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Ukraine's Reckless Nuclear Response



Photo: State Emergency Service of Ukraine/Wikimedia Commons

The ongoing war in Ukraine is not exactly a conducive environment to building new nuclear power plants.

Obviously, if your country has been invaded by a foreign power, putting your 15 commercial nuclear reactors at risk of destruction that could lead to a massive radioactive release, rendering your country and others beyond uninhabitable, there is only one clear solution: load up with more new nuclear power plants.

Just this past week, the Ukrainian energy minister, Herman Halushchenko, announced that his country had ordered two new Westinghouse AP1000 reactors for the Khmelnytskyi

site in the western part of Ukraine. The two reactors currently there already had to be shut down last November after Russian missile attacks put the plant in peril.

This scheme with Westinghouse, a company that was bankrupted by new nuclear projects in the US, comes on the heels of an earlier US-Ukraine deal announced by Special US Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, during the COP27 summit in Egypt, for a “clean hydrogen” pilot program in Ukraine using small modular reactors.

Never mind that all four nuclear power plant sites in the Ukraine have at one time or another been embroiled in the war and/or have lost power from the grid — the first step on the way to a potential meltdown.

Never mind that the International Atomic Energy Agency, despite its mission to promote nuclear power around the world, has called shelling near the plants “out of control” and “playing with fire.”

Never mind that the six-reactor Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in the country’s east, which has been occupied by Russian forces since March 4, is the largest in all of Europe and, by all accounts, has lost a considerable amount of its Ukrainian workforce due to the hostile working environment, is a major nuclear catastrophe waiting to happen.

All of this, apparently, leads to only one conclusion in the eyes of the Ukrainian energy authorities. They need even more nuclear power plants.

The AP1000 announcement of course ignores the lamentable and corrupt track record of Westinghouse as well as similar failures across the new nuclear sectors with reactors years behind schedule and billions of dollars over budget.

The Ukrainian announcement about the Westinghouse deal contained several laugh-out-loud moments including the boast that “The estimated completion date for the construction and start-up of the reactors is 2030-2032” and that “the cost of each reactor is to be about \$5 billion.”

Neither statement bears any relationship to reality, especially that of Westinghouse, whose two remaining reactors under construction at the Vogtle site in Georgia are now seven years beyond the originally projected startup date with the latest costs estimated to top \$30 billion.

The Ukraine announcement added a cautious little caveat that “the timing may be affected by the course of military operations.” Ya think?

This was curious phrasing to say the least, since

(a) it is the Russians who term the invasion a “military operation” rather than what it is, a “war” and,

(b) while the war continues — and it sadly shows no sign of ending soon — there is absolutely zero possibility of beginning construction of new reactors in Ukraine.

Even were the war to end in the near future, the country will need all its resources and focus to rebuild essential existing infrastructure and repatriate, and rehouse its population.

Of course the most logical explanation for all of this, and one explicit in the announcement, is a further step forward in Ukraine’s divorce from all things Russian.

Thus, the choice of the Westinghouse boondoggle is merely to reject “Soviet technology”.

That may indeed provide some moral satisfaction, but it will come at an enormous price, principally, a fiscal one. Ukraine is hardly in a position to empty its coffers in the name of exorbitant nuclear power projects that will only put its population in even more danger.

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