

Neighbouring Countries Concerned About the Risk of a Belgian Nuclear Meltdown

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Global Research, January 20, 2017

[The Ecologist](#) 19 January 2017

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Environment](#), [Oil and Energy](#)

It's not the metaphorical political meltdown of Belgium that neighbouring governments fret about, but a nuclear meltdown. The Netherlands, Luxemburg and Germany have all asked Belgium's government to close its most risky reactors with immediate effect. [The city of Aachen and 30 other major cities and districts are also suing Belgium](#) for not closing them. The German government no longer trusts the Belgian Nuclear Safety Agency and wants permission for its own agency to do safety checks. So far, foreign pressure is falling on deaf ears.

Belgians have even more reasons to worry. On 10 January 2017 a new emergency plan was presented in a commission in Belgium's Parliament. The evacuation perimeter was conveniently halved to 10km to avoid an evacuation of Belgium's second and third cities in case of a meltdown. Nuclear Transparency Watch, a European organisation created by Members of the European Parliament of all political colours, called Belgium's plans totally [inadequate and incoherent.inad](#)

So rather than signing [agreements with Belgium about sharing information](#), where are the sanctions for Belgium? There are both EU and UN regulations that could shut the reactors down, as [more than a million people](#) requested a year ago. Belgium's neighbours have reasons to get tough.

Belgium is your backyard

Belgium's recent nuclear history reads like a mirror of Germany's, where the [highest court decided](#) that Merkel's decision to speed up the nuclear phase-out after the Fukushima incident was justified. Belgium did just the opposite. The Belgian government reversed a nuclear phase-out law from 2003 only a year after the Japanese reactors exploded, pushing retirement back from 2015 to 2025. The last bill to postpone retirement with 10 years was approved at the end of 2016. The Government can 'take comfort' at the fact that 2017 started better than 2016: in 2016, the first 'incident' happened just two days into the New Year on January 2; in 2017 the first incident (in which [one person got severely injured](#)) took place eight days later on January 10 with an unexpected shutdown as result.

Yes, the protesting former president of the European Parliament Martin Schulz was born and raised close to Belgium's border and yes, I was born and raised 15 km from four nuclear reactors in Doel, in the city of Antwerp (half a million people). But before you call us NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) activists: our backyard contains six to seven million people that in the event of a nuclear meltdown would never be able to go home again. Depending on the wind direction on the day of a meltdown, a radioactive cloud will poison additional people in

London, Paris, Amsterdam or Aachen as well. The possibility of that scenario has increased in recent years.

Cracks, extortion and sabotage

In 2012 it became known that the mantle around the old [Tihange](#) 2 reactor shows signs of erosion. Further research in 2015 concluded that there are [thousands of cracks of up to 15 cm](#). Later that year, 10 security incidents were recorded in Tihange in just six weeks, leading Belgium's nuclear safety agency to suspend four members of staff and raise serious questions about the safety culture. In 2015, Belgian's nuclear plants spent longer in shutdown or "maintenance" than in being operational.

Who said nuclear energy was a reliable source of energy?

But it is the [Doel](#) plant that reads like the script of an apocalyptic Hollywood blockbuster, part one. The plant was sabotaged in 2014. The sabotage was found before things spiralled out of control, but the culprit(s) remain unknown. A year later, police found hidden cameras that followed the movements of a nuclear researcher, raising alarming questions about criminals extorting staff. Research also revealed a staggering number of cracks in the mantle that is supposed to keep the Doel 3 reactor in check: 13,047. The cracks are on average 1 to 2 cm wide, but the largest ones are up to 18cm. And with 35 years of operational history, the researched Doel 3 is the second "youngest" of Doel's four reactors. Belgium's nuclear safety agency concluded after the tests in Tihange and Doel that the erosion of the mantle was due to normal reactor activity. They can thus be expected to be present in all plants in the world of similar age and to keep multiplying through normal reactor use.

The economic and terrorist threats

In terms of potential economic impacts, Doel is by far number 1 in Europe. The major Fukushima disaster knocked 2 to 10% from Japan's GDP, but when Doel goes into meltdown, [the cost is estimated to be 200% of the GDP of Belgium](#). In such a scenario, GDP won't really mean much. Most of Flanders and the capital of Europe will become inhabitable zones, sending millions of refugees to France, The Netherlands, Germany and the UK. Will they open their borders for a flood of immigrants from Belgium?

And then there's terrorism. For the last two years, Belgian authorities have claimed we are living under emergency level 3, just one notch below the State of Emergency that France is living under. This means a terrorist threat is "serious" and an attack "probable". France has already experienced a series of undeclared drone flights over various nuclear power stations. The [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#) later explained that the danger of that is not about drones carrying small explosives and crashing on the plant because in theory a nuclear plant can cope with a jumbo jet crash (although this has never been tested). But drones can easily carry AK47s and drop them inside the territory of the plant, even at night.

In another scenario laid out by the atomic scientists, [drones can attack the power lines and then the diesel generator back-up system](#). It requires a bit more organisation than driving a truck into a crowd, but less than teaching a terrorist team how to fly a jumbo jet, hijack several at the same time and fly them into the two WTC towers and the Pentagon. As we have learned the hard way in recent years, Belgium also happens to be a favourite hide-out for terrorists. Belgium's authorities want us to believe that the terrorist risk has never been

so high, but they don't want you to connect that with our nuclear plants and with unexplained drone flights over nuclear plants.

Corrupted centralised power plants

All this raises the question: is it still smart to count on a few vulnerable centralised power plants? And what about the waste of state money that seems to come hand-in-hand with nuclear power? Bulgaria [wasted 1,221 billion euro](#) on a plant that never materialized. Bulgaria is also still spending money to deal with the legacy of uranium mining, even though the last mine closed in 1992. When I visited the surroundings of the now closed Buhovo mine, stones of a size that would fit a child's hand showed [radiation 100s of times above normal](#). They were ready to be picked up and played with at a popular local picnic place.

Conflicts against nuclear power plants and the formulation of constructive alternatives are popping up outside Europe as well: from [India](#) to [Japan](#). So are the conflicts and externalised costs around the uranium that now feeds most of our reactors, from [Niger](#) to [Namibia](#). Although there's one other country that has become the EU's main supplier: [Russia](#). But as environmental justice, geopolitical weakening or financial debacles don't seem to stop the nuclear addiction: will it have to take another meltdown? Policymakers seem to have forgotten that our countries signed up to the [precautionary principle](#), which the EU still has in its Treaty. Maybe it's time that the Germans, who are kicking nuclear out of their country, march once more on Belgium. As a Belgian citizen I do kindly request to come in peace and only armed with the renewable energy solutions that swept your country.

***Nick Meynen** was the organiser of a [72km long anti-nuclear energy march from Doel to Brussels](#). He works for the [ENVJUSTICE](#) project and writes articles and [books](#) on environmental issues.*

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