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Albert Rösti reignites the atomic debate

Seven years ago, Swiss voters decided to phase out nuclear power. The Federal Council is now looking to reverse that: it wants to approve the building of new nuclear power plants. This is a 180-degree shift in energy policy.

CHRISTOF FORSTER

Seven years ago, Swiss voters gave the green light to a Switzerland free of nuclear power. The last nuclear power plants were to be decommissioned by 2050 as the country moved to full reliance on renewable energies and imports. The Federal Council now wants to change that: it decided at the end of August it would allow the construction of new nuclear power plants again. For that to happen, the construction ban has to lose its legal status.

This has really shaken up the energy debate in Switzerland. The discussion on the pros and cons of nuclear power, once thought to be over, is back with a vengeance. Energy Minister Albert Rösti is talking about a “paradigm shift”. Whereas politics and the economy had been contemplating a future without nuclear power, all bets are now off the table.

Nuclear power has always been a polarising issue. The Fukushima nuclear catastrophe in 2011 gave a boost to the anti-nuclear lobby. Hundreds of

thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in Europe’s cities to protest against nuclear power. In Switzerland, Energy Minister Doris Leuthard, known as a supporter of nuclear power, placed applications to build new reactors on ice three days following the seaquake.

That same year, the Federal Council decided to phase out nuclear energy over the long term. Nuclear power plants were to remain operational for as long as they were deemed safe by the supervisory authority. However, they would not be replaced. This deci-

sion was not as decisive as it could have been. If Fukushima had really caused people to question the safety of reactors, they should have moved to shut down the country's nuclear operations much faster. As happened in Germany, for example. Switzerland opted for a pragmatic path, not least due to the public mood. The people would most likely not have approved any new nuclear plants in the aftermath of Fukushima.

Energy minister and savvy tactician

Rösti is now working to undo Leuthard's move away from nuclear power. Rösti has always been a supporter of nuclear energy. On assuming the energy portfolio following his election to the Federal Council, he acquired the means to act on his convictions. However, being a smart operator, Rösti initially bided his time, making all the right noises about renewable energy and pouring cold water on a resumption of the nuclear power plant debate. It was at best a redundant discussion and possibly even counterproductive, he said in an interview with "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" in September 2023. He argued that a debate on new nuclear plants would torpedo efforts to expand the use of renewables.

That was before the popular vote on the revised Electricity Supply Act, which lays the foundations for a major expansion of renewable energies. He did not want to jeopardise this bill by reviving the nuclear debate. Rösti's tactic worked and the voters resoundingly backed the revised law – against opposition from Rösti's own party, the SVP.

Officially, the Federal Council decision is a counterproposal to the popular initiative "Stop the blackout", which aims to lift the construction ban on nuclear power plants. The main backers of the initiative are the SVP, the FDP and Energie Club Schweiz. It is a dis-

tinct possibility that the initiative will be withdrawn if parliament supports the Federal Council's counterproposal. This would play into the hands of the atomic lobby, in so far as a vote would only require the backing of a majority of the electorate and not of the cantons as well.

The left is accusing SVP Federal Councillor Rösti of misrepresenting the will of the people, which is somewhat ironic as he is a representative of the party that sees the will of the people as paramount. SP National Councillor Roger Nordmann argues that the government's position is diametrically opposed to the energy and climate policy favoured by the public. The voters have clearly and repeatedly shown that they back the phasing out of nuclear energy in favour of a secure energy supply sourced from renewables.

Reliability of supply is key

While the threat of nuclear catastrophe loomed over the decision to wind down atomic energy, reliability of supply has since become the issue dominating the debate. The pro-nuclear camp argue that decarbonisation will drive demand for electricity. Transport and heating will have to run on electricity in order to achieve net zero by 2050. Population growth will also drive electricity consump-

tion. At the same time, there aren't extensive reserves of power just waiting to be used. The energy crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine made that abundantly clear.

A winter energy shortfall in Switzerland became a realistic prospect and the authorities created crisis plans. Out of nowhere, the concept of a power shortage planted itself in the public consciousness. Simonetta Sommaruga, who was energy minister at the time, called for people to cook with the lid on the pot and take showers together. In the end, a serendipitous turn of events made the '22/'23 winter crisis planning redundant.

The gas power plants once seen as a viable alternative source are incompatible with the net-zero objective. They are now only considered as an emergency reserve, i.e. to bridge an electricity shortfall over a number of weeks, as heavy reliance on imports is excessively risky. Potential energy suppliers throughout the country all face the same issue: where will the power come from?

Switzerland is by no means alone in this regard. Several European countries have postponed their plans to wean themselves off nuclear power, or even abandoned them altogether, including Belgium and several eastern European countries. The United Kingdom and Slovakia are even expanding



Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard engineered the move away from nuclear power following the Fukushima disaster. On 25 May 2011, she declared that Switzerland was not prepared to replace its current nuclear power plants once they reached the end of their operating life.



Energy Minister Albert Rösti announcing the change in atomic energy policy at a media conference in August 2024.

Photos: Keystone

The plan was to phase out Switzerland's nuclear power plants, not replace them (pictured here: Beznau I and Beznau II). But the Federal Council has now had second thoughts.

Photo: Keystone



The damaged Fukushima site (2011): the realisation that even an advanced technological nation like Japan couldn't guarantee nuclear safety had a strong influence on public sentiment in Switzerland. Photo: Keystone



The nuclear energy paradox: on the one hand, the people have said yes to phasing out atomic energy; on the other hand Switzerland operates the world's oldest nuclear plant, Beznau I. Reactor operators doing inspection work in May 2024. Photo: Keystone

their respective capacities. The new government in the Netherlands plans to start construction on four new nuclear plants as soon as possible. And nuclear power is still the main energy source in France.

Dependency on Russia

The plot grows thicker. More nuclear power plants would reduce the dependency on coal or gas-powered energy. Some of the gas used to power plants in Switzerland still comes from Russia, as does some of the uranium for the nuclear plants. According to energy foundation Schweizerische Energie-Stiftung (SES), which opposes nuclear energy, 45 per cent of nuclear power and 15 per cent of Switzerland's entire energy are sourced from Russian uranium. At least 7.5 per cent of that comes from Russian state enterprise Rosatom.

Efforts are underway in the EU to change this situation. However, dependency has increased over the short term. Imports of Russian uranium to EU member states have increased markedly since the start of the Ukraine war.

Proponents of nuclear power also have something else in their favour besides the climate policy and geopolitical situation in Europe: Switzerland has finally located a site, Stadel in the canton of Zurich, where radioactive waste can be stored for good. The end storage site has not yet been finalised. However, the opposition in Stadel is considerably weaker than before as the storage site municipality and the canton have practically no more legal avenues to pursue in opposition to the siting ruling. The National Cooperative for the Disposal of Radioactive Waste (Nagra) will submit a planning application to the Confederation this year.

But the devil is, as always, in the detail. The planned deep geological

repository is only designed for waste from plants already in existence, as Nagra pointed out in a recent report. New nuclear power plants were not factored into the site's capacity. The anti-nuclear camp has been quick to point out the inherent absurdity of the situation: a second end storage site would be needed for the radioactive waste from new nuclear plants, while the first storage site still awaits approval. The nuclear lobby argues that the deep geological repository at the planned site would simply have to be much larger than originally thought.

Plans for a low waste reactor

Geneva company Transmutex is working on something that adds credence to the nuclear lobby's position. It is developing a nuclear plant that runs without uranium and significantly reduces the waste coming from the reactors. The technology is called transmutation and it involves the reactor burning thorium instead of uranium. Experts say transmutation would reduce the volume of long-lived, highly radioactive waste by a factor of 100. Instead, it would yield more short-lived fission products, which are also highly radioactive and need to be stored in an end storage site for several centuries at least. In other words, Switzerland needs its repository come what may, although the storage duration would be much shorter for the Transmutex reactors. Still, for the time being the system only exists on paper. Nuclear experts anticipate it will be fit for construction from 2035.

It would take much longer than that for a new nuclear plant to be connected to the Swiss grid. The Federal Council has in principle only decided to initiate its withdrawal from the previous withdrawal. The counterproposal will be submitted for consultation this year. The parliament will then

be able to advise on the matter from summer 2025. Even if the initiative is withdrawn, the last word will most likely remain with the electorate. The left may well call for a referendum against revoking the construction ban.

A successful outcome at the ballot-box would just create the legal conditions for new reactors. A new project would have to complete the process to obtain a general licence as well as gaining approval for building and operation. Each step in the approval process could take up to four years, so it would take 10-12 years until construction could actually begin.

Financing is another major hurdle to nuclear plant construction. The major Swiss energy companies have pointed out that the construction and operation of a new nuclear plant are not profitable under current conditions. It is practically impossible to build new reactors in other countries without state support. The pro-nuclear camp knows this and is already looking at funding programmes for renewable energies. They argue that the people and economy pay over a billion francs into the programmes every year and are thus entitled to a secure energy supply. The funds sup-

port climate-friendly energy sources, such as water, wind and solar. Atomic energy should also benefit from this funding, argue conservative energy politicians, much to the chagrin of the left, which fought for these subsidies.

The withdrawal from nuclear energy proved a protracted and laborious process. The construction of new nuclear plants, if it even happens, also looks like being far from straightforward.



For decades, demonstrations and Easter marches were part of the ongoing and impassioned debate about the pros and cons of nuclear power. Demonstration at the Gösgen (canton of Solothurn) plant on 25 January 1976. Photo: Keystone

struction of cooling towers. Resistance initially arose in the Basel region against the construction of the Kaiseraugst nuclear plant. After failing to prevent the reactor's construction by legal means, people started occupying the construction site. A mass rally in 1975 saw 15,000 people converge on the site. Taking the fight to the streets ultimately led to the abandonment of the Kaiseraugst project. Fierce opposition to nuclear power stations also emerged during the mid-1970s. A number of anti-atom initiatives were presented to the people but narrowly failed to pass at the ballot box. The non-nuclear camp did experience success in 1990 following the Chernobyl reactor accident, when the public voted for a ten-year moratorium on the construction of new nuclear plants. However, this was not long enough to bring about consensus on the nuclear energy issue. It was not until 2017 that 58 per cent of the electorate approved the phasing out of nuclear power and the energy transition. (CF)

From Easter marches to opting out of nuclear energy

Opposition to atomic energy goes back a long way in Switzerland. It started at the end of the 1950s and culminated in the electorate approving the energy transition several decades later. The first protesters were pacifists and churchgoers opposing the Federal Council's call for the country to acquire nuclear weapons. The annual Easter marches spawned new types of protest. 1969 was something of a milestone

with the entry into operation of Switzerland's first nuclear power plant in Beznau (canton of Aargau) and the serious accident involving the Lucens reactor (canton of Vaud). This turned the opposition against atomic energy for peaceful purposes, albeit only to a limited extent initially. River water cooling was criticised for overheating the water, as was – by the landscape preservation lobby – the con-