

# The nuclear challenge

Europe must face many challenges if it is to make the transition to a nuclear-free future, writes **Edit Herczog**

Currently we read that we are on the threshold of a new Chernobyl, while at the same time told of the success in subduing the unleashed radiation. Ambiguous, sometimes alarming, news is published about the rate of exposure suffered by the surroundings of the plant or the rest of the world.

Some European countries are restructuring their future prospects in a nuclear energy free way. Switzerland and Germany have announced that they will stop extending existing nuclear plants or building new ones. Every country holds the right to decide on the energy-mix it applies.

The risks of running nuclear stations have been overemphasised, while at the same time certain crucial facts and processes are ignored regarding nuclear safety in Europe. We have been using atomic energy for 60 years. There are 400 working nuclear power plants worldwide, 143 of which are in Europe. At least 45 countries have plans on increasing their nuclear capacity or introducing nuclear technology. The exploitation of most energy resources holds risks. We are aware of the data regarding radiation exposure in the environment of the stations. Chernobyl has taught us what can happen if out of date technology prevents us properly controlling reactors.

Nuclear safety is an issue we are all equally responsible for. Few know that the Fukushima nuclear station was about to be closed down as it was in run down technical condition due to lack of investment. This suggests that we should not necessarily be afraid of the 143 plants in sufficient technical condition, but should certainly consider those which have been improperly closed down. Closures must be carefully and responsibly managed, the safe ending of nuclear activity must be ensured, we need regular inspection of sites and recultivation of the surrounding environment. If we are to break with the 60-year-old tradition of using nuclear energy at once, we must not try to save on technological expertise, R&D and capital investment.

An anti-nuclear Europe cannot be imagined without nuclear physicists and nuclear expert engineers. We will have to spend on R&D and the development of the expertise which ensures a more effective and safe management of nuclear fission. The question of nuclear waste is the most important evidence pointing to what extent nuclear safety is a common interest. Annually there are 7000 cubic meters of nuclear waste with

diverse radiation intensity produced in Europe and we need an agreement on how to handle it. The nuclear waste material directives to be introduced in 2015 can only serve the interests of the future generations if it makes the creation or revision of waste management strategy obligatory for all the member states. This requires immense efforts regarding R&D along with capital investment; not to mention how much more effective it can be and how much more private capital investment it would mean if organised at pan-European level.

The European left wing has declared on several occasions that it wants a future Europe where the question of energy access is not a social problem. We can only make responsible decisions if we are aware of comprehensive impact study results which consider energy prices, the number of jobs and the dynamics of a solvent demand.

Thus, my opinion is that nuclear energy is such a complex system that is not likely to easily adapt to immediate changes. Member states can only decide on banning the use of nuclear energy on the continent if they prepare for the consequences of this step individually or in cooperation and if the preparations have safety as a main aspect. ★

Edit Herczog is a member of parliament's industry, research and energy committee

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