

Nuclear power has renaissance in Europe

Even Germany is now in favor of nuclear power as well as Switzerland, while plants are being built in Finland Rumania and Bulgaria. Belgium has extended the phase out period and the Czech Republic could build.

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Fears of energy shortages appear to be trumping anti-nuclear sentiments – even in Germany despite its decision to close all nuclear power stations by 2021.

Most surveys show a 50–50 split and some polls even show a majority of Germans in favour of nuclear power, compared to 65 per cent opposed after the 1986 accident.

'There's a lot more approval for nuclear power than there was 15 years ago,' said Christian Woessner, a spokesman for the German Atomic Forum, a pro-nuclear lobby group. 'We are at the start of a new investment cycle (in Europe.)'

Nuclear power is getting a hard second look not only because of oil prices and alarm over Russia's strong-arm tactics in cutting off natural gas to Ukraine last January. It also could provide a way to cut greenhouse gases blamed in part for global warming.

Andris Piebalgs, the European Union Commissioner in charge of energy, says nuclear power needs to be regarded as part of an 'energy mix' to ensure security for the 25-nation bloc.

'The EU must continue to develop its expertise in the field,' insists Piebalgs.

Numerous European countries are already watering down or reversing laws intended to curtail or abolish nuclear plants. That means many of the 170 nuclear stations operating on the continent, up to the Russian border, will operate far longer than anticipated.

Sweden, 47-per-cent dependent on nuclear power, has repeatedly delayed plans to shut down all its stations, extending some lifelines to 2050, well beyond a 2010 target date.

'Under Swedish law the plants cannot be closed until there is a viable alternative,' explains Woessner.

Switzerland, 32-per-cent dependent on nuclear power, has overturned a moratorium on new nuclear plants.

Belgium, 56-per-cent dependent on nuclear power, has extended its phase-out period for at least another 20 years, although it is unclear if new plants will be built.

'There is a clear and visible change of mood – most governments and political parties are now seriously reconsidering nuclear power,' said an economist at the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) who asked not to be named.

That means new nuclear plants are again being built across Europe, mirroring trends in the US, where 14 new plants are planned after a 30-year hiatus, and China, where nearly three dozen are set to be built.

New plants are slated to open in Finland in 2009; Romania in 2007, 2013 and 2014; and Bulgaria in 2013. The Czech Republic could build at least two more plants if needed.

The Baltic states, still not connected to the European electricity grid, are determined to pursue self sufficiency because they fear Moscow's political blackmailing tactics.

Lithuania, supported by Latvia and Estonia, is expected to approve a new nuclear station to replace the Chernobyl-type reactor at Ignalina by 2015. Part of the current plant was closed in 2004 and block two will be shut in 2009. Lithuania is 71-per-cent dependent on nuclear power.

Even Ukraine, home to the ill-fated Chernobyl plant and 50-per-cent dependent on nuclear power, is considering a big expansion in the field. Although critics note that Kiev's financing remains totally unclear, the government says it wants to build up to 20 new nuclear power stations.

France, which generates a whopping 78 per cent of its electricity from nuclear power, under President Jacques Chirac wants to build third and fourth generation plants to keep its position as the world's top civil nuclear power. A new reactor is slated to open in 2012 in the northern town of Flamanville.

In addition, France is home to an international effort to build the world's biggest experimental fusion reactor. The International Thermonuclear Reactor (ITER) – which is supposed to produce less waste and be safer than normal nuclear plants – has support from the EU, US, China, India, Japan, Russia and South Korea.

France also provides a lightning rod for environmental protests over nuclear waste, a hotly contested issue at Germany's Gorleben facility, for example. It has a reprocessing industry that not only handles waste from abroad, including Germany and Japan, but also helps fund the French nuclear programme.

Britain, after years of backing away, appears poised to join the trend and increase its 20-per-cent dependence on nuclear power.

Prime Minister Tony Blair is expected to call on private energy companies next month to build the country's next generation of nuclear stations.

However, Europe's largest economy – Germany – is still holding off. Chancellor Angela Merkel and her conservatives support nuclear power but, under the government's grand coalition accord with the Social Democrats (SPD), the ban on new plants and a phase-out of 17 generators by 2021 remains.

But that could change if Merkel is re-elected at the head of a centre-right government without the SPD in coming years.

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