# Spain blackout reignites debate on nuclear power amid renewable energy doubts



When millions across the Iberian Peninsula were plunged into darkness last month, the fallout ignited a renewed debate over Europe’s energy future, with particular focus on renewable energy’s reliability and the role of nuclear power. The blackout, which has been described as the most significant power outage in decades, has left many questioning whether the shift towards renewable energy sources can truly guarantee a stable clean energy supply. This incident has reignited discussions regarding the nuclear power renaissance that many countries are now considering.

Despite longstanding environmental concerns, political leaders globally are increasingly eyeing nuclear energy as a viable path forward. With the urgent demand for low-carbon energy escalating—especially as data centres proliferate—there is a growing consensus that investing in nuclear energy might be essential. In Spain, this discourse has gained urgency due to plans to phase out the nation’s remaining seven nuclear reactors by 2035. Critics argue that such moves could jeopardise energy security and lead to significant increases in electricity prices. Ignacio Galán, chairman of the renewable energy company Iberdrola, warned that following Germany's lead in closing its reactors could push Spain’s electricity prices up by as much as 25%.

In light of the recent blackout, Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez vehemently dismissed suggestions that the surge in renewable energy usage contributed to the power failure, asserting that allegations linking the incident to a lack of nuclear energy are misguided. Nonetheless, even prior to the blackout, experts and industry leaders were advocating for a reconsideration of Spain’s anti-nuclear stance. Sama Bilbao y León, director-general of the World Nuclear Association, expressed concerns regarding Spain's economic future without nuclear power, emphasising its necessity for providing clean and reliably available energy all year round.

This trend towards nuclear energy is not confined to Spain. In Germany, a similar evolution is occurring under the new conservative Chancellor Friedrich Merz. His government has re-evaluated prior anti-nuclear policies in light of energy crises exacerbated by geopolitical tensions, particularly following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Merz has proposed treating nuclear energy equivalently to renewables within EU energy frameworks, aligning with France’s pro-nuclear position. This pivot marks a significant shift for Germany while fostering greater bilateral cooperation within European energy policy.

In Australia, a new coalition government is also opening the door for nuclear energy, lifting a ban on nuclear generators and promising significant financial commitments towards building new facilities expected to be operational by the mid-2030s. Meanwhile, Taiwan faces its own pivotal decision regarding the restart of a nuclear reactor amid rising energy demands from the semiconductor industry and concerns over energy security in the face of potential military threats.

The urgency for reliable power sources is echoed in the United States as well, where the infamous Three Mile Island site prepares to restart operations to furnish energy to tech giants like Microsoft, who are grappling with the escalating energy demands inherent in the AI sector. As major technology firms pursue contracts for new nuclear capacity, investment banks like Goldman Sachs project an increase in such deals as the appetite for reliable, low-carbon energy grows.

Breakthroughs in nuclear technology, particularly with small modular reactors (SMRs), promise a feasible and less risky path to expanding nuclear power. These reactors offer quick and cost-effective construction options, contrasting sharply with the historically burdensome timelines and budgets of traditional nuclear projects. Google has recently sealed agreements to procure energy from SMRs, underscoring the corporate sector's growing belief in this technology.

However, the path to nuclear power’s renaissance is not without its sceptics. Critics argue that SMRs remain unproven in commercial applications and raise concerns about unresolved issues surrounding nuclear waste management. Prominent voices, such as Dr Doug Parr from Greenpeace UK, have called attention to the potential pitfalls, underscoring the substantial financial and logistical challenges that persist in reviving the nuclear sector.

Yet the shifting political landscape is clear. Countries like the UK are advocating for the integration of nuclear energy into their clean energy strategies as they face pressure from energy-intensive industries. Plans for widespread nuclear deployment have been announced, including the possible operational start for smaller reactors as early as 2032. Meanwhile, the European Union has acknowledged nuclear energy’s role as a necessary component in achieving climate goals, amidst ongoing debates regarding safety and waste management.

As the demand for electricity surges worldwide, driven largely by technological advancements and the climate crisis, nuclear energy is being revisited not only as a reliable source but also as a pivotal player in the global transition towards decarbonisation. The coming decade will likely determine whether this renaissance can successfully navigate the challenges it faces, but the renewed political will suggests that the time for nuclear energy may indeed be now.

## Reference Map:

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2. <https://www.ft.com/content/e99efa2b-338a-4065-89c6-0683d5759ed7> - Germany has reversed its longstanding opposition to nuclear power in a significant policy shift aimed at strengthening Franco-German cooperation and unlocking progress on EU energy policy. Under new conservative Chancellor Friedrich Merz, Berlin has agreed to treat nuclear energy on par with renewables in EU legislation, aligning with France's pro-nuclear stance. This change resolves a key bilateral dispute that had hindered energy policy decisions, especially after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Merz, critical of Germany's nuclear exit under Angela Merkel and Olaf Scholz, supports investment in next-generation nuclear technologies like small modular reactors and nuclear fusion. His openness also includes discussions on joining France's nuclear deterrence strategy. The move reflects broader EU support for atomic energy amid high gas prices, leaving Austria isolated in its anti-nuclear stance. A coalition of 12 EU countries has called for EU recognition of nuclear power’s role alongside renewables. Previously, Germany’s opposition stemmed from industry competitiveness concerns and domestic anti-nuclear sentiment, especially from the Green party. The policy shift enables advancements in areas like hydrogen production and enhances EU unity on energy sovereignty and sustainability.
3. <https://apnews.com/article/4a6ff96bbde3251cb42109e1d9d4b399> - In 2024, the European Union achieved a record 47% of its electricity generation from renewable sources, with solar power contributing 11% and wind power surpassing gas for the second consecutive year. Nuclear power, which doesn't emit greenhouse gases, accounted for 24%, making nearly three-quarters of the EU's electricity free from planet-warming emissions. This progress stands in contrast to the United States, where the new administration under President Trump is increasing fossil fuel use and withdrawing clean energy incentives. Europe’s clean energy shift is driven by the European Green Deal, ambitious emission reduction targets, and the need to reduce dependency on Russian gas following the invasion of Ukraine. The EU saved over $61 billion in fossil fuel imports since 2019, with notable renewable energy growth in Portugal, the Netherlands, and Estonia. As the U.S. pulls back from international climate commitments, Europe solidifies its leadership in clean energy innovation and sustainability.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/berlin-paris-overcome-rift-over-nuclear-energy-french-official-says-2025-05-19/> - Germany and France, the EU’s two largest economies, have resolved a long-standing disagreement over nuclear energy legislation, with Germany now signaling it will no longer object to treating nuclear power equally with renewable energy in EU climate policies. This marks a significant shift under new German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, who has criticized Germany’s nuclear phase-out and emphasized stronger energy policy alignment with France. France, which relies heavily on nuclear energy, has consistently advocated for nuclear’s inclusion in low-carbon energy strategies. Germany’s policy change could increase pressure on the European Commission to allocate more funding for nuclear initiatives across the EU. Austria remains the only major country opposed to nuclear power. Despite the policy shift, challenges such as financing and the long timelines required to bring new nuclear facilities online still persist. The development comes amid a broader European trend toward reviving nuclear energy to reduce dependency on Russian gas, with countries like Belgium, Sweden, and others in Central Europe reconsidering or expanding nuclear plans.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/eu-riles-nuclear-industry-with-delay-low-carbon-hydrogen-rules-2025-05-13/> - The European Union is facing criticism from the nuclear industry over its draft plans to delay until 2028 the classification of hydrogen produced from nuclear energy as 'low-carbon.' This designation is vital for building a market for cleaner hydrogen fuels. The draft rules indicate that the European Commission will begin consultations on the topic in 2026 and will assess the classification by July 2028. Nuclear Europe, a pro-nuclear industry group, argues that this delay puts nuclear-generated hydrogen at a competitive disadvantage compared to hydrogen from renewable sources, which were approved under EU green rules in 2023. The debate reflects broader EU political divisions over the role of nuclear energy in the clean energy transition. Countries like France, Poland, and Sweden support greater inclusion of nuclear power, whereas Germany and Denmark oppose it, emphasizing a focus on wind and solar energy. While nuclear power does not emit CO2, concerns remain about radioactive waste. With most current hydrogen production relying on fossil fuels, the EU aims to shift towards emissions-free alternatives, but disagreements continue to stall policy advancements. The draft will be discussed by EU country experts later this week.
6. <https://time.com/6169164/ukraine-nuclear-energy-europe/> - Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the fire at Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, European countries are reconsidering nuclear power to reduce reliance on Russian oil and gas. The conflict, coupled with climate change commitments, has spurred renewed interest in nuclear energy for energy security and emissions reduction. The UK plans to build new nuclear plants, and the EU has classified nuclear energy as 'green.' However, opposition remains, particularly in Germany due to historic and ideological reasons. Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) are seen as a potential game-changer, offering safer, cheaper, and more flexible nuclear power solutions. The U.S. is positioned to lead the revival of nuclear technology, enhancing its geostrategic influence at Russia's expense. China, with its aggressive nuclear expansion, may also be a potential partner, but concerns over strategic ambitions persist. The ongoing conflict ensures nuclear energy technology will remain high on the policy agenda.
7. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2023/06/19/eu-finally-acknowledges-nuclear-power-s-role-in-the-fight-to-decarbonize-the-economy_6034113_19.html> - In June 2023, the European Union acknowledged the role of nuclear power in the fight to decarbonize the economy. The European Commission pointed out that 'fossil fuel-free energies, other than renewable energies, contribute to achieving the 2050 climate neutrality targets for those members who decide to use such energy sources.' This marked a significant shift in EU policy, recognising nuclear energy as a crucial component in achieving climate neutrality by 2050. The decision was influenced by France's advocacy for nuclear power, given its substantial reliance on nuclear energy. The move aimed to balance the EU's energy mix and enhance energy security while addressing climate change. However, the decision also sparked debates among member states, with some expressing concerns over nuclear energy's safety and waste management issues. Despite these challenges, the EU's acknowledgment of nuclear power's role reflects a broader trend of re-evaluating energy strategies in the context of climate goals and energy security.