

Baltic states agree to build nuclear reactor

Old stagnant Europe based around Berlin, Paris and Greenpeace will be dragged to the necessity of nuclear power by newer minds

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The EU could get a new nuclear reactor in Lithuania under a fresh energy security deal signed by Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn in the Lithuanian town of Trakai on Monday (27 February).

The Baltic states' energy pact does not give a schedule for the project, but "invites" the firms Lietuvos energija, Latvenergo and Eesti Energia "to invest in the preparation and construction" of a new reactor at the Ignalina plant.

Lithuania shut down one old reactor at Ignalina in 2004 under its EU accession treaty, with plans afoot to shut down the facility's second old unit in 2009.

EU public opinion does not like nuclear power, with a recent European Commission survey indicating just 12 percent of people would be happy to see more nuclear plants.

But a Lithuanian diplomat told EUobserver the Baltic states are cut off from the rest of the EU power grid and face being bypassed by a new Russian-German Baltic Sea gas pipeline.

"Of course, we are still hoping to be included in the pipeline, but we shall have to wait and see," the contact indicated. He added that the Baltics' energy "vulnerability" is not well understood by the commission and other EU states.

More ideas for EU energy policy

The Baltics' energy plan also calls for integration of electricity markets in the region; developing liquid gas port terminals and boosting gas reserves.

The trio welcomed EU efforts to create a common energy policy in the wake of the January Ukraine gas crunch, but stressed the need to "maintain national sovereignty over the choice of primary energy sources."

They also urged the 25-strong bloc to speak "with one strong voice" to oil and gas supplier Russia and the Middle East oil cartel, OPEC, using tools such as the G8 club and the World Trade Organisation as leverage in talks.

The commission's green paper on a common energy policy is due on 8 March with follow-up discussions at a top level summit later that month.

But member states' infighting on takeovers of national energy firms, such as Spain's Endesa and France's Suez, does not bode well for the plan.

Polish energy solidarity plan gains support

The Baltic states also backed Poland's idea of an energy solidarity pact, saying EU states should use their gas stocks to help any one member facing a supply crunch.

Poland's energy solidarity scheme is more ambitious however, extending to all 32 NATO states, with top diplomat Stanislaw Komorowski asking EU colleagues on Monday to place the "energy NATO" idea on the March summit agenda.

Polish prime minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz sent a letter with details of the project to all EU and NATO members as well as the European Commission last week.

The NATO-type pact would be overseen by an entirely new institution and could stand in parallel to any EU common energy policy, Mr Komorowski indicated.

He said that no matter what happens to the NATO idea, Poland will also push to get the word "solidarity" inserted in the March energy council conclusions.