “Europe’s last dictator.”

Turning to Teheran

Shunned by the West, Lukashenko is actively engaged in cultivating a “strategic partnership” with Iran. Even before the ascent to power of his fellow U.S. antagonist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Belarusian president hosted the relatively moderate Iranian President Mohammed Khatami in Minsk on the third anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Ahmadinejad himself visited Lukashenko in May 2007, offering Belarus access to the Jofeir oil field, which borders with Iraq and has the potential of producing up to 30,000 barrels per day, as part of giving the East European rogue ally greater access to Iranian oil reserves.

Iranian Ambassador to Belarus Abdolhamid Fekri announced at a Feb. 27 press-conference in Minsk that Iran is ready to aid Belarus in the construction and operation of a nuclear power plant. “Despite the hardships that have developed, Iran has opened a new way for the peaceful use of nuclear energy, and is ready to share its achievements with all who have peaceful goals,” Fekri said.

Rajab Safarov, director of the Moscow-based Center for Contemporary Iranian Research, believes that Teheran is ready to assist Minsk in two ways. Firstly, it can offer financial help in getting the project off the ground. Secondly, Belarusian and Iranian specialists could work together to begin the construction process. Safarov said that Iranians gained valuable experience from working with Russians for over 10 years on the Bushehr reactor, and from having started building their own 360-megawatt light water reactor to produce electricity.

In return, Belarus could provide Iran with some of its military-industrial complex leftovers from the Soviet period, Safarov underscored.

Considering other options

While the prospect of Belarusian-Iranian nuclear cooperation is headline-grabbing, most experts believe that only Russia can realize Lukashenko's nuclear dream.

David Marples, a Belarus expert at the University of Alberta, doubts that Iran could afford to finance a project that is likely to run much higher than, perhaps even double the amount of, the officially projected \$4-5 billion. "It would be an enormous commitment from Iran," he said and pointed to Russia as the more likely nuclear partner.

At the same time, Marples argues that the Belarusian-Iranian partnership is not as threatening as it appears at first glance. "In my view, the danger from Iran is considerably exaggerated," he said. "The Belarusian-Iranian relationship is at best an irritant to the United States, but hardly the main concern for the State Department."

A roundtable dedicated to Belarus' "nuclear revival" was held at the office of the Minsk-based *Nasha Niva* weekly, with experts of the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies (BISS) participating. The participants pointed to the fact that a nuclear power plant in Belarus was justified by Lukashenko as a means to guarantee Belarus' "national security" by reducing the country's dependency on gas imports from Russia. But, instead of reducing, the project may considerably increase Belarus' political, energy and financial dependence on Russia, they agreed.

"If Russian companies begin the construction, it will be a political catastrophe [for Belarus]," said Vitaly Silitski, BISS director. He made the argument that this sort of cooperation with Russia will act to undermine the anti-Russian opposition in Belarus.

According to the directorate for the construction of the nuclear power plant, which was set up in November 2007 under the Belarusian Ministry of Energy by a presidential decree, the 2,000 megawatt plant will make it possible to save about five billion cubic meters of natural gas per year. It is supposed to supply some 15 percent of the country's electricity needs.

"Surely it would be more rational to see how the existing energy infrastructure can be optimized instead of wildly deciding to build a nuclear power plant," said Jeroen Ketting, managing director and founder of The Lighthouse Group, a Moscow-based Dutch consulting company that recently kicked off an energy efficiency project in Russia.

Ketting estimated that at least 20 to 30 percent of energy consumption could be saved in Belarus "by introducing rational policy," which would incorporate technical, policy, legislative and financial measures. He cited the introduction of public awareness campaigns, tax incentives for energy efficiency initiatives and green energy, subsidies for alternative energy solutions and the establishment of commercially viable tariff

infrastructure as some of the non-technical measures the Belarusian government could adopt. On the technical side, thermostat valves for radiators, energy efficient lighting, housing insulation, reduction of leakage in heat distribution, combined heat and power installations, and gas leakage reduction in distribution are among the multitude of measures Ketting recommended over the nuclear option.

A step back for democracy

In addition to failing to take into account the viable alternatives to nuclear energy, the Belarusian government's decision to build the nuclear power station has completely bypassed the Belarusian public.

"Belarus has never entered into any dialogue with the public about the need or desire for such a station," Marples described.

Valery Dranchuk, head of the environmental civil initiative "TERRA-Convention," said that the building of a nuclear power plant in Belarus would constitute another blow to democracy, and criticized the Belarusian government for making "a typical authoritarian decision." He also pointed out that, in 1999, Belarus joined the Aarhus Convention, an environmental agreement linking environmental rights and human rights that requires member states to "guarantee rights of access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters."

"We need to ask the public [for its opinion] and to expose the people to a knowledgeable and diverse group of experts on the issue," Dranchuk said.

Silitski also raised the question of the right of the Belarusian public to have its say in the project. "Such political decisions are not widely discussed here [in Belarus]." At the same time, he pointed out that Belarus has neither the proper institutions for democratic representation nor the independent media necessary for sparking free debate.

Some members of the Belarusian public have already voiced their disapproval of the project, however. More than 1,000 local inhabitants of one site that was considered for the construction of the plant signed a petition to stop the project. Other locations in the Mahileu region, which is not far from the Russian border, have also been reported as potential sites for the nuclear power plant. According to RIA Novosti, the station would be built in the small village of Kukshynava, which is 30 miles from the city of Mahileu and, as Marples pointed out, only 21 miles from the native village of the Belarusian president.

Calling a bluff

One question that naturally arises is whether Lukashenko expects to stay in power long enough to see the project through. Given the Belarusian president's grip on power, it is entirely possible that he will remain the head of state for at least eight more years.

However, according to Marples, Lukashenko is concerned more with “instant solutions” to Belarus’ energy dependency problem than using this project to stretch his political career. “I never thought that Lukashenko looks very far ahead,” Marples said. “On paper, a nuclear power station seems like a plausible way out of reliance on Russia for oil and gas. But the program has not been thought through.”

Given its impracticality and costliness, Lukashenko’s nuclear mega-project may never be brought to completion.

According to Alexander Voitovich, former President of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences and speaker of the Council of the Republic, Belarus does not have the human capital necessary for the building and managing of a nuclear power plant. He supports the idea of nuclear energy, but believes that Belarus is not politically ready to carry out the project. “Our country is not stable... We have not yet gone through the development stage that Russia, Ukraine and even Moldova have gone through,” he said, adding that “It would be better for our country if we achieved change by evolutionary rather than revolutionary means.”

Marples pointed out that the station’s location is adjacent to, if not directly within, the radiation fallout zone from Chernobyl. “This is going to be a significant factor not only because of the construction of the station, but also because of the need to build a new town for reactor workers, with some 10-15,000 population, taking into account the workers and their families,” he explained.

Egor Fedyushin, Belarusian environmentalist who, after working for many years in the field of nuclear energy, changed his career focus to alternative energy sources, said that the Chernobyl disaster altered the “ideology and psychology” of nuclear initiatives. “No one will work on a nuclear power plant with the same enthusiasm as during the Soviet period. Then, it was a matter of defending the Motherland. That was a holy task. Now, the goals and reasons behind building a nuclear power station are not clear,” he explained.

Fedyushin also admitted that over the past ten years it never crossed his mind that the Belarusian government might consider building a nuclear power plant. He is certain that it will eventually have no choice but to close the project. 