

## [A Russian drone has revived a Ukrainian nuclear nightmare](#)

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### **A Russian drone has revived a Ukrainian nuclear nightmare**

#### **But who is prepared to pour even more money into making the country safe?**

ONE NIGHT last February, flames leapt over the Chernobyl nuclear power plant for the first time since 1986, when it was the site of history's worst nuclear disaster. A Russian drone had punched a hole in the reactor's protective dome, known as the new safe confinement (NSC). The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), a UN watchdog, initially called the damage superficial. But repairs are likely to cost hundreds of millions of dollars. Experts say there is a risk of a severe leak.

The NSC was completed in 2019. The project, orchestrated by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), took 22 years and cost \$1.6bn. Placed atop the concrete sarcophagus erected after the meltdown, it was designed to contain radiation for the next century. The drone blasted a hole in it and started a fire. To fight it, "some 300 openings had to be cut into the structure," says Balthasar Lindauer, the EBRD's head of nuclear safety. Fire destroyed parts of its airtight seal, making it vulnerable to corrosion in a few years.

Mr Lindauer says such corrosion could lead parts of the post-1986 sarcophagus to collapse and stir up radioactive dust. Some would be released around the reactor. Beyond that, he hesitates to speculate. There has been no radioactive leak since the drone attack, but without repairs, says Rafael Mariano Grossi, the IAEA's director, it will become "a far more costly" threat.

In October Ukrainian employees covered the gaping hole made by the drone with a metal sheet. A contractor will try to patch the holes made by firefighters. But to restore the NSC's integrity, the dome must be resealed. The question is how to do this without exposing many workers to high levels of radiation. One option is removing the NSC, fixing it offsite and replacing it. It is the largest moveable land-based structure in the world. The EBRD is trying to raise the funds, but asking for money to send to Ukraine is at present a hard sell.