

Czech villagers embrace disputed nuclear plant

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The four cooling towers of Temelin Nuclear Power Plant are seen from a grain field on July 24, 2011. Flanked by Germany, which is phasing out nuclear power, and Austria, which has already done so, the Czech Republic is pinning its future on atomic energy.

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The ex-communist republic of 10.5 million people, which now relies on nuclear for about 30 percent of its energy mix, is pushing an upgrade of its disputed Temelin plant and betting on getting at least half of its energy from the atom by 2025.

Twenty-three years after its launch, Temelin's Soviet-designed reactors still stir controversy among neighbours and [environmentalists](#), yet people living directly in their shadow are more circumspect.

"I'm not afraid of the power station," says Vaclav Hrabě in the kitchen of his modest house encircled by a small garden in Temelin, a village some 120 kilometres (75 miles) south of the capital Prague.

At 90, he's the oldest resident of the village, overshadowed by the four huge steaming concave cooling towers of the plant, which soar to a height of 155 metres (yards).

According to a recent survey, 72 percent of Temelin's 400 villagers back the planned additional two units at the power station, run by the CEZ state-run power giant.

The Czech environment ministry recently gave the go ahead for the lucrative project worth an estimated 200-300 billion koruna (7.8-11.7 billion euros, \$10.2-15.3 billion).

US industrial giant [Westinghouse](#) is bidding for it against a group called MIR-1200, led by Russia's Atomstroieksport and backed by several Czech companies. France's Areva remains bitter over having been eliminated from the running late last year.

"The power station will grow bigger, just like the village. There are quite a few people who want to build a house and live here," says Hrabě, proud of his idyllic village in which the hulking [nuclear facility](#) seems

completely out of place.



Dark clouds cover the sky over the four cooling towers of Temelin Nuclear Power Plant on July 24, 2011. Flanked by Germany, which is phasing out nuclear power, and Austria, which has already done so, the Czech Republic is pinning its future on atomic energy.

Temelin the village is also cashing in on Temelin the atomic facility.

"Every year, the power station gives Temelin 10 million koruna to boost its infrastructure. The village also gets 30 million koruna from CEZ a

year in real estate tax," says Marek Svitak, spokesman for the plant.

Cheekily dubbed "Disneyland" by the locals owing to the colourful lights that illuminate the plant at night, the power station, launched in 2000, uses two Russian-era VVER pressurised-water reactors, with output of 1,000 megawatts each.

Coupled with CEZ's other nuclear plant in the southern village of Dukovany, Temelin covers 30 percent of energy consumption in the Czech Republic.

The two new reactors, expected to come online in 2025, will raise that share to 50 percent.

Just sixty kilometres (38 miles) to the south, Austria, which gave up [nuclear power](#) in 1978, eyes the communist-era plant with grave concern.

But the Czech government, which holds a controlling stake in CEZ, says nuclear power is a strategic part of the Czech Republic's drive for energy self-sufficiency and has no intention of giving it up.

In his garden opposite Temelin's town hall, pensioner Frantisek Riha is among the minority of villagers who share Vienna's concern.

"Nobody has persuaded me the plant is safe," he says firmly, adding that emergency drills held four times a year were "stressful."

In Ceske Budejovice, a city just 30 kilometres from Temelin, environmentalist Monika Machova-Wittingerova is an avowed opponent of the plant.

"Nuclear power depends on activities that harm the environment, like

uranium extraction and treatment," said the head of a protest movement dubbed the South Bohemian Mothers.

"There's also the unresolved problem of nuclear waste storage... and you can never fully rule out the risk of a serious accident," she added.

"We organise concerts in the memory of Chernobyl and Fukushima, but only few protest rallies because public opinion is rather lukewarm," Machova-Wittingerova admits.

Two years after Japan's March 11 Fukushima nuclear disaster which prompted EU heavyweight Germany to decide to shut down its nuclear plants in 2022, Prague remains undeterred.

Other ex-communist countries Poland and Lithuania keen to overcome their energy dependence on Soviet-era master Russia are also pushing ahead with nuclear facilities.

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