The Oil Drum: Europe
DISCUSSIONS ABOUT ENERGY AND OUR FUTURE

Andris Piebalgs: Nuclear and the EU's Energy Policy

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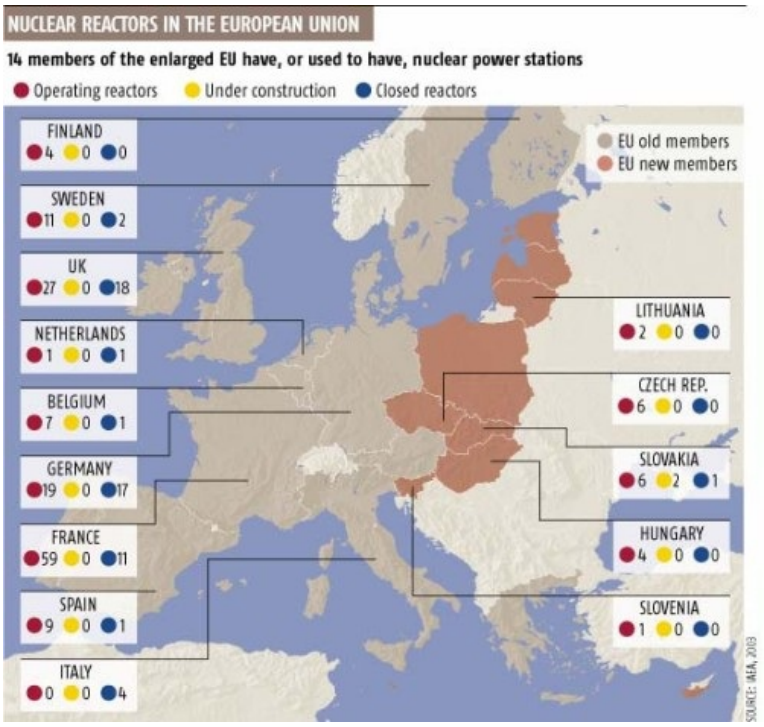
Topic: Policy/Politics
Tags: andris piebalgs, energy policy, eu, european commission, nuclear [list all tags]

This week Andris Piebalgs talks Nuclear in his blog. Without taboos, Andris lays down the advantages of Nuclear energy that have put it at the core of the Commission's New Energy Policy for Europe.

Nuclear energy has been discussed many times at TOD, mostly from a technical perspective, on its practicality and long-term sustainability. This time we look at Nuclear Energy policy, from the perspective of an Executive that has made a clear option towards this energy source.



Source: NewScientistTech (click to enlarge)

Crossposted at the European Tribune

Concerns with CO_2 emissions are still the main driver behind the EU's Energy Policy, but from the several texts reproduced henceforth, it is becoming clearer a certain sense of urgency towards energy security from the stakeholders.

In his blog, Andris starts by asserting that Nuclear has special a role to fulfill, that other energy sources and/or policies are not able to meet at the moment:

> In this context, energy efficiency, renewables and sustainable biofuels have all a very important and growing contribution to make for a sustainable energy policy, as we have seen in previous entries of this blog. However, for the production of base-load energy at competitive prices, nuclear energy is currently the main low-carbon source in many EU Member States.

But there is more to Nuclear energy that makes it so attractive to policy makers at the moment:

> Let's start with some facts. Taken together, the EU is the largest nuclear electricity generator in the world, has a mature nuclear industry spanning the entire fuel cycle with its own technological base and highly skilled workforce. Currently, nuclear energy provides more than a third of EU electricity. It has proven to be a stable, reliable source, relatively shielded from price fluctuations when compared to the oil and gas markets. Conventional nuclear energy is essentially free from CO_2 emissions and on the face of it, fulfils an important requirement of all **three pillars of the EU energy policy**, which are **competitiveness**, **security of supply** and **sustainability**. Continued use of nuclear energy therefore would increase our energy independence and supply security as well as contribute to the limitation of CO_2 emissions.
> [emphasis added]

As a consequence of the current Energy Policy approved by the Council in March of 2007 the Commission set up the European Nuclear Energy Forum in order to provide a debate among stakeholders in a way transparent to the EU citizens.

The idea is simply to have the politic stakeholders, regulators, industry stakeholders and scientists dialoguing together and at the same time projecting a friendlier image of Nuclear Fission in Europe, where safety is ahead of all concerns.

The Czech and Slovak Prime Ministers agreed on jointly host the Forum, which was set to be held alternatively in Bratislava and Prague. The first meeting took place in late November in Bratislava and the next will be held in Prague later this month. Andris promises to take with his luggage the proposals left by commentators at his blog.

After looking into some of the texts produced during the first meeting of the Forum, some passages seem worth reproducing here. Barroso was in China at that time and sent a letter that Andris, as the senior representative of the Commission, read during the opening session. Some important points were made:

> In this context I really believe that there is a need for a full and frank debate about nuclear energy. It is not the EU's role, or indeed the role of the Commission, to decide for Member States whether they use nuclear energy or not.
>
> But it is - in my view - not surprising that we are witnessing a renewed interest of nuclear energy at global level. Nuclear energy can have a role to play in meeting our growing concerns about security of supply and CO_2 emission reductions. In the EU, around one third of the electricity currently comes from nuclear energy.
>
> Nuclear energy also protects our economy against price volatility of energy prices, as nuclear power is less vulnerable to fuel price changes than some other energy sources.

> With the current record oil prices, this element is becoming increasingly important.
>
> At the same time, I believe that in the context of the revival of nuclear energy, we need to develop further in Europe the most advanced framework for nuclear energy, meeting the highest standards of safety, security and non proliferation. The EU should also continue their efforts to ensure that such high standards are observed internationally, in the context of increased cooperation with the IAEA.

Although not the main driver, "price volatility" is gaining relevance. When Andris took on the speech with his own words he left it clear that there are serious problems. These appear to be some of the most anxious declarations on Oil ever produced by the Energy Commissioner:

> I am concerned about the current escalation of the oil prices and its consequences for our economies. The energy package adopted by Heads of State and Government in March this year already highlighted the multi-dimensional challenges we are facing. But the exponential price increase of crude oil has even accelerated the need for swift and structural action. Therefore we increasingly need a totally open debate on all potential sources of energy, including nuclear energy, to reflect on our energy mix.
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> [...]
>
> Together with and complementarily to the work of the High Level Group, improving nuclear safety must be an overwhelming principle of your dialogue here as well. The highest level of safety, but also of security and non-proliferation, is the absolute condition for the use and development of nuclear energy.
>
> [...]
>
> However I would like to stress that the highest possible level of safety is only a necessary condition, but it is not sufficient. Public acceptance is the second important pillar.
>
> Building trust and increasing confidence in the use of nuclear energy are vital elements for public acceptance in democratic societies. Increased transparency and participation is in the interest of all, whatever their position on nuclear. This is at the core of the debates to which you will participate. Gaining trust and confidence, involving the citizens in the decision-making process, tackling all issues in a transparent way are not easy tasks. But they are issues on which you as decision makers or as influential observers have to focus your efforts on. It means demonstrating to people that the risks of nuclear energy are dealt with in a satisfactory manner, that the concerns of the population are taken seriously, and that you are all willing to help those who are not confident yet to get the necessary and balanced information which may gradually reassure them.

In a more elaborate way, Andris explains the importance of Nuclear energy in facing the challenges ahead for the EU. And once more the negative public image is presented as an obstacle left to overcome that could hinder the process.

On the first meeting's website you can find a plethora of texts from different people with different backgrounds. It is worth while to spend sometime studying them if you have the slightest interest in this matter.

Finally the conclusive document of this first meeting:

Main priorities for the Working Groups of the European Nucelar Energy Forum

"Opportunities of nuclear energy"

1. To establish a Nuclear Energy Roadmap to improve the nuclear legal framework, including greater harmonization of licensing procedures.
2. To analyse in more detail, in comparison with other energy sources, the competitiveness of nuclear energy in a European low carbon and global security context. To examine ways to translate some competitive advantages of nuclear energy in the final price of domestic and business consumers.
3. To explore innovative models regarding regional approaches and financing possibilities in the field of nuclear energy.
4. To examine the ways and means to maintain the industrial capacity while improving the industrial environment.

"Risks of nuclear energy"

1. To support a greater harmonization of safety requirements at EU level for nuclear installations in the EU (notable through the High Level Group).
2. To encourage Members States and industry to swiftly implement adequate nuclear waste disposal facilities, in particular deep geological repositories for high level waste.
3. To call for sufficient funding for decommissioning and waste management through adequate methods.
4. To develop innovative approaches and exchange best practices to ensure adequate training, both qualitatively and quantitatively, for nuclear engineers and technicians, including radioprotection (e.g. Possible European post-graduate degrees), and to strengthen the safety culture.
5. To support the reinforcement of non-proliferation in the international context through a stronger European position and the strengthening of nuclear security.

"Information and transparency"

1. To examine ways and means to better inform the public in the objective and factual terms all aspects of nuclear energy (e.g. in the context of new build, encourage common approaches between regulators).
2. To analyse the most effective approaches to build up trust and confidence in the available information, by increasing transparency and giving access to all non-sensitive information.
3. To provide information in clear language on the existing solutions for waste management.
4. To exchange and develop best practices at European level between all actors (Member States, municipalities, industry, etc.).

I left on Andris' blog an idea for a European special budget for energy development. With an income tax of 0,1% to 0,2% on each EU citizen, a value in the order of 4 to 8 Giga €uros (4 to 8 short billion €uros) could be raised every year. That money could get a lot people and a lot of resources working together to develop the EU's energy future. Nuclear seems to be the discipline that could benefit the most from such programme, due to the extra infrastructure and waste disposal requirements.

Without starting another endless and quite often inconclusive technical debate, I would like this

time to get comments on Nuclear Energy policy. What is the Commission doing right? What is it doing wrong? What alternative policies can be pursued?

And don't forget to pay a visit to Andris' blog and leave some ideas for the second meeting of the Forum.

Previous coverage of Andris Piebalgs blog:

Andris Piebalgs' priority number one

Andris Piebalgs : getting a sense of proportion

Andris Piebalgs on Bio Fuels

Piebalgs on European Energy Security

Andris Piebalgs' Blog

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