

Ms. von der Leyen and Nuclear Power?

The speech delivered in Paris on March 10 at the Nuclear Summit by the President of the European Commission is full of insights. Will it also lead to concrete actions?

The speech, notably echoing almost verbatim the recent analysis by German Chancellor Merz, declares that the European Union's withdrawal from nuclear energy over the past several years has been *a serious strategic error*. Driven, among others, by Germany, the anti-nuclear green diktat has indeed become law, first at the Commission which proposes, then at the Council and the European Parliament which decide. The focus was on renewables supplemented by cheap Russian gas. The 2022 Ukrainian crisis shook things up. REPowerEU was supposed to change the game. In reality, the push for renewables has accelerated significantly, with gas coming from other suppliers, particularly American and Qatari liquefied natural gas, which is much more expensive and far worse for the climate and the environment. And when it is shale gas, it is worth remembering that its extraction is in fact prohibited in most European countries. But no worries, the use of gas was considered a temporary measure, pending the magical arrival of a fully renewable energy system or carbon capture and storage. Nuclear power wasn't part of the plan or it was relegated to the margins. It, too, was considered temporary, as stated in the taxonomy. It is clear that after the Russian warning, it took the Middle Eastern crisis to awaken consciences and encourage open discussion, leading to a belated recognition of irresponsible illusions. But is this widely acknowledged and accepted?

Ms. von der Leyen's figures regarding nuclear power's contribution to electricity consumption in the EU are worth analysing. She mentions a contribution of one-third in the past, which is correct for the period between approximately 1990 and 2010, with 140 GW installed at that time. She goes on to indicate *only* about 15% today. This figure is incorrect; it is 22-23% with 100 GW installed. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the word "only," was used even though it was not in the speech prepared by the Commission services. Could this "only" be meant to mean too little?

This leads us to the PINC, the Nuclear Illustrative Programme, a document published by the Commission on March 10, 2026, the day of the Nuclear Summit, proposing an intermediate scenario for 2050 with 150 GW of nuclear power. If we estimate that electricity consumption will double by then, this would indeed correspond to approximately 15%, a figure used by the Commission in its Green Deal since 2018. Can we infer from Ms. von der Leyen's speech that 15% nuclear power will not be sufficient? In that case, we at SLC would fully agree.

Other items of the speech are also worth noting. On several occasions, emphasizing the necessary combination of low-carbon electricity production means, Ms. von der Leyen cited nuclear power first, followed by renewables. This is remarkable in a speech by the President of the European Commission. Could it be that she was thus indicating the order of priorities for the institution she leads?

For the rest of her speech, she focused primarily on Small Reactors (SMRs) and Fusion, mentioning a €200 million guarantee fund (until 2028) for SMRs and €5 billion for Fusion. Here, the priorities do not seem judicious to us. Without wanting to underestimate the potential of SMRs, and therefore acknowledging that the figures indicated could be reversed if we want to deploy them quickly, priority must first be given to extending the lifespan of existing large reactors and building a fleet to replace them within the next 10 to 20 years. Conditions must be urgently established, including at the European level, to encourage the necessary investments, and the overall target should be not 150 GW of nuclear capacity but at least twice that, in order to reach 30% of electricity from nuclear, decarbonized, and dispatchable energy by 2050 in the European Union, while leaving each Member State free to choose its energy mix as stipulated in the Treaty.

Yet, in recent months and weeks in Brussels, there has been a flurry of European initiatives which, broadly speaking, remain within the framework of the Green Deal and can be summarized as follows: we need to decarbonize (zero emissions by 2050), therefore we need to electrify (double our capacity by 2050), therefore we need to accelerate the deployment of renewables... all of which is already a given... and, as we seem to be discovering, we also need to massively develop storage, electricity transmission and distribution networks, and dynamic demand management. Nuclear power? Yes, well, for those who want it, but overall, it will arrive far too slowly and cost far too much.

At the same time, to the use of magic words like “technological neutrality,” continues suggesting fair treatment between renewables and nuclear power, while maintaining that dispatchable power sources must necessarily be flexible to adapt to the intermittency of renewables. This already corresponds to the market organization based on a merit order determined by the marginal cost of production, without consideration for the system costs generated by intermittency. The "flexibility" condition recently imposed by the Commission on Poland for granting it state aid for the construction of its first nuclear power plant sets a precedent that could have detrimental consequences for future nuclear investments. Since these investments are highly capital-intensive, they can only be justified if the facilities operate most of the time; simply put, in baseload mode.

There is still a long way to go before we can hope to see the Commission President's speech translated into concrete actions that will truly promote nuclear power, as stated in the Euratom Treaty and in accordance with the Lisbon Treaty, recognizing its full value for a future decarbonized, affordable, and reliable electricity mix, serving European

society, its citizens, and its businesses. To achieve this, it will be necessary to recognize and affirm:

- that depending on gas imports, wherever they come from, is a peril for the European Union and a major handicap in global competition,

- that extending the long term operation of existing power plants is the most economical way to produce decarbonized electricity and that they must therefore be maintained safely,

- that the planned 80-year lifespan of new reactors means that an investment today, even if it is large, should be considered a major asset for future generations,

- that nuclear power is and will remain very capital-intensive, even in the case of SMRs, and that therefore it must operate as much as possible as baseload power to ensure its economic return. This nullifies the option to force nuclear power to be flexible and step aside in favour of renewable energy production when it is present,

- that therefore, the priorities set in 2018 by the Green Deal must be reversed. As stated in Ms. Von der Leyen's speech, priority must be given to nuclear power, which, to be clear, does not mean that renewables are unnecessary, but rather that we must stop focusing solely on them because "they are for free", - ou : "their production comes at no cost" while obscuring their essential support infrastructure (storage, grids, demand management, and flexibility) with a "simple solution" approach.

- that, this shift in priorities automatically requires a structural overhaul of the electricity market, particularly the merit order.

- that, it is therefore of the utmost urgency to do what should have been done long ago but has been deliberately ignored: an economic study of the total costs of the electricity system, with proper allocation of these costs to those who generate them. Storage costs, and to a large extent grid and flexibility costs as well, are due to intermittency. Those who are responsible for it must bear the costs.

- Finally, that it is crucial to prevent lobbies who directly benefit from energy policy choices dictate terms in Brussels, whether they are on the production, storage, or grid side. Their influence can be gauged by reading between the lines of the ENTSO-E report on the Spanish blackout, a model of a political report that skirts around the issue without explicitly stating it.

Will the European institutions, primarily the Commission, rise to the challenge?

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