
Russia plans nuclear project for Kaliningrad

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MOSCOW. (RIA Novosti commentator Tatyana Sinitsyna) - Russian plans to build a nuclear power plant in the Kaliningrad Region have provoked protests from Europeans concerned about environmental and radiological safety.

The plant is intended to ensure the Baltic enclave's energy security. Russian physicist Anatoly Zrodnikov once said, "The world is now not ruled by the dollar or the euro, but by the joule." (The joule is a unit of energy measuring heat, electricity and mechanical work named after English physicist James Prescott Joule).

There are many nuclear power plants in Europe, notably in France, Germany, the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Finland.

A nuclear power plant is absolutely necessary for the Kaliningrad Region. It will ensure its competitiveness and sustainable development, Sergei Kiriyyenko, head of the Federal Nuclear Power Agency, Rosatom, said when signing the framework agreement on the construction of the plant on April 16.

The other signatory was the regional governor, Georgy Boos, who said energy supply was a major headache for the region because gas prices keep rising.

Speaking before regional Duma deputies, Kiriyyenko said, "The nuclear power plant is vital for that part of Europe in terms of market and energy security."

The European Union, and especially Kaliningrad's Baltic neighbors, do not like the idea of the nuclear power plant. But nuclear power generation seems to be the only solution now in view of the feared global energy crisis. Experts say that energy consumption will double by 2050.

Even such small countries as Albania and Estonia are considering building nuclear power plants. Lithuania, which does not want to part with its energy comfort, is planning to build a new Ignalina plant instead of the old one. The Baltic countries on both sides of the Kaliningrad Region are prepared to pool their funds to finance Lithuania's project. Finland, which has four nuclear reactors and will commission a fifth one in 2009, has announced its intention to build another two or three reactors.

The EU looks benevolently on its members' nuclear ambitions, but complains about environmental and other dangers when Russia advances nuclear plans.

Twenty-two years after the Chernobyl disaster, the world should have cured itself of radiophobia.

As the saying goes, "once bitten, twice shy," but the probability of an accident at a modern nuclear reactor is one in a million. Such reassuring figures do little to assuage the public, however.

Russia could simply disregard the opinion of its neighbors, but it respects Europe and its standards - especially since the Kaliningrad Region is surrounded by EU countries.

On the other hand, many EU countries in the Baltic region either already have, or plan to build, nuclear power plants, and so the Russian enclave is located in a hypothetical nuclear risk zone. It can continue to buy energy

from neighboring countries at market prices, or build its own nuclear power plant.

Besides, the Kaliningrad plant will provide electricity not only to the enclave, but also to its close and distant neighbors. According to experts, the plant's two reactors will enable Russia to diversify its foreign trade by selling not only commodities (oil and gas) but also high-tech nuclear generated electricity.

In short, Russia plans to make a strong geopolitical move, and it is probably this that worries Europe most of all.

The planned Kaliningrad plant is similar to the Belene nuclear power plant in Bulgaria, which has been certified by the EU. This should be enough to allay Europe's fears. But it is also worried by the plant's huge capacity. After long debates, it has finally accepted the experts' arguments that a plant with two 1150 MW reactors will be the best choice economically and operationally.

The two twin reactors with common infrastructure will make the plant cheaper and ensure that operation will not be interrupted by routine maintenance shutdowns of one of the reactors.

Experts have estimated the cost of the project at 5 billion euros.

Atomstroyexport, Russia's nuclear power equipment and service export monopoly, will be the main contractor.

This, too, should go some way to allaying European safety concerns.

Atomstroyexport is known for working to the highest standards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and European requirements for nuclear projects. It was granted the EUR (European Utility Requirements) certificate for the Belene project.

Foreign investors and nuclear construction companies will be invited to take part in the Kaliningrad project. Russian legislation dictates that the state owns and holds controlling stakes in all nuclear power plants. However, Russia is ready to offer foreign partners, above all European ones, a 49% stake in the Kaliningrad plant, Kiriyyenko said.

Several potential partners have already expressed interest in supplying equipment to the plant. Now that the agreement has been signed, talks will be held officially.

As for investment, Rosatom plans to consider the issue thoroughly and hold a tender, even though "some investors have expressed willingness to buy everything without a tender," Kiriyyenko said.

The decision to build the plant was made after a yearlong survey. Since the plant cannot be built on the Baltic coast for geophysical reasons, it will be built inland, on the area of 13.300 square kilometers, some 120 km (75 miles) from the capital city in the east of the region.

The project will be adapted to the site geographically, will take into account possible environmental effects, undergo thorough ecological expertise and will be approved only after public debates.

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