

Nuclear energy**EU must wean itself off Russian nuclear fuel, Belgian prime minister says**

Alexander De Croo urges bloc not to replace one energy dependency for another



Alexander De Croo: 'The [nuclear] industry has quite some promises to deliver on' © Olivier Matthys/EPA/Shutterstock

Alice Hancock and Sarah White in Brussels MARCH 24 2024



The EU must wean itself off Russian nuclear fuel “as fast as possible”, Belgian’s prime minister has said, to stop a renaissance in Europe’s interest for the low-carbon energy inflating Moscow’s war chest.

Alexander De Croo told the Financial Times that Belgium had taken a “180 degree” turn in its attitude to [nuclear power](#), prompted in part by the bloc’s laws aimed at curbing carbon emissions across Europe.

Pressure to meet those targets and a rush to move away from Russian gas has prompted renewed interest in nuclear power in Belgium and other European countries. But with Russia’s enriched uranium making up 30 per cent of [EU](#) supply in 2022, there was a risk that the bloc could swap one dependency for another.

“Changing supply chains especially for nuclear is complicated but we need to do it as fast as possible . . . we need to disconnect from Russian nuclear fuel but you need to make sure you can still produce zero emission electricity,” he said.

[Belgium](#) decided in December to extend the lifetime of two nuclear reactors that had been scheduled to be closed in 2025. They will now run until 2035 although De Croo said he personally thought their lifetime should be extended by 20 years.

The enthusiasm of the Belgian premier was echoed by leaders from more than 30 countries at the first International Atomic Energy Agency nuclear summit that took place in Brussels on Thursday.

A senior EU official said the nuclear summit was a “reflection of a shift that is happening and it is quite remarkable”.

The renaissance of the once ostracised industry started last year at the UN’s COP 28 climate summit, when 25 countries including Canada, the UK and the US signed a pledge to triple nuclear power by 2050. That marked a comeback after years in the doldrums for atomic energy plans following the 2011 Fukushima meltdown in Japan.

Han Gyu Joo, president of the Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute, said that much of the emphasis at the Brussels summit had been on energy security, adding he’d been surprised to see it hosted by Belgium.

Seth Grae, chair of American Nuclear Society’s International Council, said the difficulty of finding alternatives for Russian enriched uranium was in part due to a lack of investors. “Enrichment capacity is a multibillion-dollar cost . . . we need guaranteed offtake from governments.”

But IAEA director-general Rafael Grossi dismissed pressure for countries to accelerate a move away from Russian fuel.

“Let’s make sure this is not about using nuclear energy as a political pawn,” Grossi told a news conference. “I would warn against this point of good nuclear against bad nuclear, it’s not conducive to what we need to have in the global energy market.”

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who is EU’s most Russia-friendly leader, name-checked France and Austria, who are working on Hungary’s nuclear plant expansion plans piloted by Russian constructor Rosatom.

“We are happy to note that regardless of geopolitical difficulties a wide range of international, professional and scientific co-operation still exists in the field of nuclear energy,” Orbán said.

Austria, Luxembourg and Germany have been opposed to any EU money going towards nuclear energy fearing that it will take much-needed funding from renewables, although the new government in Luxembourg has recently signalled that it may shift position.

An EU diplomat said that EU funding for nuclear power would be a “Christmas present” to France, home to Europe’s biggest fleet of 56 reactors.

“Each nuclear project spans decades and incurs exorbitant costs, posing a risk of market distortion when EU funds are directed towards such expensive endeavours,” Leonore Gewessler, the Austrian climate minister, told the FT.

De Croo said the summit was not a gathering of “nuclear fanboys”.

“[It] was quite nuanced,” he said, noting that with a history of budget overruns and a looming skills shortage “the industry has quite some promises to deliver on”.

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