GREEN
EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

Nuclear Energy: Back in the Mix?

Article by Luis Nicolas Jachmann
May 27, 2022

As war rages just beyond the border, the cracks are beginning to show in the nuclear energy debate in Europe. While France aggressively pursues nuclear as an alternative energy source under Macron, Germany's traffic light coalition finds itself in a bind between following through on a nuclear phase-out sanctioned by the German public, weaning itself off Russian gas, and meeting climate goals. Meanwhile, the European Commission doubles down on its stance on nuclear as green energy.

On 31 December 2021, two hours before the new year was rung in, the EU Commission sent a powerful message to the 27 member states: nuclear power and natural gas will be considered green transition fuels. While the content of the message was no surprise, its timing was. With this proposed regulation on the EU Taxonomy, Brussels institutionalised an informal deal between German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and French President Emmanuel Macron. On the one hand, it reinforced the German government's plans to use gas for at least another decade as a bridging energy on its way to climate neutrality. On the other hand, it backed France's efforts to rely on nuclear energy as CO2-free energy in the future.

At the turn of 2021, three nuclear reactors went off the grid in Germany. By the end of this year, the last three nuclear power plants will also be closed. The end of the country's nuclear era is imminent – a decision supported by widespread anti-nuclear sentiment in German society. Despite ultimately acquiescing with the government position, Green ministers did not hide their scepticism. "The regulation is about creating a financial investment market and qualifying it as green and sustainable – and that's a label fraud," said German Vice-Chancellor and Minister for Economy Robert Habeck.

The reasons for the opposing positions of the European Union's two strongest economies are historical and social. In the context of war, it is clear that their energy politics have geopolitical consequences for Europe as a whole.

Justifying nuclear as a means to an end

Despite igniting divisions, the European Commission stands by its reasoning that nuclear and gas can help Europe on the path to becoming carbon neutral by 2050. When the Commission adopted the legislation in early February, Finance Commissioner Mairead McGuiness put it this way: "It may not be perfect. But it is a real solution."

According to the regulation, the classification of nuclear energy is subject to conditions: new nuclear power plants must be able to present a plan for the management of radioactive waste from 2050 at the latest. By that time, Macron plans to connect several

nuclear reactors to the grid in France.

Even if reactors are quasi-carbon-free once built, their installation is energy-intensive. Additionally, nuclear reduces the incentives to heavily invest in renewables.

Stefan Wenzel has been following this position for years. As the German parliamentarian for European affairs, he is also regularly in Paris, where he meets French colleagues. The Green member of the Bundestag criticises the Commission's decision: "The original idea of the taxonomy is being destroyed. The actual goal is missed." The aim of the taxonomy, he says, is to give investors and private individuals an orientation regarding which sustainable bonds they can invest in. Wenzel does not believe sustainable investors will now switch from renewable energies to nuclear energy: "The decision will not lead to private money flowing into nuclear power because it is simply highly uneconomical." Experts estimate that the returns on investments in renewable energies are considerably higher.

A divided union

Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, and Portugal have been speaking out against nuclear energy for years. But their opposition hardly seems credible when they are the greatest beneficiaries of the privileged position of gas. What's more, these countries would need a majority in the European Parliament or at least 20 member states on their side. For eastern European states such as Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, nuclear energy appears as a reliable business proposition and is attracting long-term investment.and promises long-term investment to Baltic states and eastern European countries – such as Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.

France's nuclear energy boomed in the 1980s as a result of major state investment in response to the 1970s' oil crises. However, in recent years almost half of all reactors have been approaching their end-of-life date, with some appearing to demonstrate malfunctions. Two weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Macron paid a visit to the turbine manufacturer Alstom in Belfort. In front of hundreds of its workers in blue jackets, Macron asserted that these turbines for nuclear reactors were helping "the energy destiny of France". His rhetoric pitches this sector as important for national and global markets.

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Macron plans to build six new nuclear power plants. The EDF group has submitted a proposal to the state to build them for around 50 billion euros. In a second step, up to eight more power plants could be built, depending on demand. Last November, Macron also brought small modular reactors into play. These reactors are the size of a football field, produce significantly less than conventional plants, but are more compact and kind to the natural landscape. Despite warnings that forecasts of the economic benefits of such reactors may be highly optimistic, in the 2030 investment programme, 170 million euros have been earmarked for research.

Stefan Thomas, German researcher at Wuppertal Institute for climate, has little sympathy for the French argument that nuclear energy is essential for the EU's climate goals: "You wouldn't need nuclear energy for climate neutrality. If Germany, with its much smaller potential for renewable energies, manages to become climate-neutral by 2045 from its own production – apart from the import of green hydrogen – then France, with its larger surface area and greater potential for wind energy, can do more," says Thomas.

To him, the French position stems from geopolitical ambitions: "Many commentators are quick to point to France's nuclear force. The military background seems plausible to me. With the construction of civilian reactors, one also wants to secure the know-how as media reported. Dual use, at least, is not ruled out. In principle, you can also produce plutonium for nuclear bombs in the civilian reactors", says Stefan Thomas.

Nicolas Mazzucchi works for the French Foundation for Strategic Research. The expert in economic geography claims each country must be allowed to follow its own energy path as long as it reduces CO2 emissions: "If Germany, Austria, or Luxembourg do not want to produce nuclear energy, they are free not to do so. Nobody is forcing them to. And the same goes for France: nobody is forcing the country to rely on gas like its eastern neighbour, for example. When you have an incident in a chemical power plant in Germany, France will also be affected. And France is not claiming Germany has to shut down all coal power plants all of a sudden. There are regulations and they are surely some of the strictest in the world."

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Talking nuclear

Macron has intensified his rhetoric of greater energy independence for France in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: "We can no longer depend on others, and in particular on Russian gas, to move around and to run our factories. That is why, after having decided to develop renewable energies and build new nuclear reactors for France, I will defend a strategy of European energy independence", Macron said in March 2022.

During the 2022 French presidential campaigns, many candidates adopted the rhetoric of the incumbent: "Most of the parties are behind his proposals. They just differ in the number of new power plants they want to construct. However, the Green party and the far-left party are anti-nuclear," says Mazzucchi. "Despite attacks from the Right and Left, as well as trade unions, all these political opponents have been calling for nuclear power to be kept high – as a national symbol" observes German MP Wenzel.

In a way, the support for nuclear energy among the French population makes it easy for re-elected president Macron to promise new reactors. A poll commissioned by the magazine *Les Echos* in November 2021 shows that more than half of French people think it is right for their country to focus on renewable energies and nuclear power.

Energy companies who stand to lose the most have been among the critics of this pivot to nuclear. Engie and TotalEnergies, France's fossil energy giants, advocate for their gas and renewable energies, including wind power and solar energy: "They are not entirely opposed but they are advocating for other solutions," says Mazzucchi.

Today, people tend to forget that France, like Germany, also had a substantial anti-nuclear movement in the 1970s. In the 1990s, however, opposition waned: "The protest movement in France appears to have resigned at some point. The Greens are still against it in France today, but that's almost it," says Stefan Thomas. Unlike in Germany, left-wing parties in France are divided on the issue of nuclear energy. "It's no secret that at EDF, the state energy company that also operates the nuclear reactors, the communist trade unions are very strong. So even on the Left, there is support for nuclear energy"– as well as among figures on the far-right, such as Marine Le Pen.

Nicolas Mazzucchi traces the origins of France's dependence on nuclear energy to 1973, when the oil shock compelled European countries to search for new energy sources: "Most of the countries decided to focus on the resources that were available at that time on the continent whether coal or gas. France made a totally different choice having in mind that switching to another hydrocarbon would not contribute to much energy security. So France accelerated its nuclear programme."

Giving up on giving up nuclear?

For years, many Germans were in favour of phasing out nuclear energy: the nuclear build-up between the two blocs during the Cold War had generated a strong anti-nuclear movement. The peace movement gave rise to a Green Party in the 1980s, which has since taken power in several governments. But now rising energy prices and dependence on Russian energy imports, as well as the war against Ukraine in March shaped a shift in public opinion: for the first time, a majority is in favour of extending the last nuclear reactors in operation, according to a representative poll by the public TV channel ZDF.

But so far, Germany remains a long way from changing its nuclear policy. However, since the war began, it has cancelled the gas project Nord Stream II. It is also looking to expand natural gas imports from the USA, Qatar, and other countries.

Already limited to functioning as a bridge energy in recent years, nuclear power in Germany is on its last legs. The German scientist Stefan Thomas sees 1986 as a turning point: "After the Chernobyl reactor accident, the Social Democrats joined the Greens. This meant that half of the party spectrum in Germany at the time was already against nuclear energy. In 2002, the first governing coalition took the unprecedented decision to phase out nuclear power. Until Fukushima, a stalemate prevented new nuclear reactors from going online. The Japanese reactor accident made the then Conservative-Liberal government under Angela Merkel rethink." An extension of existing nuclear reactors was abandoned, and a gradual phase-out of nuclear energy was decided. "The population was totally behind the phase-out and there was also broad agreement in the scientific community at the time," says Thomas.

The narrative of a coal phase-out or a nuclear phase-out – but not both at the same time, with equal intensity – dominated the German debate for a long time. And so far, it is still the

plan. “We cannot phase out coal, nuclear, and natural gas energies at the same time,” warns Thomas. The new traffic light coalition is eager to phased out coal by the end of the decade. But with high inflation and rising energy prices in the wake of Russia’s war against Ukraine, some politicians on the centre-right have begun to advocate for an extension of the nuclear reactors in Germany.

Energy security remains a long way off and there are no easy answers.

Bavaria’s Prime Minister Markus Söder, an influential politician of the conservative opposition recently said: “Of course, an extension would be possible from a purely technical point of view. The question is whether one wants it politically. I believe that for three to five years it would simply be a good transition in this emergency situation to produce cheap electricity that at the same time does not cause any climate pollution.” The Green Secretary of State for Economic Affairs Michael Kellner is unconvinced by the proposal: “I don’t see how nuclear power plants can help for the next winter, because they also need fuel, and you can’t get that easily either.” However, coal-fired power plants will be kept in reserve for all eventualities.

In the crisis situation in Europe, Germany seems to be at least reconsidering its position on nuclear energy. Whether it will change course remains to be seen. From his statements at the EU summit in Versailles, it is evident that Macron thinks his push for nuclear has been strengthened: “Today, France depends less on foreign gas supplies because we rely on nuclear energy.”

Ultimately, both large European economies are united by a major common goal: compliance with the Paris Climate Agreement and the promise to be climate-neutral in the EU by the middle of the century – but their paths to this goal are very different. The potential for cross-border collaboration between the two countries towards this goal, at least on a small scale, is demonstrated by the Franco-German *Zukunftswerk,* a bilingual citizens’ dialogue intended to bring about the energy turnaround in local communities on a basis of solidarity.

The debate about energy supply in the wake of dependence on Russian energy imports has shaken up seemingly immovable, decades-old positions. While both countries stand by their basic principles – phasing out nuclear power in Germany and expanding nuclear power in France – the crisis is also a reminder that energy security remains a long way off, and that there are no easy answers. France’s nuclear fleet is ageing and overhauling it will take years. Similarly, nuclear fuel needs to be imported from other parts of the world. In Germany, renewable energy has yet to reach the point where it can forego fossil energy imports. In the push to phase out Russian imports, the German government has been forced to deepen ties with states like Qatar to secure alternative supplies.

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Published May 27, 2022
Article in English
Published in the *Green European Journal*
Downloaded from https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/nuclear-energy-back-in-the-mix/

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