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Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

Minutes

of the hearing on “Nuclear safety and security in Europe” held in Paris, on Wednesday, 6 December 2017, from 2.30 pm to 4 pm

In light of the report currently in preparation on “Nuclear safety and security in Europe” (Rapporteur: Ms Emine Nur Günay, Turkey, EC), the Committee **held** a hearing with the participation of:

- Mr Michael Kuske, Deputy Head of Unit D1 'EURATOM co-ordination, legal matters and international relations', Directorate D for Nuclear Energy, Safety and ITER, Directorate-General for Energy, European Commission;
- Mr Roger Spautz, Nuclear Campaign Officer, Greenpeace.

Mr Kürkçü, second Vice-Chairperson, opened the meeting and welcomed the participants. He recalled that the Committee had held its first discussion on the matter at its meeting in September 2017. Further to the introductory remarks by Ms Günay, rapporteur, experts would make their presentations, and members could then proceed to the discussion. The Nuclear Energy Agency could not take part in the hearing but was ready to delegate its official participant for the hearing at the next meeting during the January 2018 part-session when one more expert would probably participate.

Ms Günay reminded members that concerns over the safety of a nuclear power plant currently under construction in Belarus had been the starting point for her report whose scope had been widened so as to cover all nuclear safety and security concerns across Europe from a political angle in a fair manner. PACE members as politicians needed expert insight into the standards and levels of operational safety of nuclear installations (including as regards the choice of sites and their geological stability), and with regard to the external dimension – nuclear security – that covered various possible risks (such as climatic events or human interventions). Europe's “fleet” of nuclear power plants was increasingly aging (with some 66 plants being over 30 years old) and required enhanced attention. Energy choices belonged to each country; however safe use of nuclear energy was a high common concern for all Europeans. Preparation of the report in question would require further fact-finding through site visits and hearings.

Mr Kuske briefly presented the Euratom Treaty of 1957 establishing the European Atomic Energy Community, attached but legally distinct from the European Union. The European Commission's work in relation to nuclear energy focused on radiological safety, leaving the management of external security aspects and the national energy mix to member States. To that end, the Commission had established a general and binding legal framework composed of several directives, whilst the EU Council had put forward a general energy policy framework with climate objectives in mind. The Nuclear Safety Directive of 2009, as amended in 2014 after post-Fukushima stress tests, established common safety rules for nuclear installations. The Directive for the Management of Radioactive Waste and Spent Fuel set rules for safely disposing of used radioactive materials. Moreover, the 2014 directive on radiological protection of citizens and workers (Basic Safety Standards Directive) also covered requirements on emergency preparedness.

¹ Minutes approved and declassified by the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development at its meeting on 22 January 2018 in Strasbourg.

The main nuclear safety objective was to prevent a large-scale release of radioactivity even in case of an accident. The Commission itself had no power over this, only national regulators did. In addition, requirements were set for transparency and safety culture. The emergency preparedness framework necessarily involved cross-border management aspects, with special coordination foreseen with the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), also as regards radiological monitoring at all times. Post-Fukushima stress tests had been organised via the national regulators and about one-third of nuclear power plants had been physically visited by inspectors. National action plans had afterwards been prepared for each power plant. Under the ENSREG network, national regulators met each year to ensure good coordination and follow-up to action plans. This network had important outreach activities beyond the EU, such as with Armenia, Belarus and Turkey. Some concerns had been raised with regard to the nuclear power plant under construction in Belarus but in close proximity to Lithuania and Poland. A stress test for this plant had been carried out and submitted to ENSREG, with a peer review field visit foreseen for March 2018. Finally, co-operation with the relevant authorities in Lithuania had been established on this question under the Espoo convention.

Mr Spautz in his presentation focused on the Greenpeace report on nuclear security in France and Belgium published on 10 October 2017 and based on the work of seven independent experts. A major conclusion of the report was that spent fuel storage pools were not well protected. In case of damage to these pools, they would not be cooled and would overheat, with large-scale chain reactions setting in. There were 63 such storage pools in France alone – the most nuclearised country in Europe and probably the world. In 2014, drones had flown over all the French nuclear power plants but it was still not known who had been at the origin of these acts; moreover, those drone overflights still occurred. Whilst reactors were generally well protected by thick concrete walls, this was not the case of storage pools.

Because the full Greenpeace report contained a lot of sensitive information, it had not been made public but transmitted to competent authorities. In 2012, Greenpeace had presented a report detailing vulnerabilities of power plants in terms of an airplane crash. Greenpeace had demanded action from the EDF (the French electricity producer and network operator) and the relevant authorities in order to better protect power plants against ill-intentioned acts. It had, in particular, recommended the “bunkerisation” of storage pools. Unlike in most other countries, the French Nuclear Safety Authority (ASN) was not fully in charge of all security and safety aspects, nor of those concerning radiological protection. Citizens should be informed about the existence of potential dangers and press the authorities to invest in substantial improvements.

[Mr Spautz's full PowerPoint presentation (in French only) and the summary of the Greenpeace report (in English only) are available on the PACE Extranet.]

Mr Masiulis said that the Greenpeace report deserved to be more widely distributed and publicised, as many countries neighbouring France should be concerned by the findings. In a similar vein, Lithuania and Poland were highly concerned by the nuclear power plant under construction in Belarus some 40 kilometres from Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital, on a geologically unstable site. Too many nuclear power stations in Europe were located in densely populated border areas, which meant that even countries that quit the nuclear energy option remained captured by their neighbours' energy choices. Society was not sufficiently informed about the risks. Emergency preparedness was a very difficult issue, as was a question of who should pay in case of an accident. Moreover, were there enough legal and operational frameworks in place for handling such extraordinary situations?

Mr Hunko stressed the importance of the debate and of the report. In many countries, such as in Austria and Lithuania, the population had voted on the phasing out of nuclear energy. Yet in many other countries the people had never been consulted on this energy option that committed huge resources and to some extent even threatened national security in the long-term. This point should be revisited in the report. In addition, the problem of the location of some nuclear power plants in seismic zones should be addressed.

Mr Essl explained that his country, Austria, viewed nuclear energy as a dirty, dangerous and expensive source of energy, in particular if all safety and security aspects were properly factored in. Upgrading the safety of storage pools and facilities would probably cost a fortune, both short- and long-term.

Ms De Sutter referred to an accident in a Belgian nuclear power plant 30 months ago and deplored that it was still not known who the main actors involved had been. It was important to talk not only about nuclear power plants but also of all facilities producing or using radioactive materials, such as those using it for medical, research and military purposes. The International Nuclear Event Scale (INES) could be evoked in the context of the report, with recommendations on its appropriate use in communicating to the public. The report should insist on regulations for the choice of sites for nuclear power plants towards locating the latter more to the centre of countries concerned or imposing some sort of security perimeter zone.

Mr Poderys pointed out that the construction of the nuclear power plant in Belarus had been launched in breach of the Aarhus (Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters) and Espoo (Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context) conventions.

Mr Kiral wondered about the recent leakage of radioactive material from a site near the Urals in Russia and lessons from the past which raised questions about the regulation and organisation of monitoring in matters of radiological safety for the population. From a climate change perspective, it was interesting to know if investment in the nuclear energy sector was not an obstacle to investment in renewables.

Mr Spautz replied to the comments and questions from members. So far, there had been too many public subsidies to the nuclear energy industry. In the United Kingdom, the construction of nuclear power plant in Hinkley Point was challenged on the grounds of excessive subsidies and estimated cost overruns. Concerning the recent nuclear material release in Russia, some French and German monitoring authorities thought that the massive release of ruthenium isotope was due to an accident in the vitrification plant near Mayak (Chelyabinsk region). The existing Aarhus and Espoo conventions were useful but their implementation depended on the political will of participating states. A major dilemma for many countries, such as Belgium, was the life-extension for old nuclear power plants. Another issue that urgently required attention was the security of nuclear materials in transportation, notably in France where plutonium cargos crossed the country each week. In terms of earthquake-related risks, some national regulators called for reinforced compliance and upgrades in standards. Unfortunately, there was still no satisfactory solution for the final disposal of nuclear waste, and the cost of decommissioning nuclear power plants remained hugely expensive.

Mr Kuske reminded members about the European Commission's requirements on national nuclear waste repositories which imposed reporting obligations on the member States. A geological repository for final safe storage was being readied in Finland but elsewhere the nuclear waste was mostly being stored temporarily and remained a subject for heated discussions within the EU. In respect of the plant under construction in Belarus, the expert report following a field mission should be ready towards the end of 2018. The EU as such had a special system for the monitoring of radiological safety, and the IAEA had established rules on the choice of sites for nuclear power plants.

Ms Günay thanked experts and members for their comments, information and suggestions which she would take into account, as much as possible, in the report. The management of nuclear power plants and their waste disposal was more a technical matter. Although various regulatory frameworks existed for nuclear safety and security, there was obviously a lack of enforcement, such as for rules on site selection. As the rapporteur on nuclear safety and security, Ms Günay was prepared to visit the plant under construction in Belarus, hopefully in the presence of experts, and experts should also be invited for an exchange of views on this matter in the Committee.

Mr Kürkçü in turn thanked all the participants for their most valuable contributions to the hearing and reminded members that further hearings and exchanges of views were planned for the next Committee meeting in January 2018.

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(81sièges)

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