

TARTU, Estonia, June 21 (UPI) -- Regional cooperation between the Baltic states on energy security and other issues is deepening, the presidents of Lithuania and Estonia say.

Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė and Estonian President [Toomas Hendrik Ilves](#) met late last week in Estonia and stressed their common goal of "enhancing the energy security and independence of the region" as both countries seek to counter the regional energy dominance of Russia.

Ilves said the building of the new Visaginas Nuclear Power Plant in Lithuania is a critical element of that goal.

"In 20 years, the cooperation between the Baltic states has added new color to the emotions of becoming decoupled from the empire, and cooperation aimed at joining important international organizations has turned into specific projects," he said, adding that building the new nuclear power plant in Lithuania is "the most essential" such project.

The comments came after Lithuania's plans to build the new plant, replacing the shuttered Russian-built Ignalina nuclear power facility, regained life with the submission of a pair new bids from foreign companies.

Japan's Hitachi GE Nuclear Energy and Westinghouse Electric of the United States this month threw their hats into the ring as candidates for the strategic investor role for the new plant, Lithuanian Energy Minister Arvydas Sekmokas told reporters.

Latvia, Estonia and Poland will jointly consider the bids in consultations with the European Commission, Sekmokas said.

Lithuania has indicated any such strategic investor will own at least 51 percent of the new nuclear power plant. Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland had initially wanted it built by 2015 but now say it won't be launched any earlier than 2020, ITAR-Tass reported.

The facility is expected to cost \$5.7 billion-\$6.4 billion, officials say.

"Estonia is still interested in participation in the Visaginas nuclear power station," Ilves said, adding that Eesti Energia is considering the bids from Hitachi-GE and Westinghouse.

"Let us hope that the negotiations for finding and involving a strategic investor will be successful and the new nuclear power station will be a project that will really enhance the energy security and independence of the region considerably," he said.

Other kinds of economic cooperation are also bringing together the Baltic states in their search for an "urgently needed feeling of security" and integrating them more closely with the European Union, Ilves said.

One of those areas is transportation, where EU-backed efforts are under way to strengthen north-south rail connections in the Eastern Baltic Sea Region, replacing the east-west routes that connect the countries to Russia.

The transport ministries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania last year initiated a feasibility study for a high-speed, European-gauge line called Rail Baltica, which would stretch from Tallinn to the border of Lithuania and Poland.

The need for a new north-south rail route, the Baltic countries say, is apparent by the overcrowding of their only north-south road connection, the Via Baltica, which is constantly packed with freight-hauling trucks.

"When can we take a high-speed train from Estonia, through Latvia and Lithuania, to Berlin?" Ilves said in the meeting with his Lithuanian counterpart. "When will we finally have a modern Via Baltica, which connects all of us and then runs further, to Poland? When will the Baltic states no longer be an energy isle, separated from the rest of Europe?"

"The answers to these questions will also represent our evaluation of the health of our regional cooperation in the 21st century."

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