End to Nuclear Power in Germany?

Nicola C. Ostertag

When the coalition government of Social Democrats and the Green Party took office in Germany in October 1998, after fifteen years of Christian Democrat rule, one crucial point in their coalition treaty was the future of nuclear power. The wish to abandon nuclear power, once a driving force in the formation of the environmental movement in the 1970s, constituted a central demand in the political program of the Green Party. The two leading parties agreed that within one legislative period, i.e., four years, the use of nuclear power was to be irreversibly ruled out by law. This goal would be reached by changing the appropriate legislation and by coming to an agreement with the privately owned utility companies that operate the nineteen existing nuclear power plants in Germany. Not surprisingly, the latter proved to be the harder part since claims for damages were under discussion.

After months of negotiations, an agreement was signed in June 2000. According to this agreement, the generation of electricity from nuclear energy will be phased out by approximately the year 2020. Without this long time span, the government might have been obliged to compensate the utility companies for what was considered a taking by a number of legal experts. To determine the remaining length of service for the individual nuclear power plants, each facility was assigned a maximum amount of electricity it is allowed to generate before being shut down. The quota was based on the assumption that the regular life span of a plant is 32 years. Allotments may be traded between power plants to ensure that inefficient facilities will be taken off the grid first. No new reactors are to be built and a pending application for licensing must be withdrawn. The agreement also includes a change in policy with regard to the handling of nuclear wastes. So far, a significant share has been shipped to nuclear processing plants in France and Great Britain. As of 2005, waste disposal will be restricted to direct underground storage, possibly on site.

The consensus between politicians and energy companies on this controversial issue was possible because drastic economic sacrifices on either side were avoided. The government will not be sued for compensation since running a nuclear power plant for more than 30 years is not believed to be cost effective anyway. Furthermore, operators have now been given assurance for further planning. Critics who consider nuclear power to be a safe and, in view of CO_2 emissions, a clean source of energy had little understanding for the deal struck. Many environmentalists were also disappointed. They had wished for a shutdown to happen overnight or at least within one legislative period. The agreement turned out to be another grueling test for the members of the Green Party, many of whom struggle with the necessity to compromise.

In the meantime, other questions arise. For the privatized energy sector, the purchase of cheap electricity from nuclear power plants in neighboring Eastern European countries proves a realistic option. Certainly, this was not intended by the government. And why should Germany, which is one of the leading countries when it comes to technology and safety standards in the area of nuclear energy, withdraw and leave this field of expertise to less experienced and maybe less scrupulous countries? Whether or not renouncing nuclear power will be an irreversible move remains to be seen. The political opposition has already announced that it will revise the plan should they win the next elections.

Nonetheless, the decision not to pursue the nuclear track is a political signal and could be the beginning of an energy policy that concentrates increasingly on higher energy efficiency and the development of renewable energy. First steps have been taken. New legislation requires energy companies to buy electricity from renewable sources. Housing projects with photovoltaic installations are being subsidized, and there are several more initiatives in the works. Yet, a great effort will be required to avoid replacing the current contribution of nuclear energy—12% of Germany's total—with energy from fossil fuel. The promised reduction in greenhouse gases of 25% compared to emission levels in 1990 will not be met this way.

Address correspondence to Nicola C. Ostertag, MES, Neubertstr. 25, 01307 Dresden, Germany; (phone & fax) ++49-(0)351-4425716; (e-mail) nicola.ostertag@smwk.sachsen.de.

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