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What is Westinghouse Doing in Ukraine?



Westinghouse already has a contract to complete construction of reactors at the Khmelnytskyi nuclear power plant site. (Photo: RLuts/Wikimedia Commons).

You might think that being in the middle of a war, the last thing you would be contemplating is building more nuclear power plants. But that hasn't stopped Energoatom, the Ukrainian state nuclear operator.

Earlier this month, Energoatom inked a new agreement with Westinghouse of all companies, the American corporation that went bankrupt trying to build four of its AP1000 reactors in South Carolina and Georgia. The two in South Carolina were canceled mid-construction, while the pair in Georgia are years behind schedule and billions of dollars over-budget.

But like a good corporate vulture, Westinghouse has swooped into Ukraine, to grab a golden opportunity. Already the supplier of nuclear fuel to almost half of Ukraine's reactors, the company now plans to increase that commitment to all 15, replacing Russia's

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Rosatom; to establish a Westinghouse Engineering and Technical Center; and, craziest of all, build nine new AP1000 reactors there.

Westinghouse already has the contract to build more reactors at the 2-reactor Khmelnytsky nuclear power plant, which remain partially complete. Under the deal, Westinghouse will work first on Khmelnytsky 3, which is 75% complete, before taking on the 25% complete unit 4. Talks this month also evaluated Westinghouse building two more reactors at the site.

Fifteen operational reactors in a war zone — seven of them are apparently still running in Ukraine — is already risk enough. If even one of those reactors were fully breached, or its fuel pool caught fire or suffered an explosion — whether from an attack, accident, or meltdown due to gird failure — the amount of radioactivity released would dwarf the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

Chernobyl Unit 4 was a relatively new reactor when it exploded on April 26, 1986, releasing potentially as much as 200 million curies into the environment. At least 100,000 square kilometres (39,000 square miles) of land was significantly contaminated with radioactive fallout. As much as 40% of Europe beyond Ukraine, Russia and Belarus, received fallout from the disaster. Certain plants and animals — including in Germany, Lapland and, until recently, the United Kingdom—remain unsafe to eat, even today.

The contamination from Chernobyl, and the resulting and widespread health effects, will endure potentially indefinitely. And all of that, as Scientists for Global Responsibility's Phil Webber said in a recent webinar, would “look like a tea party” compared to the devastation unleashed should one of the older Ukrainian reactors suffer a catastrophe during this unforgivable war.

We've already seen the six-reactor Zaporizhzhia site attacked and a fire break out, mercifully not in one of the reactors or fuel pools. Zaporizhzhia will now likely remain permanently occupied by the Russians as they move deeper into Ukrainian territory from the east.

More recently, there have been incidences of Russian missiles flying low — too low — first over the six-reactor Zaporizhzhia site and then over the three reactors at the South Ukraine nuclear power plant. The humanitarian catastrophe that is already unfolding in Ukraine would be magnified beyond imagination were one of those missiles to malfunction and hit a nuclear plant — I use the term ‘malfunction’ because we still rest on the assumption that even Putin would not be reckless enough to deliberately order an attack on a nuclear reactor. But we can't count on it.

And yet, in the middle of all this, Ukraine is busy making business deals with a bankrupt American nuclear company with a lamentable track record of cost over-runs, technical challenges and long delayed completion times.

All of this is testament to the misplaced caché still held by anything nuclear. Somehow, the possession of both nuclear weapons and nuclear power plants is seen as holding prestige. Indeed, Energoatom announced this latest Westinghouse deal thus: “Every such event in energy too brings the victory of Ukraine!”

It’s not really clear what, if anything, will bring victory to Ukraine and at what price. But building more nuclear power plants there only achieves one thing: putting the people of Ukraine in even greater danger, war or not. Reactors are vulnerable to failure and they make deadly radioactive waste, lethal for tens to hundreds of thousands of years. There is nothing victorious in perpetuating that. Just utter folly.

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