

[SE4-LT-1] Europe's Response to Fukushima

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Full Summary

The nuclear consultant **Dominique Grenêche** started the panel expressing that since the birth of nuclear power there have been permanently various debates surrounding the use of this energy, which have been extremely politicized and often affected with national and international security concerns as well as economic arguments.

So, considering the consequences of the Fukushima accident in other national nuclear programs is something vital, especially in the European case. There he said that we need to differentiate 3 aspects: the impact in the public opinion (with an increment in the opposition to nuclear power); energy supplies strategies and political consequences (with cases like France and Germany, very different in their positions but very similar in the sense that in both countries the nuclear issue will be an important topic for the next elections); and the safety of nuclear power plants (all the 143 nuclear power plants in the UE will have “stress tests” programs).

In the case of **Barthélémy Courmont**, from the Institute for International and Strategic Relations (IRISI), he assumed that Fukushima marks for some the “end of nuclear”, more than Chernobyl ever did, mostly because it took place in a very advanced country (and in a democracy). But, if we don't arrive to that extreme, this accident at least will affect the “nuclear renaissance” watched the last years. And that, in a European Union where most of its members have nuclear energy (14 of 27 countries), is one of the many reasons why the impact of Fukushima should be studied more carefully.

To show the importance of the nuclear energy in Europe, he signaled that France has 58 reactors in operation and another 2 planned, UK 19 currently in use and another 8 to come on-stream, and Germany currently 17 reactors. The others reactors are: Sweden (with 10), Spain (8), Belgium (7), the Czech Republic (6), Finland (4), Hungary (4), Slovakia (4), Bulgaria (2), Romania (2), the Netherlands (1) and Slovenia (1). Switzerland, whose government recommends phasing out by 2034, has 5 reactors, to which must be added 32 in Russia and 15 in Ukraine. Another is also being built in Belarus.

After focusing on the media reaction (like the French *Le Figaro*, the Germans *Die Welt*, *Der Spiegel* and *Der Standard*, the Czech *Hospodářské noviny*, the Italian *Corriere della Sera* and the Belgian *De Standard*) that revealed the influence the public opinion may have on leaders, depending on the national culture and perception of nuclear energy in different EU states, he analyzed the political responses in several countries, and the possible impact in the electoral campaign (especially considering the advances of the Green Party in Germany and France, with the possibility of having next year a socialist government in France allied with the Greens).

According to him, and with an opinion similar to what Grenêche said, Europe's divisions over nuclear power have deepened since Fukushima, with Britain and France remaining resolute supporters until now, Italy putting off plans to build new plants (after its abandon in 1987 following the Chernobyl disaster) and Germany calling for a phase-out.

Speaking of the last case, he mentioned that Angela Merkel's decision to extend the working life of Germany's 17 nuclear plants last year, reversing a deal done 10 years ago between the SPD-Green government and the energy producers for an exit by 2021, was considered the most significant proof of a nuclear renaissance in Europe. For the same reason, he indicated, the German U Turn appears to be the proof of its necessary revision.

Referring to France, besides that the government is in favor of supporting nuclear energy, have repeated and emphasized the differences with Japan, in order to respond the public opinion's fears, and even sees a business opportunity in the closure of the German program (because they will be able to sell them energy), an Ifop opinion poll published on June 4th found just over three-quarters of those surveyed support a gradual withdrawal over the next 25 to 30 years from nuclear technology. Considering that 80% of energy consumed in the country comes from nuclear, until now the candidates for the primaries of the Green Party judge that although France cannot give up its nuclear potential in the near future, political measures have to be taken to focus on renewable energies, and they even call for a referendum on the issue. Also, is the reason why they made the nuclear issue a condition to a possible alliance with the Socialist Party, bearing in mind the next 2012 presidential election?

Something in what Grenêche and Courmont agreed is that, according with the polls, many people supports the possibility of moving away from the nuclear energy, but at the same time they are opposing the necessity of paying more for the non nuclear energy, what looks like a dilemma that could also impact in the future of the nuclear energy in Europe. There is also the uncertainty about the possibility of a fast replacement of the nuclear contribution with renewable power. This insecurity, according with Courmont, leads the European nuclear powers in a position where they will unlikely follow the German example.

He ended his presentation with several unsolved questions that EU political leaders may have to face in the near future:

1. What will be the EU position if more countries decide to follow the German example? At what point shall we consider that the nuclear renaissance is disputed in Europe?
2. What are the chances for success in Germany's search for renewable energies? And what will be the German position if it does not work as efficiently as planned?
3. How solid is the agreement on stress tests? Are some countries likely to call for a revised agreement, in order to push harder or, on the other side, reduce it?
4. What will be France's position if the Green party has a high score in 2012 and pressures a potential socialist government? And what if a referendum was confirming the public opinion's fear, like in Italy in 1987?
5. More generally, is the divergence on nuclear energy symptomatic of the problems the EU members face, or an isolated and specific case?

In the case of **Hans-Joachim Schmidt**, from the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF), he explained the evolution of the German nuclear program, all the debates and demonstrations that that issue created, and how the Green Party increased its influence thanks to that.

Germany began its civil nuclear program during the fifties. Later, in the 70s there was the first important debate about its future, with protests of NGOs and the emergent of the Green Party. Then, during the 80s and 90s there were significant discussions that also fortified that party, based in the Chernobyl disaster and the problems related to the nuclear residues issue.

Now the majority of the German population has an antinuclear feeling, supporting the progressive abandonment of the nuclear power. In 2002 it was decided to do it, with 2021 as the deadline, but later Merkel arrived to power and canceled that decision, until the Fukushima disaster and its impact in the German people forced her to reestablish the progressive retirement of the nuclear centrals, with a 2021 and 2022 target. Schmidt thinks that it is a definitive decision, and that the regional elections showed to the liberals and the conservatives that there was no support to prolong the civil nuclear program.

He also considers that will be possibly for Germany to replace the nuclear energy with other technologies, but answering a question from the public, he accepts that at the beginning that will imply to use more carbon and gas, and an increase in the dependency from the Russians. However, from him at least, the last point won't be a long problem, because first they have

good relations and second the new technologies will allow decreasing that dependency relatively fast. In the middle, they will need to work on the safety of the Russian gas stations. But if the change works in Germany, he thinks that will be a good example to other European countries and other regions in the world that it is possible to renounce to the nuclear energy without important economical cost, something that was put into doubts by some of the assistants to the panel.

Finally, was mentioned by the speakers that the EU reached a technical consensus about the safety of the power plants, and also agreed on the need to reinforce the IAEA's role on nuclear safety; but looks almost impossible to achieve a similar consensus in the political side of the nuclear energy issue, with many differences between the countries (with France and Germany as good examples of that).

But if Germany ends its nuclear program in 2022, more than half of the EU will be no, and perhaps also anti, nuclear. What will happen in that case is one of the open questions that left the panel.

Finally, after some questions about German possibilities to replace nuclear energy in the closer future, the experiences in others European countries, and the Russian role; a person from the public, member of the Asan Institute, spoke about the South Korean case and mentioned that some of the opposition that the Koreans have against nuclear energy derives from a lack of confidence in the government, more than from the safety situation of the facilities. That is according to a poll from last April.

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