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Energy Minister Rösti pulls the plug on new nuclear plants

Nuclear power in Switzerland had been a taboo subject ever since the nuclear disaster at Fukushima. Then, fears of a power shortage increased support for building new nuclear power stations. Now, there is renewed resistance to the idea – from an unexpected quarter.

CHRISTOF FORSTER

Supporters of nuclear power rejoiced when Albert Rösti (SVP) succeeded Simonetta Sommaruga (SP) as energy minister at the start of 2023. Rösti was one of them: against the energy transition and in favour of new nuclear power plants. Proponents of nuclear energy argue that Switzerland needs new nuclear power stations more than ever. However, it seems their hopes are not to be realised.

Construction ban on new nuclear power plants

The nuclear power lobby had been saying for a long time that there is no alternative to nuclear for ensuring the country's power supply. But no one was listening. The Fukushima

nuclear disaster of 2011 pushed the (already controversial) topic firmly off the table. In 2017, the people gave the green light to the "Energy Strategy 2050", in other words to the incremental expansion of renewable energies and a construction ban on new nuclear power plants. The decision led indirectly to the decommissioning of Mühleberg nuclear power station in the canton of Berne, which is currently being dismantled. This is the first time Switzerland has actually proceeded with dismantling a nuclear plant.

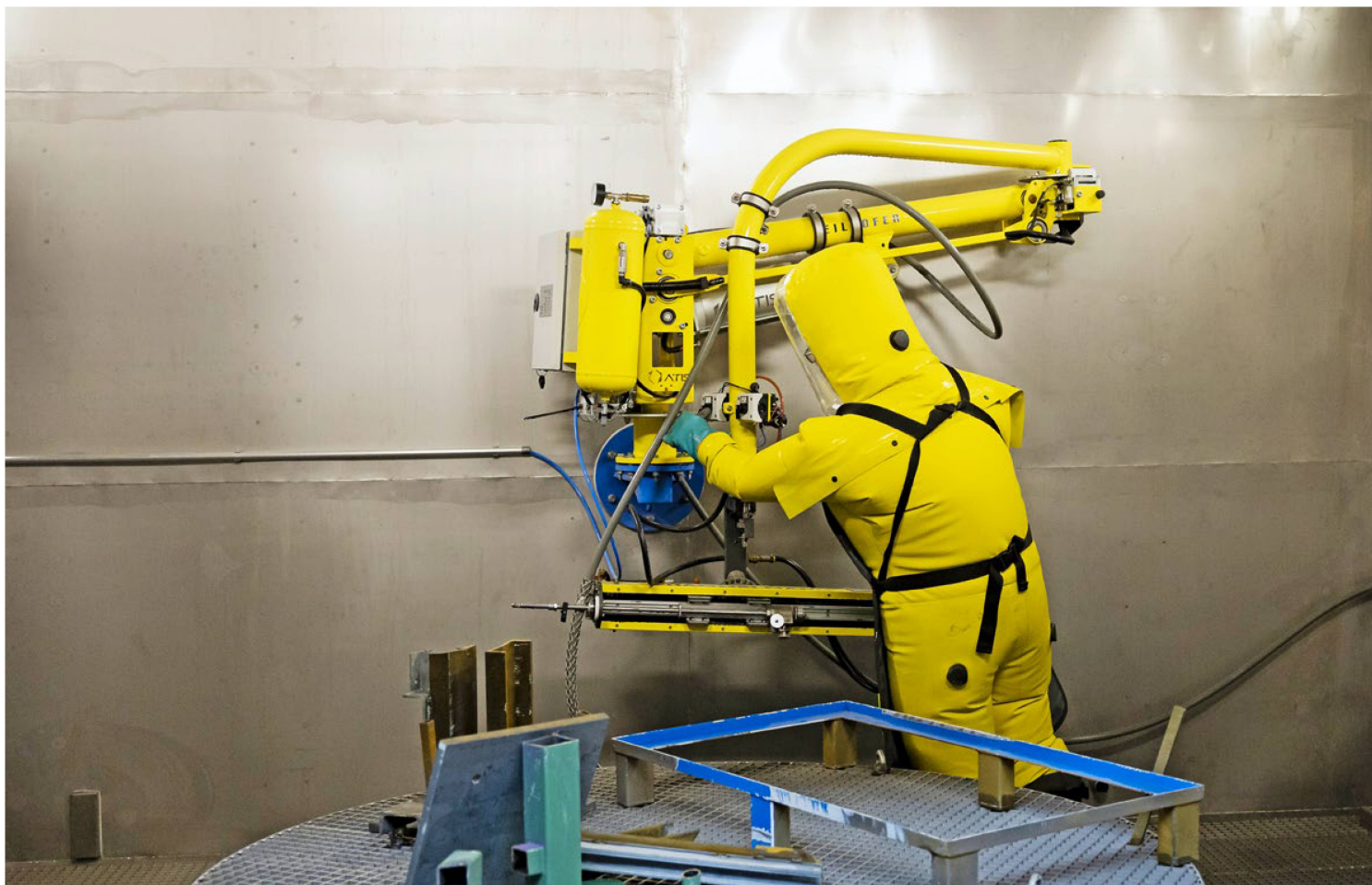
Sluggish expansion of alternative energy sources

In the meantime, the planned expansion of photovoltaics and wind tur-

Switzerland is currently learning more about dismantling nuclear power plants than building them: workers dismantling the decommissioned Mühleberg nuclear power plant. Photo: Keystone

bines has been underwhelming. As the country had adequate power, there was a lack of urgency in parliament to back renewables. It wasn't long before this complacency was challenged. In autumn 2021, a good four years after the vote to phase out nuclear power, the federal government issued a study warning of potential 'power shortages'. Although the study outlined an absolute worst-case scenario, it caused alarm among the political parties and population.

The right-wing conservative Swiss People's Party (SVP), which had always opposed the energy transition, criticised the Federal Council's 'camping stove policy' and called loudly for the construction of new nuclear power plants to address the potential power shortages. The nu-



clear lobby also regrouped as young Vanessa Meury added a fresh face to their ranks. The 26-year-old is president of Energie Club Schweiz, which is committed to a 'reliable and environmentally friendly energy policy over the long term'. In autumn 2021,



Meury told Tamedia newspapers: "I believe we are now regaining momentum". Her call for more nuclear power has been well received. The association wants to overturn the law banning the construction of new nuclear power sites and has launched a popular initiative to that end: "Stop the blackout".

Russia's attack triggered the energy crisis

The European energy crisis, triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, strengthened the nuclear argument. A power shortage in Switzerland during the winter became a realistic scenario. The federal government and cantons created crisis plans. Detailed rules were formed as to who could use how much electricity and when. Energy Minister Sommaruga recommended saving energy while cooking and sharing showers. This was met with surprise as people wondered how it had come to this in a country that had enjoyed surplus power for decades.

In the end, Switzerland negotiated the 2022/2023 winter without too

Albert Rösti before changing sides: as president of the SVP, he was at the forefront of the opposition to the Federal Council's energy policy – he is photographed here submitting the referendum against the Energy Act. Archive image 2017: Keystone

much trouble, not least due to the mild temperatures and prompt substitution of Russian gas by other energy sources. Parliament acknowledged the gravity of the situation and pushed the expansion of renewables. Supporters of nuclear energy also came in from the cold as it was acknowledged that demand for electricity would grow significantly, for example for electric transport and heating. In addition to that, the existing nuclear power plants, which account for a third of annual electricity production, would need to be replaced.

Rösti surprises the nuclear lobby

The stage seemed set for a grand entrance by nuclear energy supporter Albert Rösti. However, the new energy minister had his own ideas, to the surprise of the nuclear lobby. "This discussion is redundant right now – if not counterproductive," he said in an interview with "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" (NZZ) in September 2023. He said he had no interest in discussing nuclear power. Instead, his priority was to implement the energy strategy approved by the people to the best of his ability.

In other words, Rösti's full attention is on expanding electricity production over the next five to ten years. Additional power will be urgently needed during this time. In Rösti's view, a fundamental debate about new nuclear power plants would be detrimental to these efforts. New nuclear power plants are not a short-term solution: experts estimate that approval for and the construction of a new nuclear reactor would take about 20 years.

The dream of a thorium reactor

As the SVP federal councillor pulls the plug, there is no shortage of people who would gladly reinsert it. Geneva firm Transmutex is working on a nuclear power plant that runs without uranium and even disposes of

waste from old reactors. Maurice Bourquin, former rector at the University of Geneva and former president of CERN Council, is involved in the project. Bourquin recently requested that the Federal Council conduct a feasibility study on such a thorium reactor – despite the ban on nuclear power plant construction.

The reactor would be fuelled by thorium instead of uranium. In contrast to conventional radioactive waste, thorium 'only' remains radioactive for several hundred instead of hundreds of thousands of years. In addition, the volume could be drastically reduced with the planned fuel recycling economy. Nonetheless, there would be high-energy gamma rays and heat. The waste would have to be cooled for more secure final storage, which adds uncertainty to the process.

From nuclear power plant site to giant battery

There are also ideas circulating as to how the decommissioned reactor sites could be used in other ways. For example, the Green Liberals propose building electricity storage sites there – as security against power shortages. The electricity companies are not against the idea, although they point out that nuclear power plants need to have been decommissioned for 15 years before being put to alternative use.

By the way, Rösti does not want to pull the plug on operational nuclear power plants – quite the opposite. He does not want another 'Mühleberg', he said in an NZZ interview. He even backs state intervention to keep the plants running if necessary. Operators estimate their nuclear reactors have 60 years or more to run.

More on atomic energy – and nuclear waste disposal: revue.link/deponie