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Berlin under pressure ahead of energy summit



Berlin is deciding the future of Germany's nuclear power plants

Ahead of Sunday's energy summit in Berlin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's support for extending the life of nuclear power plants has come up against strong resistance from green campaigners and the opposition.

The energy policies of Germany's ruling coalition have come under increased scrutiny and fire just as Angela Merkel was preparing to meet colleagues to discuss the burning issue of prolonging the operations of the country's remaining nuclear power plants.

Speaking to the Berlin radio station RBB Inforadio on Saturday, September 4, the chairman of the opposition Social Democrats (SPD), Sigmar Gabriel, claimed that policy was being "strongly politically influenced" by major energy companies.

"I know of no government in the past, that so openly and boldly represents the interests of a tiny part of the economy," Gabriel said.

He added it was clear Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) and her coalition partners Free Democrat (FDP) would want to extend the lifeline of old nuclear plants as they were electorally backed by the four biggest energy giants.

The German chancellor, on the other hand, has argued that keeping Germany's nuclear plants running is indispensable during a transition to renewable sources.

"As a bridging technology, until we have really reached the age of renewable energy, nuclear energy is necessary and sensible," Merkel said earlier in the week.

What next?



In 2002, the then-ruling coalition of Social Democrats and Greens passed a law that said all of Germany's nuclear power plants were due to go off line by 2022 at the latest.

This Sunday, Merkel's cabinet is meeting with business leaders to hammer out a new energy strategy. Germany has 17 nuclear power plants, but it is not certain how many would be given extensions if one was granted.

The Greens are long-time opponents to nuclear power

Even within her own ranks, however, Merkel is struggling to keep control of different factions. Rainer Bruederle from the FDP has argued nuclear runtimes should be extended up to 20 years, whereas Environment Minister Norbert Roettgen has pressed for a shorter, 10-year extension.

EU intervention?

Meanwhile, the environmental organization Greenpeace said that any extension of the lifespan of nuclear plants needs to be approved by the European Commission.



Merkel claims the nuclear extension is only to cover until renewable sources are ready

They argue that according to the Euratom treaty, a decision like this has to be weighed up with the consequences for other member states too.

There is an additional legal doubt that has been raised by Germany's interior and justice ministries that any extension of more than 10 years could be illegal if not approved by the Bundesrat, the German government's upper house of parliament that represents Germany's 16 states.

Nine out of 16 German states oppose the extension, including Hamburg, Thuringia and Saarland which are led by Merkel's own Christian Democrats.

Ministers from both North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate have said that they will press for a judicial review in Germany's Constitutional Court, if the government goes ahead without Bundesrat approval.

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