
Nuclear energy in the European Union?

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There is hardly any other matter in Europe which continues to spark so many emotional and often heated debates as nuclear energy, not only among politicians but also among citizens. Supporters and opponents seem to eternally argue about the pros and cons of nuclear power: its environment-friendly character and economics as well as the safety of nuclear power plants and the management of radioactive waste. Add to this the still omnipresent shadow of the Chernobyl tragedy and one begins to better understand why it seems impossible to have an objective and unbiased discussion about the future of nuclear energy in Europe.

There is neither any other policy over which Member States are more divided than nuclear energy. Much has changed since the signature of the Euratom Treaty when nuclear power was believed to constitute the energy source of the future. Today, the status of nuclear power differs enormously between Member States. Some countries are fundamentally opposed to the use of nuclear energy, whilst others have been long-standing promoters of the nuclear option. Among the fifteen EU countries that have nuclear power plants on their territory, some have adopted a phasing-out policy, others are planning or have already started to construct new plants and yet others have to decide what to do with reactors that will soon reach the end of their operating life.

In the context of the European Union's ambitious climate change policy, its search for an enhanced energy security and the high and volatile oil and gas prices, it comes as no surprise that nuclear power is back on the political agenda at both European and national level. As a result, many governments are under internal and external pressure to at least reconsider their nuclear policy. A crucial question hereby is to what extent the European Union can play a role, if any.

This contribution briefly discusses the recurring arguments in the nuclear debate. It subsequently examines the present status of nuclear energy in the EU Member States, thereby looking at the various national policies. Finally this paper deals with the European Union's approach towards nuclear power.

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