

Nuclear power debate heats up before German summit

Europe really has to get its act in order ... unfortunately it hasn't a President. If Germany was rational, Austria would be isolated as the only nincompoops.

Reuters
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German politicians and industry leaders hold an energy summit on Monday to tackle one of Germany's most sensitive issues -- the future of nuclear power in the world's third biggest economy.

Chancellor Angela Merkel, Economy Minister Michael Glos, Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel will meet with top managers from German utilities and other major firms to begin work on a new long-term energy policy.

Although no breakthroughs are expected, public debate on nuclear energy is likely to intensify as a result, analysts say.

There is agreement among Merkel's conservatives (CDU/CSU) and their "grand coalition" partners, the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD), that Germany must boost investment in environmentally friendly alternative sources of energy.

But there is a deep rift over the issue of nuclear energy.

Recent threats by Russian gas giant Gazprom to cut off gas supplies to Ukraine if it did not pay higher prices prompted conservatives close to Merkel to demand that Germany cancel a planned phase-out of nuclear energy in Germany.

The gradual shutdown of all Germany's nuclear power plants was agreed in 2000 by the government of former SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and his then-coalition partners, the Greens.

Despite Germany's increasing dependence on Russian gas -- Gazprom and two German firms are building a gas pipeline from Siberia to Germany -- the SPD are firm on the phase-out and forced the conservatives to back their line during coalition talks last year.

But pro-nuclear conservatives have not given up.

A paper for the summit penned by CDU/CSU members of parliament said that nuclear energy "remains a competitive and CO2-free form of energy that is absolutely essential for the foreseeable future."

STATES WANT NUCLEAR POWER

Germany has 17 nuclear power plants and 30 percent of the electricity provided to the country's 82 million people comes from nuclear reactors. But some states use a much higher percentage of atomic energy and strongly oppose the phase-out.

Christian Wulff, the conservative premier of the state of Lower Saxony, said Germany's precarious economic recovery could not afford an increase in already-high power costs.

"Billions of euros of investments depend on energy prices," he said in an interview with the newspaper Bild am Sonntag. "We need an appropriate energy mix that is not based on ideology but on technology, environmental friendliness and price."

Industry leaders voicing similar views have been widely quoted in German media ahead of the energy summit.

But Environment Minister Gabriel of the SPD told the newspaper Welt am Sonntag that there was no need for nuclear energy and that even coal, used to produce half of Germany's electricity, was undergoing a "renaissance."

He also said that "by 2020 it will be possible to cover 20 to 25 percent of our energy demand with renewable sources."

Conservative Economy Minister Glos, who has been trading barbs with Gabriel on the issue for weeks, said that in a world where nuclear power was coming back into vogue Germany risked isolation.

"I see nuclear power as a transitional energy source which we should use as long as renewable forms of energy still need further development," he said.

At an EU energy summit in Brussels earlier this month, the majority of EU leaders agreed nuclear energy was the future for Europe. Germany and Austria were the main dissenters.