



Directorate of Intelligence

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European Review

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23 May 1986

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Articles

Europe, West and East: Chernobyl Disaster Will Slow Some Nuclear Programs [redacted]

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Not unexpectedly, the explosion of the Soviet Union's nuclear power facility at Chernobyl is generating contrasting official and public reactions in the two Europes. In the West, the disaster has revitalized antinuclear movements and forced most governments to reexamine the future of their nuclear programs. Leaders there will have to contend with the general public's heightened alarm over safety standards, which in some countries will mean delaying construction of planned new plants. Nuclear safety also is already becoming a heated issue in election campaigns, and environmentalist parties seem likely to strengthen their support. In the East, the accident also has aroused popular anxieties, but—apart from Yugoslavia—environmentalist groups are small and have virtually no influence with the ruling Communist parties, and the regimes have long-term commitments to nuclear power as a major means of coping with their chronic energy shortages. [redacted]

Western Europe

In Scandinavia, where evidence of the accident materialized days before the Soviet acknowledgment, reactions have been of mixed intensity. Stockholm and Copenhagen both described Moscow's withholding of information as irresponsible and dangerous. Sweden reaffirmed previous plans to gradually phase out its 12 nuclear power plants by the year 2010 and promised to reassess its entire energy program in response to strong public reaction to the Chernobyl disaster. Even before the accident, a new law had been proposed to ban further construction of nuclear power plants as the government sought to demonstrate its commitment to a 1980 nuclear referendum decision. In Denmark, the government has demanded that Sweden shut down its Barseback plant on the grounds that the safety of thousands of Danes living just across the border from the facility is

in jeopardy. Finland, which has been considering the purchase of a third nuclear plant from the Soviets, may now scuttle the project. [redacted]

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The US Embassy in The Hague reported that continuing controversy over nuclear power in the Netherlands has been heightened by the Chernobyl incident. A long-awaited parliamentary debate on sites for two new Dutch plants—scheduled for mid-May—has been delayed indefinitely pending a thorough analysis of the Soviet accident. Labor Party leader den Uyl, anxious to capitalize on the heightened antinuclear sentiment in the 21 May national elections, went further and pledged to cancel all Dutch plans for expanding the nuclear power program. At the same time, Prime Minister Lubbers confided to the US Ambassador that the Chernobyl accident had also seriously eroded support for the nuclear program among the conservative Christian Democrats, making it unlikely that any new government will tackle the nuclear question for many months. [redacted]

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Repercussions are also being felt in the United Kingdom, where the Thatcher government had an ambitious development program and was hoping to obtain parliamentary approval for four new nuclear waste disposal sites and for a new \$2 billion pressurized water reactor at Sizewell. According to press reports, public pressure since the Chernobyl accident has already forced London to drop plans for the new sites while it undertakes a major review of the nation's nuclear waste disposal strategy. Further actions on the Sizewell facility or any other nuclear programs in Britain also are likely to be stalled. Leaders of both the Labor Party and SDP/Liberal

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Alliance must now respond to growing grassroots opposition to nuclear power projects, and the Tories also must work out emerging new disputes—most blatantly the one between Energy Secretary Walker and Minister for the Environment Waldegrave over the need for nuclear power development versus issues of environmental safety. [redacted]

In West Germany, a recent poll found that fully one-third of the respondents had changed their views on the use of nuclear energy since the accident. That issue also has entered the domestic political scene, with the Social Democrats pledging to make nuclear energy a focus of their campaign in the Lower Saxony state election in June. In contrast to the Christian Democrats' staunch support for nuclear industry, Gerhard Schroeder, the SPD's leading candidate there, claims he will treat the poll as a popular referendum on the industry's future in the state. Most observers also expect the antinuclear Greens to reap electoral benefits from the accident in a series of local and state elections this year and possibly in the national election next January. [redacted]

In Italy, the Chernobyl accident is invigorating an aggressive and well-organized antinuclear lobby in its attempts to convince Rome to abandon plans to construct three new nuclear power plants. The government has ordered that work on two projects in Lombardy and Puglia be postponed indefinitely. In addition, municipal authorities at Trino Vercellese—site of the next scheduled nuclear power station—have asked the national electricity agency, ENEL, to postpone site preparations until new safety standards can be established. For most Italians, the Soviet disaster amplifies a longstanding wariness of nuclear energy. Nearly 80,000 people joined in an antinuclear demonstration on 10 May, and a recent poll conducted by a leading newspaper found that 79 percent of those questioned oppose construction of new plants. Although most parties in Italy's coalition government have voiced support for a nuclear energy program, Prime Minister Craxi's Socialist Party has asked for a national referendum on the issue, and the large Communist Party also has demanded a parliamentary debate. [redacted]

Political fallout in France from the Chernobyl accident thus far has been minimal, and we doubt that the incident will have a significant impact on the nation's nuclear program. France depends more heavily than any other West European country on nuclear power for electricity—about 65 percent of its power is currently nuclear generated—and the public generally has been supportive of the nuclear industry. Moreover, the French have great trust in their technology and are confident that French safety standards far exceed those of the Soviet Union. Paris is also loath to publicize the dangers of nuclear energy because it is relying increasingly on nuclear technology exports to make its industry more cost effective. [redacted]

Eastern Europe

Although the Chernobyl accident has stirred up widespread anxiety in most of the East Bloc, environmental movements there are small by Western standards and have little if any influence on the ruling Communist parties. Moscow's CEMA allies almost certainly will remain committed to expanded use of nuclear power because they lack adequate reserves of clean-burning fossil fuels. [redacted]

Environmentalist concerns over the danger of nuclear power have never had much influence on the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe. The latter view their small environmental movements suspiciously and subject them to police harassment and media scorn. Nuclear power tends to be regarded as a virtually inexhaustible energy source free of the environmental pollution created by other energy sources and a means to more economic independence. Only Yugoslavia has an influential antinuclear movement with prominent national and local leaders who argue openly that because of the dangers and economic costs of nuclear power other energy sources should be developed first. [redacted]

Nonetheless, most official East Bloc commentaries justifying government commitments to nuclear programs in the wake of Chernobyl have struck defensive tones and attempted to reduce popular

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anxiety about the safety of reactors. Initially, they followed the Soviet line by playing down the seriousness of the accident. This tack was abandoned when the Soviets themselves began to release more information on the disaster. Since then, the media—particularly in Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia—have stressed the benefits of nuclear power and emphasized the safety and advanced technological features of their own reactors. [redacted]

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In Yugoslavia, however, the Republic of Croatia has questioned the need for nuclear power and deleted any commitment to nuclear energy from its 1986-90 development plan. The decision postpones at least temporarily earlier plans to build a \$2.5 billion nuclear plant near Zagreb. [redacted]

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Over the longer term, the Chernobyl disaster almost certainly will encourage East European governments to improve the safety of their nuclear reactors and make them more mindful of the need to locate their plants farther away from heavily populated areas. Such actions would increase the costs of nuclear power and perhaps stimulate arguments for slowing down the pace of construction. While such an outcome seems unlikely given Eastern Europe's lack of alternatives, the probability would increase if popular anxiety over safety mobilizes effective dissidence—and if oil prices remain at their current low levels. [redacted]

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