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Germany's reaction to the accident at the nuclear power plant in Japan

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On 14 March, Chancellor Angela Merkel announced a three-month moratorium on extending the period of operation of nuclear reactors in Germany. A day later, a decision to temporarily shut down seven of the seventeen oldest working nuclear power plants in Germany. These decisions were made in response to the enormous public unrest resulting from the damage at the nuclear power plant in Japan as well as to demonstrations from opponents of nuclear power in Germany and pressure from the opposition, which is demanding the closure of the plants as soon as possible. The actions taken by the government at the present stage are mainly a PR trick aimed primarily at calming the nervous public reaction before parliamentary elections in three federal states, which are due to be held this March. If the situation in Japan seriously deteriorates, the German government will probably be gradually withdrawing its support for the nuclear energy sector. This will require a modification of the German energy strategy, which was adopted in 2010. However, if the emergency in Japan is quickly brought under control, the German government is likely to return to the situation existing before the present crisis and at the same time impose stricter safety standards. A bigger threat to the future of the German nuclear power sector is still posed by the verdict of the Constitutional Court, which will determine whether the decision to extend the operation of the nuclear power plants in Germany was legal. The present situation may make judges of the Constitutional Court more inclined to take a negative decision.

Nuclear power – a sensitive issue in Germany

Opposing nuclear energy in Germany is one of the key issues on the agenda of the Green Party and the SPD. When these two parties were in a government coalition, decisions were taken to withdraw from the use of nuclear power in Germany, to close power plants and increase the share of energy produced using renewable sources in the energy balance of Germany. This met the expectations of the public halfway, 41% of whom (a survey conducted in 2005) wanted a complete withdrawal from the use of nuclear energy. Although the number of nuclear energy supporters has increased to over 80% (a survey conducted in 2010) during the rule of the CDU, the CSU and the FDP – the parties which traditionally favour the nuclear sector – fears of the possible consequences of the plants' failure are still alive. According to results of a public opinion poll conducted after the accident in Japan, more than 70% of the respondents believe that a similar disaster may happen in Germany. Negative sentiments are manifested through demonstrations of the opponents of nuclear energy, which have been held in many regions of Germany over the past few days. These are

being used by the Green Party and the SPD in the campaign preceding the March elections to the parliaments of Saxony-Anhalt, Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate.

German politicians are reacting nervously

Extending the period of operation of nuclear reactors was among the promises the CDU, the CSU and the FDP made during the election campaign. The government energy strategy, adopted in 2010, provides for extending the period of operation of the seventeen plants still working by twelve years on average, and at the same time increasing the significance of renewable energy sources. The government coalition is of the opinion that nuclear power, being a relatively cheap technology, is inevitable to keep the energy-consuming German economy competitive. Five federal states co-governed by the SPD on 28 February contested the amendment of the law extending the work of nuclear power plants at the Constitutional Court, indicating formal errors in the legislative process. The court is expected to announce its verdict in 2011. The anxiety caused by the power plant's failure in Japan, which is being fomented in the German media in an extreme way, has been used by politicians from the SPD. The prime minister of Brandenburg, which borders on Poland, and the spokesperson for Berlin's parliament appealed to Poland to withdraw from its plans to build a nuclear power plant. The Japanese catastrophe will certainly be used also in the more distant future by local German politicians, who have for a long time opposed the idea of Poland having a nuclear power plant.

The government announced the moratorium in response to the accident at the nuclear power plant in Japan not because it no longer believed that the use of nuclear power as an interim technology (between the traditional and the renewable sources) was reasonable. It did so primarily to show that the government coalition can respond quickly and also to calm public unrest before the elections in Baden-Württemberg, where four active power plants operate. This is a key federal state for the CDU, who fear they could be forced to relinquish power to the SPD and the Green Party as a result of the elections. The government is assuring that the three-month moratorium will be used to check additionally whether each of the reactors is safe and to develop a risk analysis. Furthermore, actions will be taken during this period to check the opportunities of switching the German economy to using energy from renewable sources.

Aside from the moratorium, the German government has also responded to the disaster in Japan by temporarily closing the seven oldest nuclear plants, which was agreed between the central government and the prime ministers of the federal states where the power plants are located. The prime minister of Baden-Württemberg, Stefan Mappus (CDU), has additionally announced that block I, which was built in 1975, at the Neckarwestheim power plant located in this state will not be put into operation again after the three months.
The energy corporations which own the German power plans (E.On, RWE, EnBW and Vattenfall) have promised to close the plants in the next few days. Additional checks of the condition and safety of the reactors will be carried out in the meantime. The suspension of the reactors' operation will result in a reduction of budget revenues (a tax of 145 euros per gram of burnt fuel was imposed on power plant owners, which was to yield annual revenues of 2.3 billion euros). Electricity prices will also rise in Germany as a result.

The European Commissioner for Energy, Günther Oettinger, responded to the events in Japan by convening an emergency meeting of energy ministers of EU member states on 15 March. In effect of the meeting, a proposal was made to carry out voluntary additional safety tests by the member states in whose territories nuclear power plants are located. The test criteria are to be developed by June 2011. The meeting was of a consultative character since only the member states have the competences to decide on their respective nuclear sectors.

The consequences of the moratorium

If any irregularities are discovered in the operation of the oldest plants during the control, they will probably not be switched on again. However, if they pass the tests and the situation in Japan is brought under control quickly, the moratorium announced by Chancellor Angela Merkel will not change the German government's approach to nuclear energy in a radical way. This is an effect of not only the undertakings made in the adopted energy strategy but also of the special characteristics of the German economy. Many of the ambitious goals the German government has set for itself will be impossible to achieve without using nuclear energy. According to the strategy's guidelines, CO_2 emission is to be reduced by 2020 by 40% in comparison to 1990. Furthermore, if this source of energy were no longer in use, electricity prices would rise for a long time, and a more rapid increase in the share of alternative energy sources in the general energy balance of Germany would be very expensive and would certainly require imposing additional levies on citizens. Another risk which a more rapid closure of active reactors could pose would be problems with ensuring energy stability in Germany and the need to import energy from other counties on a larger scale. These arguments were reflected in Chancellor Merkel's speech, who said while announcing the moratorium that a total withdrawal from the use of nuclear power in Germany was impossible.