

# Czechs bet on nuclear power for their future

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View of the four cooling towers of Temelin Nuclear Power Plant behind a grain field in the village of Temelin. The Czech Republic is poised to build on its position as central Europe's nuclear hub, seeking greater energy security and shrugging off the concerns of environmentalists and other opponents.

The Czech Republic is poised to build on its position as central Europe's nuclear hub, seeking greater energy security and shrugging off the concerns of environmentalists and other opponents.

It is a cool-headed approach, in the wake of the disaster at Japan's Fukushima plant earlier this year which has prompted Germany, the Czech Republic's neighbour, to phase out nuclear power by 2022.

Italy and Switzerland have also put nuclear power plans on ice.

"The development of nuclear power is a fundamental priority," says Daniel Benes, chief executive and chairman of the Czech power giant

CEZ, two-thirds state-controlled.

"If we lose nuclear power, we will find ourselves at the mercy of Russian gas. There's no other way. [Renewable sources](#) won't cover our (energy) needs," he argues.

As Europe's second largest power exporter and central Europe's largest nuclear energy provider, CEZ runs the [power plants](#) in Dukovany, in the southeastern Czech Republic, and in Temelin, in the southwest.

Its two [nuclear plants](#) produce one-third of the country's total power output but the share is expected to grow to 50 percent around 2025 with two new reactors at Temelin.

By 2060, [nuclear power](#) is expected to account for 80 percent of the mix, according to a revamped energy strategy drafted by the Czech industry ministry and due to be submitted to the government by the end of the year.

"With the plan foreseeing an 80-percent cut in [carbon dioxide emissions](#) by 2050 and the development of [electric cars](#), it would be difficult not to raise the nuclear part," said Pavel Vlcek, spokesman for the ministry.

The plan has become a real concern for [environmentalists](#), who favour [renewable energy sources](#).

"Of course renewable sources are equally expensive but their costs are falling," said Vojtech Kotecky of the Duha (Rainbow) movement. "The government should try to boost the sector, not stifle it," he added.

The current national energy strategy suggests renewables could cover 15 percent of Czech power consumption by 2030.

Three groups, led by France's Areva, Russia's Atomstroieexport and the US giant Westinghouse are bidding for a deal to build the two new units at Temelin, about 120 kilometres (75 miles) south of Prague.

Estimated to cost 20 billion euros (\$28 billion), the contract also includes an option to build a reactor at Dukovany and two others at the Jaslovske Bohunice nuclear plant in neighbouring Slovakia.

The government expects to receive bids next year.

Planned in the communist era and launched in 2000, Temelin comprises two Russian-type VVER pressurised-water reactors, each with output of 1,000 megawatts, made by Czech company Skoda Plzen and equipped by Westinghouse.

Contrary to popular belief, the reactors are different from the RBMK-type that exploded at the Chernobyl plant in the former Soviet Union in 1986, in what is still regarded as the world's worst-ever nuclear disaster.

The Dukovany plant launched in 1985 comprises four VVER reactors with a capacity of 440 megawatts each, also produced by Skoda Plzen.

Besides the expansion of Temelin and the potential construction of a new unit at Dukovany, the Czech government has mentioned the possibility of building a third nuclear plant in Blahutovice in the northeast of the country around 2040.

A plot of land in the village "is reserved for the construction of a large power station, which could be nuclear but not necessarily," said Roman Portuzak, head of the department for electric energy at the industry ministry.

Czech power stations -- like others in eastern European countries -- have

been criticised by Austria, which has cast doubts on their safety.

"Six months after the terrible Fukushima disaster in Japan, our neighbours have learned no lessons," Austrian Environment Minister Nikolaus Berlakovich said recently.

But the Czech government's nuclear safety authority (SUJB) insists the accusation is unfounded.

"The SUJB, just like the other European nuclear security offices, examines all incidents that occur in nuclear plants across the world and adopts adequate measures," said SUJB vice-president Petr Brandejs.

The safety level of Czech nuclear plants is "at least comparable to that at other European plants," he added.

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