

Europe Should Sanction Russia's Nuclear Industry – Now

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A cooling tower at the Emsland nuclear power plant in Lingen, Germany. **Olivier MORIN / AFP**

The Russian nuclear industry has once again managed to avoid inclusion in the latest round of EU sanctions – the eighth in a row to skirt this vital issue in an apparent acknowledgment that Europe's dependence on Russian nuclear fuel cannot easily be reversed.

Since the start of the war in February, the media has been so focused on Russian fossil fuels, particularly natural gas, that it has avoided any discussion of Europe's nuclear dependence on Russia completely. However, the topic can no longer be safely ignored.

The Kremlin has already earned several hundred billion dollars so far this year by selling fossil fuels to Europe, a financial cushion that has allowed Moscow to fund its horrific war in Ukraine. While Europe is less reliant on Russia supplying its atomic energy sector than it is its fossil fuel sector, the dependence of the European atomic energy industry on Russian nuclear fuel is as surprising as it is alarming.

Much work has gone into weaning Europe off Russian fossil fuels, with time being of the essence as Brussels seeks to curtail Moscow's lucrative revenue streams as quickly and as comprehensively as possible. However, its nuclear industry has not yet been the focus of any such efforts.

Russian sales of nuclear fuel to the EU earn the Kremlin far less than its fossil fuel exports do, and some Western politicians have used that to justify a lack of resolve in the EU to sanction Moscow's nuclear industry. But the amount the industry makes for the Kremlin coffers is beside the point now, as Europe's dependence on the Russian nuclear industry has become more of a security concern than a financial one.

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There are 18 Russian nuclear reactors in operation in the EU: in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Finland. Russia supplies the nuclear fuel they require and there is no alternative supplier. In addition to that, Russia's atomic energy agency Rosatom supplies uranium to French company Framatome, which operates a nuclear fuel facility in the German town of Lingen. Despite protests against the continued delivery of Russian uranium last month, the facility's owner said it would continue to work with Russia – and the German government admitted it was powerless to prevent it from doing so.

Framatome provides nuclear fuel to nearly all Western European countries with a nuclear power sector. In total, Russia supplies 20% of the uranium consumed in Europe. Almost the same amount comes from Kazakhstan, where uranium production remains effectively under Moscow's control.

France has not made a single move to limit its cooperation with Rosatom, which goes far deeper than just fuel production. The French-made Arabelle turbines, as well as instrumentation and control systems produced jointly by Siemens and Framatome that are essential for new nuclear reactors, are still available to Russian customers. Hungary plans to build two new Russian nuclear reactors, and will use these components if its plans go ahead. In this case, it is Russia who is dependent on Europe, not vice versa – but still no sanctions apply.

Russia's attitude towards nuclear power has been clearly demonstrated by the occupation of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant where Russian forces have taken local staff hostage. The plant itself has become an instrument of war, putting Europe on the brink of a new nuclear disaster potentially more dangerous than Chernobyl.

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If the bloody and barbaric Russian war in Ukraine teaches us anything, it is that Russian President Vladimir Putin is out of control and negotiating with him is inherently futile. Anyone in any way dependent on Russia can be sure that Putin will find a way to use that dependence to his advantage.

By maintaining their nuclear dependence on Russia, European countries are making a very big mistake. They seem to believe they can find a way to deal with Putin to secure further nuclear supplies.

But Putin is not Santa Claus and Rosatom was not created to serve Europe. It is the geopolitical arm of the Kremlin – that's why all its foreign contracts for new reactors, including the deal in Hungary, are paid for from the coffers of the Russian state. Europe's dependence on the Russian nuclear industry was actually engineered to weaken Europe and bring it under Russian influence.

Weaning Europe off its dependence on Russia's nuclear industry will be a struggle and won't happen on its own. But choosing to ignore an obvious security threat in a sector as sensitive as nuclear power would be foolhardy in the extreme. European governments must take action.

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