Political support for nuclear power in Central Europe

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Abstract: Since the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan, nuclear energy has been under increased media scrutiny. The focus is mainly on Germany and the radical transformation of the position on nuclear energy in that country. To understand and potentially predict the development, however, the situation needs to be viewed from a wider Central European perspective. Polarisation of countries’ attitudes towards nuclear energy is characteristic of the Central European space. In post-communist countries there is no relevant political opposition to constructing nuclear power plants, whereas all political parties in Austria, and now in Germany as well, are strictly anti-nuclear. The paper presents seven hypotheses explaining this situation. Roots are sought in the past, in the nationalisation of the issue, in endeavours to produce environmentally-friendly energy, in the imperatives of energy security, etc. Importance of nuclear energy for the respective countries’ power production, and public opinion on this issue are also briefly analysed.

Keywords: nuclear power; political support; nationalisation; securitisation; public opinion; environmental policy; anti-nuclear movement; Central Europe; Fukushima.


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1 Political support for nuclear power in Central Europe

Nuclear power occupies a very specific position in Central Europe. On the one hand, we have in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic examples of countries where Nuclear Power Plants (NPPs) produce between a third and a half of all electricity generated and these countries thus rank among those most reliant upon nuclear power globally. Support for nuclear energy is stable among both the general public and the political parties in these states. On the other hand, one country in the region, Austria, strictly refuses nuclear energy, and this not only affects domestic politics but also an important component in the country’s foreign policy. The dominant actor in the region, Germany, has changed its position on nuclear power several times already. The March 2011 Tsunami and subsequent nuclear accident in Japan affected Germany indirectly, yet profoundly.

This paper seeks to analyse the political support for nuclear power in Central Europe and the conflict potential of this phenomenon. Above all we will look into the possible causes of the very different attitudes to nuclear energy in this comparatively small region. In order to dedicate ourselves fully to this goal, we will first briefly analyse the importance of nuclear power in the energy mix of the Central European countries. We will also note the opinions on this issue among the general public, emphasising analysis of political support for and opposition against nuclear power. After analysing the positions of the political parties in the individual countries, we will articulate several explanatory hypotheses – why in some countries support for nuclear power is very strong, whilst in other countries of the same region opposition against nuclear power is among the strongest in the world?

Only very limited effort has been made hitherto to answer these questions. Within the Central European space the attitudes of the individual countries towards nuclear power are taken as a given. Outside the region a simplified perception biased by the strong Austrian anti-nuclear rhetoric prevails. Current developments in Germany are closely observed; as following the Fukushima disaster the issue of nuclear power dominates the political sphere and substantially influences election results. Many analysts ask whether the developments in Germany will be followed by other countries that employ nuclear power. Understanding the specifics of the individual countries therefore seems highly relevant. In addition, we must bear in mind that in the Central European region in particular, the question of generating power is a very sensitive one, given how closely connected it is with central issues in security and geopolitics. Changes in nuclear policy will not only influence the availability and prices of energy, but they can increase or decrease the influence of the Russian Federation, a country which understands raw resources for energy generation as one of the power tools with which it can exert influence on its proximate and distant neighbours in the long term. Furthermore, as we shall see, in some countries stance towards nuclear power has become an important part of national identity. The complex character of a seemingly narrow and specific topic thus represents an interesting theoretical and practical challenge.

2 Importance of nuclear energy in power generation in Central European countries

At the outset we need to briefly analyse the importance of nuclear energy for the individual countries in the region. Of the total energy production, the share produced in
NPPs, i.e. the importance of nuclear power in the overall energy mix, provides a suitable criterion here. If we also want to emphasise the great inertia caused by the long time it takes for new NPPs to be constructed, this indicator must also be evaluated in the long term and trends estimated. Obviously, the Fukushima events totally preclude simply extrapolating from the existing trends in the individual countries; rather, interpretation of data must proceed with caution. For that matter, we will look into the directions that future developments might take later in the paper.

At the end of 2009 Slovakia was the country with the highest share of nuclear power, and is in fact one of the three countries most reliant on nuclear energy globally.\(^2\) In Hungary, Slovenia and the Czech Republic, the role of nuclear energy is also substantial. The share of nuclear energy in countries where it is used is around 27.5%, making all of these countries more or less above average. Germany, with 26.1%, is rather average in this respect. The great opposition to nuclear energy in Austria seems permanent\(^1\) and substantial changes in this regard are not expected. On the other hand, Poland has been considering the construction of a new NPP for the last couple of years in an attempt to limit the hitherto dominant share of coal power plants which excessively burden the environment, and to limit the country’s dependence on energy raw materials from the Russian Federation (STRATFOR, 2011).

There were no substantial changes in any of the countries in the past decade. In Germany, the importance of nuclear power has been diminishing relatively (by about 5% in the past decade), however, the shutdown of seven reactors in March 2011 has substantially decreased the production of energy from nuclear sources by about 41%. The Czech Republic had the biggest increase since 1999, which is caused primarily by the opening of two new blocks at the NPP Temelín.

The future of nuclear energy is fundamentally shaped not only by constructing new power plants, but also by increasing the lifespan of existing facilities. In Hungary the decision has been made to increase the working life of all the blocks at the NPP Paks by 20 years, the Czech NPP Dukovany has already been modernised and its functioning up to 2040 (i.e. doubling of the working life) seems certain (International Energy Agency, 2010, p.112). In Germany the policy on continued use of NPPs has been changed several times already; the coalition government of SPD and the Greens initially decided that all NPPs will be gradually decommissioned, the conservatives then overturned this policy (Black, 2009); however, the Fukushima events and the pressure exerted by sections of the public led to the immediate shutdown of the oldest reactors in March 2011.\(^4\)

Increase importance of nuclear power is expected in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. In Poland and Slovenia the final decision is yet to be made, but certain steps, and not only formal ones, have been taken. Austria will probably keep its nuclear-free status and in Germany the discussion in the long term has been about extending or not extending the lifespan of existing facilities. Serious-minded proposals that new NPPs should be constructed do not appear.

3 **Public opinion and nuclear power before Fukushima**

Thanks to the regular polls carried out by Eurobarometer (2008, 2010), the methods of which are unified across the EU, public attitudes towards nuclear power in the individual countries can be compared relatively easily. Eurobarometer measurements will thus constitute the focal point of this section.
Public opinion polls on nuclear energy focus on multiple issues – perceptions of nuclear power production safety, opinions on nuclear waste and its disposal, attitudes towards expanding the life cycle of older reactors, etc. In this paper, we will mainly follow the general attitudes towards nuclear power with the aim of establishing the prevailing patterns in the countries examined.

The general attitude towards nuclear energy in the countries studied was explored by Eurobarometer in 2009. Eurobarometer asked whether the share of NPPs in the production of electricity should change. Great support for increasing the share or maintaining it at the present level was witnessed in all post-communist countries; in Germany and Austria, contrariwise, the support for increasing the share or keeping it as it is relatively small.

Europe-wide comparison can also be interesting. Are countries of Central Europe rather sceptical in their attitudes towards nuclear energy, or the opposite? The EU-wide statistics from 2009 shows that support for increasing the share of nuclear energy is far below the European average in Austria and Germany, about average in Slovenia, and highly above average in the remaining Central European countries, in Poland in fact the highest of the whole of Europe.

Conversely, opposition to nuclear energy is highest in Austria where more than twice as many people as the European average believe that the share of nuclear power in generating electricity should decrease. Opposition is also strong in Germany, while in the other countries of the region the percentage of respondents in favour of decreasing the share of nuclear power was lower than the European average.

Measurements of the perception of nuclear power stations carried out by Eurobarometer can serve us as an example of the trend preceding the Fukushima disaster. In all countries observed (including Austria and Germany!), with the exception of Hungary, the general support for nuclear energy increased between 2005 and 2008. The probable causes of these shifts will be discussed below.

4 Political opposition to nuclear energy

The main theme of this paper is the analysis of political opposition to nuclear energy. We will be interested primarily in the positions of all relevant political parties. The criterion of relevance we will adopt, however imperfect, will be the success of the party in the last election of the national legislative body. We will focus on all parties which managed to cross the electoral threshold. Tangentially, we will also deal with other parties which did not fulfil this basic requirement – for instance, the pronouncedly anti-nuclear Czech Green Party was represented in the country’s Chamber of Deputies only for one term and lost its parliamentary representation in 2010. Nevertheless, the party had been influencing Czech energy policy for four years.

4.1 The Czech Republic

All of the political parties currently represented in the parliament’s lower chamber currently support the use of nuclear energy. The parties of the right, ODS and TOP09, are in favour of increasing the share of nuclear energy in electricity generation. Similarly the Social Democrats (ČSSD) demand that the nuclear programme continues, although voices have appeared subsequent to the Fukushima disaster demanding a careful review (Parlamentní listy, 2011). Electoral programmes of Public Affairs (VV) and the
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) likewise declare their support for extending the NPPs. We thus see almost unqualified support for the expansion of NPP Temelín and for potential further plans to enlarge nuclear generating capacities.

The Czech Republic is unique in the context of post-communist countries by the success of the Green Party in the 2006 parliamentary election (Hloušek and Kopeček, 2010, p.102). It’s a gain of 6.3% of the vote, and its participation in the coalition government created after the election, represent the first substantial breakthrough for a politically represented green movement in the former communist space. The success was not repeated in the 2010 election, and the impact of the Green Party was thus rather episodic.

In terms of the Green Party’s attitude to nuclear energy, it has been endeavouring to limit nuclear generating capacities and their shutdown at the end of their life cycle (Strana zelených, 2010, pp.20–21). Interestingly, in a March 2009 opinion poll 56% of the party’s electorate supported the construction of new blocks at Temelin. The spell of the Green Party in the government did not have a substantial effect on nuclear energy generation. The coalition government policy statement, it is true, included the clause that “the government will not plan and support the construction of new nuclear blocks” (Vláda ČR, 2007), but the Green Party protested in no way whatsoever to the opening of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the proposed enlargement of NPP Temelín (Musilová, 2008). The process of increasing the share of nuclear energy in Czech power generation was thus not in fact slowed down.

4.2 Hungary

In the April 2010 parliamentary election, the conservative party FIDESZ obtained a constitutional majority. It might seem, therefore, that any decision concerning nuclear energy’s future is solely in the hands of this party. Already during the period when the Hungarian socialists (MSZP) ruled, however, the decision had been made to construct two new nuclear blocks. The parliament voted on the new NPPs in March 2009. The result, with 330 MPs voting for the project, ten abstaining and only six against, was significant, even more so given the fact that it had been made at the peak of a political crisis. Only a few days earlier, the grave economic situation in the country forced the prime minister Gyurcsány to resign, and a tough battle over the proposal was to have been expected, given the heightened rhetoric at the time (Polanecký and Haverkamp, 2011, p.6).

The 2009 vote in parliament was by no means unique, as the plan to extend the lifespan of existing facilities attracted similarly wide support in 2005, reaching 96.9% voting for the proposal (MVM Group, 2011). All of this points to a wide and solid political consensus on this issue. The general public, however, is not quite as convinced of nuclear energy’s advantages, which is one of the reasons for András Pergár’s claim that “Hungary’s energy policy has long been determined by an elusive group of politicians personally connected to leading representatives of former state-owned companies from the socialist period” (Polanecký and Haverkamp, 2011, p.27).

Political support for nuclear energy thus goes across the spectrum; the construction of new blocks at NPP Paks is supported by the conservative FIDESZ, social-democratic MSZP as well as the radical movement JOBBIK. The 2010 parliamentary election brought a change: the green party LMP won 16 seats. A force is now present in the parliament which strives to have NPPs gradually supplanted, the project of extending
their lifespan terminated, and also demands stringent control of the plants’ safety (Jávor, 2011). Question is, however, what future awaits this party whose orientation and success is often compared with the Czech Green Party and its episodic spell in the parliament. The anti-nuclear rhetoric of LMP representatives is relatively mild and always speaks only of gradual replacement of nuclear energy sources.

4.3 Germany

The position of German political parties towards nuclear energy is currently undergoing a radical transformation. As already said, the government coalition of SPD and the Greens pushed through gradual decommissioning of the NPPs. This was subsequently overturned by the new cabinet of CDU-CSU and FDP. The distribution of political forces before the Fukushima events was therefore clear; conservatives and liberals supported further use of nuclear power, whereas the social democrats, the greens and the leftist LINKE pressed for Germany’s abandonment of nuclear energy.

The current arrangement of political powers is substantially different. The conservatives with Chancellor Merkel at the helm no longer insist on extending the lifespan of the existing facilities and have pushed through a permanent shutdown of Germany’s seven oldest reactors and the gradual shutdown of the remaining NPPs. The liberals likewise changed their opinions and now also press for Germany’s gradual abandonment of nuclear power. It seems that the other parties stepped up their anti-nuclear rhetoric further: for our purposes the most important fact is that nuclear energy is losing all political support and there are no pro-nuclear parties in contemporary Germany. This finding will constitute an important point of departure for the analytical part of our paper.

4.4 Poland

There is substantial political support for nuclear energy in Poland. The ruling liberal-conservative Civic Platform (PO) supports the project of a new NPP, as does the strongest opposition party Law and Justice (PiS). The Polish People’s Party (PSL) is also for nuclear energy but pushes for a referendum on the issue (Staniszewski, 2011). For that matter, the prime minister, PO’s Donald Tusk, does not rule out the referendum (Energia News, 2011). The main party of the Left, Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), is rather sceptical of the plan to construct the NPP, but does not argue against it directly, urging a referendum on the issue.

There is therefore currently no important political opposition to nuclear energy in Poland. None of the political parties rejects the construction of the NPP. The demands for a referendum voiced by SLD and PSL could be understood as tacit expression of a negative attitude, but given the generally positive stance of the Polish public to nuclear energy, insisting on a referendum is more a gesture of self-definition against political opponents than a real endeavour to stop the NPPs’ construction.

4.5 Slovakia

Stable political support for nuclear energy can be observed in post-revolutionary Slovakia. Mečiar’s government (HZDS), for instance, guaranteed the loans necessary for the completion of the blocks in NPP Mochovice and Fico’s cabinet (SMER) lowered the
obligatory payments by operators into the fund for future decommissioning of NPPs (Polanecký and Haverkamp, 2011, pp.14–15). Although the present prime minister Radičová (SDKÚ) admits that the experience of Fukushima must be taken into account and generally moderates the very strongly pro-nuclear rhetoric of previous governments, she nevertheless supports the construction of new reactors. Her partners in the coalition, Freedom and Solidarity (SAS) and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), support the construction of new NPPs, even though SAS only supports construction of new blocks for domestic energy consumption and not for export. The specific Most–Híd party (the words are Slovak and Hungarian for ‘Bridge’) does not have an entirely clear nuclear policy, although its leaders are mostly in favour of nuclear energy and even the party’s environment minister, József Nagy, calls the nuclear power an acceptable green energy (Petková, 2011, p.5).

The radical Slovak National Party is equally in favour of nuclear energy and is probably the main proponent of Slovak ‘nuclear nationalism’.

4.6 Slovenia

Slovenia’s party system is fairly diversified (Hloušek, 2002, p.382). In the most recent parliamentary election seven political parties gained seats. Given the fact that Slovenia shares the NPP Krško with Croatia, the theme of nuclear energy occupies a somewhat specific position in the country.

At the turn of 1995 and 1996 nuclear energy was the most important topic of domestic politics. Leo Šešerko, an MP, attempted at the time to press for a referendum on decommissioning the NPP Krško, initially by trying to gather enough signatures within the parliament to call a referendum, later by initiating a public petition (Gismatullin, 2011).

The problematic period began in 1997 with the onset of a protracted dispute with Croatia over the sharing of electricity from, and the expenses for, the NPP Krško. This unique dispute substantially influenced the Slovenian discussion about nuclear power – the dominant issue became the settlement with Croatia, rather than whether nuclear energy as such should be supported or not. The dispute ended in 2003; however, the issue of where the nuclear waste dump should be was not resolved. The Slovenian Youth Party–European Greens is a noticeable presence in this discussion; interestingly, it is not against nuclear energy, but on the contrary, states that “it is necessary to decide on the waste disposal site with the authority of the government and of professionals; and it must also be built in the shortest time possible” (Stranka mladih – zeleni Evrope, 2011). It thus reacts to the fact that attempts at the highest level to find a solution to the nuclear waste problem have been unsuccessful for two decades now (Polič et al., 2006, pp.8–9).

In 2008 the present coalition government composed of the Social Democrats (SD), the Zares party and the Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS) came up with a plan to accelerate the construction of a second reactor at Krško. The second largest political party, SDS, also supports the development of nuclear energy, as do the smaller opposition parties DeSUS, SNS and SLS, which seldom make pronouncements on this topic. There was not a radical change in opinion subsequent to the Fukushima events and support for the enlargement of the plant is stable (Slovenian Press Agency, 2011).
4.7 Austria

Austria is well-known for its negative attitude towards nuclear energy, which is reflected not only in domestic politics but also influences relations with the country’s neighbours. The strongest Austrian party at present, the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), and the second strongest Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) were both in favour of constructing NPPs in the 1970s (Weisch, 1988, p.1). As we shall see, the events surrounding the completion of NPP Zwentendorf profoundly transformed the parties’ attitudes, however. All parties relevant today declare their opposition to nuclear energy. Nevertheless, one cannot speak of a purely consensual approach to this issue and of its disappearance from the political arena. Nuclear energy remains the subject of political contestation, as the political parties strive to gain voters by employing tough anti-nuclear rhetoric against other countries. In December 2000, for instance, the Chancellor Schussel (ÖVP) agreed to sign the Melk Protocol regulating relations between Austria and Czech Republic as far as the Temelín NPP is concerned. After signing the agreement, a wave of criticism by SPÖ, FPÖ and the Greens against what was perceived as the dangerous and inconsistent defence of the anti-nuclear attitude of Austrian citizens descended on the ÖVP (Fawn, 2006, p.110).

Although there is therefore agreement between Austrian political parties on an anti-nuclear stance, the issue remains topical and politically sensitive, as parties argue over the most suitable defence of anti-nuclear interests in foreign policy. Recently, for instance, there has been talk of making the closure of Krško NPP a condition of Croatia’s potential accession to the EU (Bradbury, 2011).

5 Analysis of political support for nuclear energy

Perceptions of many and various things, not always directly related to nuclear energy, inform opinions on nuclear energy. A complex analysis of the reasons for political support must take into account a large number of factors. Bodansky (2003, pp.581–582) gives a concise classification of these factors. Although such classifications (see Table 1) suit the initial exploratory phase of research, they are not sufficient for a deeper analysis. In no way do they allow for the varying importance of the individual criteria and they are unable to express local differences. Specific findings about the status of nuclear energy in Central Europe from the previous section of this paper will serve as the point of departure for our analysis. These findings can be summarised into three areas.

First, in all of the post-communist countries of Central Europe there is virtually no political opposition to nuclear energy. If one can speak of political parties with anti-nuclear orientation in these countries, then those are marginal formations scoring low in elections; in addition, if they gained parliamentary seats, they did so, according to analysts, by articulating other themes. The dominant political parties in these countries are pro-nuclear.

Second, the situation in Austria is the exact mirror opposite. There is no politically backed attempt to promote nuclear energy and all political parties are anti-nuclear.

Third, the only country in the region where the anti-nuclear debate was balanced and where it was possible to clearly distinguish pro- and anti-nuclear attitudes among the dominant political actors, Germany, is now witnessing a fairly rapid transformation and approaches the Austrian model. The main reason given for this is the Fukushima nuclear
disaster. But there must be some specific factors in the German political system, which play important roles in certain parties’ turning away from nuclear energy. Otherwise one could not explain the fact that there is no similarly radical change of opinion in other countries, even though these are exposed to the media image of the nuclear disaster as much as Germany.

Table 1 Factors influencing attitudes towards nuclear energy

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<tr>
<th>Internal Factors</th>
<th>External Factors</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nuclear accidents</td>
<td>Energy and electricity demand</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reactor designs</td>
<td>Limitations on oil and gas resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Waste disposal</td>
<td>Global climate change</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resistance to proliferation and terrorism</td>
<td>Renewable energy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessments of radiation hazard</td>
<td>Fusion energy</td>
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Source: Bodansky (2003, pp.581–582)

In what follows we will attempt to formulate hypotheses explaining this specific situation. Rather than attempting a detailed analysis and going through the process of rigorous verification of hypotheses we will endeavour to present the whole spectrum of possible causes.

5.1 Why is political opposition to peaceful application of nuclear energy absent in post-communist countries?

Hypothesis 1: The communist legacy of admiration for technology and large industrial projects has survived to this day and explains public support for nuclear energy.

In all of the countries of the former Eastern bloc, glorification of large industrial projects which formed an element in the ‘construction of socialism’ was part of official propaganda. Modern technological development was understood as the tool to solve most problems and NPPs were perceived at the time as the pinnacle of technology. Does the present high degree of support for nuclear energy in the post-communist countries therefore constitute a relic of the communist era?

Such a hypothesis is often advanced within the environmental movement (for instance Polanecký and Haverkamp, 2011, p.1). Communist propaganda, they say, glorified engineers and technical intelligentsia who thus enjoy an incomparably higher prestige than academics in the humanities, and one of the reasons for that is that they were the source of hope in material progress. Under these circumstances, the expert opinion is seldom questioned; critical points of view are not expressed or are a priori judged unscientific (paraphrased according to Stropnický, 2011).

On the other hand, it is worth remembering that admiration for great technological projects was also widespread in the second half of the 20th century in democratic countries.12

Another issue with this proposition is the fact that in many respects post-communist societies managed to do away with admiration of technology damaging the environment. For example, very soon after 1989 the coal power plants began to be desulphurised and dangerous chemical facilities decommissioned.
An unfinished project of an NPP was abandoned in Poland, with public pressure playing a role in the process; the continuity of support for nuclear power was thus broken in this case. Since the turn of the century, the Poles are again beginning to consider nuclear energy generation and the causes of this would better be sought elsewhere than in a tradition of admiration for complex technology, a tradition that had been interrupted for more than a decade.

Hypothesis 2: High support for nuclear energy is the consequence of attempts at more environmentally friendly attempts to generate power.

Generally speaking the post-communist countries of Central Europe are not the main actors in pushing for lower CO₂ emissions, on either the European or global levels. Given the re-structuralisation of industry following the fall of communism, fulfilling the requirements of the Kyoto protocol will not be a substantial issue. On the other hand, local concerns about environment are often listed as reasons to support nuclear energy.

In the Czech Republic, for instance, coal is understood as a real alternative to nuclear power by politicians. Coal power plants, however, do pollute the air, the quality of which is already very bad in certain areas. In addition, the lifting of mining limits is a very controversial topic in the Czech Republic and a much more sensitive one than nuclear power. The utterance of Václav Horáček, an MP who said that “Smoking chimneys are far more dangerous than NPPs” (Pravec, 2011) expresses the attitude of the majority of Czech politicians well.

In Poland efforts to decrease environmental impact is one of the main arguments in discussions about the proposed NPP (Reuters, 2011). The dominant part of Poland’s electricity (over 90%) is generated by coal combustion and the country is striving to generate cleaner energy, for instance by employing the technology of carbon capture and storage (PowerPlantCCS, 2011), or precisely by building an NPP. According to 2009 Eurobarometer poll, 54% of Poles believes that nuclear energy helps to mitigate the global climate change (in Germany 48% and in Austria only 29% of respondents agreed) (Eurobarometer, 2010, p.14).

The contribution of nuclear energy to the quality of the environment has been persistently questioned by environmental NGOs. They say that nuclear power drains funding and capacities that could be dedicated to developing renewable sources. The main argument is obviously the environmental hazards in the event of a disaster. The zero-emission status of nuclear power is likewise questioned (Polanecký and Haverkamp, 2011, p.2).

For the purposes of this paper, it is not crucial to establish whether NPPs truly are an environmentally friendly source of energy. They are certainly understood as such in some circles and this can be one of the causes of support for nuclear power. In addition, Austria secures a significant part of its energy consumption from hydroelectric power plants, whereas post-communist countries tend to rely on coal. Understandably, then, nuclear energy can seem less environmentally friendly than hydro energy, whereas mining and the combustion of coal can have many more negatives in the eyes of the public than NPPs. In forming an attitude, an objective view of the environmental impact of nuclear energy can be less important than its comparison with the real alternatives.

Hypothesis 3: High dependency on importing raw materials for energy generation increases support for nuclear power.
Nuclear energy is often understood as a suitable tool for lowering energy dependency by both politicians and experts on the one hand and the general public on the other hand (Eurobarometer, 2010, pp.17–18). Is it possible to confirm the assumption that substantial dependency on energy import is one of the main causes for the wide support for NPPs and their construction?

Let us reflect upon this assumption for a while. The post-communist countries of Central Europe have very different levels of dependency on imported energy. The Czech Republic and Poland are relatively self-sufficient, mainly thanks to the large-scale use of domestic coal reserves; the other countries, by contrast, are more dependent than is the average. But if we look at Austria and Germany, we will also see a high dependence on imports. The degree of dependence is not therefore directly correlated to the support for nuclear power.

But possibly the objective facts are yet again less important than perceptions. In this case, it is less about the perception of nuclear energy than about perception of foreign suppliers of energy raw materials. The main supplier to the area is the Russian Federation. Whereas Germany and Austria do not perceive Russia as a markedly problematic actor; in the post-communist countries, perceptions of the Russian Federation are very sensitive and worries exist that energy dependency could be used in power politics. At the same time, the real possibilities of diversifying energy sources are lower in the post-communist countries than in Germany or Austria which contributes to the feeling of vulnerability and probably also to the support for nuclear energy.

5.1.1 Conclusion

It would certainly be interesting to assess the import of the individual causes in opinion formation on nuclear power generally. Unfortunately, neither the scope of this paper, nor the authors’ education allow for such a complex psychological and sociological research. One Eurobarometer opinion poll, which proposed three statements on the positive impact of nuclear energy and investigated how large a share of the population agrees with the statements, could provide us with some clues. The three questions about nuclear energy’s positive impact focussed on the following areas:

1. Prices of energy and their stability;
2. Mitigating climate change;

In all five post-communist countries and indeed in the whole of Europe, the statement on nuclear power’s importance for energy security attracted the greatest support of the three. In the Czech Republic, 58% of respondents believed that nuclear energy is important for limiting climate change, whereas 55% of the population thought it important to keep prices competitive and stable. In Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary, on the contrary, more respondents agreed with the economic advantages of nuclear power (Eurobarometer, 2010, pp.12–23).

5.2 How can we explain the negative attitude of all Austrian political parties to nuclear energy?

Hypothesis 4: Political opposition is absent because there are no proponents of nuclear power in Austrian society – the political parties represent the opinion of the electorate.
As we have seen, Austrian public opinion is currently predominantly against the development of nuclear power not only in Austria, but also equally in other countries of (not only) Central Europe. The political parties accept these attitudes. Can we claim, then, that the lack of political opposition follows simply from the absence of nuclear power’s proponents in Austrian society? Do the political parties represent the opinion of the citizens?

To answer this question we need to look at the roots of the current Austrian anti-nuclear stance. The first important point is that before the 1978 referendum on the NPP Zwentendorf both of the dominant political parties (SPÖ, ÖVP) were in favour of a peaceful nuclear programme. The situation transformed dramatically after the referendum and already in 1978 a law forbidding the use of nuclear energy had been passed by votes of all political parties (Weisch, 1988, p.4).

At first glance it might seem that the parties indeed simply listened to the call of the citizens. The result of the 5 November 1978 referendum was very narrow, however: 50.47% against the NPP, 49.53% in favour. That is to say, less than 20,000 votes decided. How could so small a majority lead to such a profound transformation in the stance of political parties?

Hypothesis 4A: The radical and simultaneous change in the parties’ opinion on nuclear energy was caused by distinctive traits of the Austrian political system.

The Austrian party system has been characterised by a high degree of consensus and cooperation between the two dominant parties, and to a certain degree this remains true to this day. Austria is usually ranked among consociational democracies; sometimes the term proportional democracy (Proporzdemokratie) is used. Although society has been divided into camps according to political affiliations, the solution to political issues was sought consensually. The alternation of governing parties expected by bipartism was not a rule in Austria. On the contrary, grand coalitions of SPÖ and ÖVP were much more common. Under these circumstances, the turning away from nuclear power could have been caused precisely by the common decision of the two large parties, although this meant that the pro-nuclear opinions in society lost their political representation.

It is difficult to find evidence which supports such a theoretical construct. The referendum itself – the first in post-war Austria – testifies to the parties’ inability to arrive at an agreement. It was a solution which the government adopted as a way out of six months of tense and unsuccessful negotiations with the opposition. In addition, the events surrounding the Austrian NPP are sometimes understood as the beginning of the end of Austria’s division into two camps according to political affiliation, as the anti-nuclear movement had cut across those two previously rather strictly separated groups (Stockinger, 1998).

Hypothesis 4B: Support for the active anti-nuclear movement, however insignificant its numbers, was understood by the political parties as crucial for victory in the next election.

This hypothesis seeks the causes of the 1978 transformation in political parties’ attitudes in the political situation at the time and in the parties’ manoeuvres to maximise their electoral gains. FPÖ had been moderately anti-nuclear in the long term. ÖVP spotted the opportunity to undermine support for the governing SPÖ and the People’s party chairman Josef Taus declared that although his party still does support nuclear energy they had reservations about NPP Zwentendorf’s safety (Weisch, 1988, p.2). Although the
Chancellor Bruno Kreisky had an absolute majority in the parliament in theory, he could not rely entirely on party discipline, especially with SPÖ MPs for the federal state of Vorarlberg. The opinion polls in the first half 1978 indicated that the majority supported nuclear energy and, under the pressure exerted by part of the public as well as ÖVP and FPÖ, calling a referendum seemed like an acceptable concession on the part of the Chancellor. On top of that, appreciating the strong position of the Socialists, Chancellor Kreisky proclaimed that a vote for Zwentendorf would also be a vote for SPÖ (Patterson, 1979, p.7).

The narrow result of the referendum and the tense atmosphere filled with conflict led to the agreement to call an early election for May 1979. Initially a slump of SPÖ and its chairman, the proponents of nuclear energy, was expected. The socialists, however, successfully shifted attention to the economy (unemployment and inflation) and won the election with an absolute majority, whereas ÖVP plunged totally. What is important for our purpose is that already before the election, in December 1978, all of the parties agreed on Austria’s nuclear-free status. The socialists thus eliminated this explosive topic out of the game, which was probably a political necessity for them, whereas ÖVP and FPÖ could claim that they fulfilled their objectives. A quick solution to the dispute over Zwentendorf was therefore in the interest of all political actors.

One of the factors involved in the quick and final solution of the disputes over Zwentendorf was thus SPÖ’s unorthodox and skilful politics. Instead of reacting conventionally and representing the proponents of nuclear energy, the party decided to displace the theme by quickly resolving it. According to some sources, the capacities need for potential opening of Zwentendorf had been kept for some time, which only supports the hypothesis that the issue of nuclear energy was used instrumentally to obtain political success.

On the other hand, the hypothesis cannot explain why the anti-nuclear stance became one of the pillars of Austrian domestic and foreign policy. Is the attitude of the public and the NGOs so strong that it precludes any potential political discussion of this theme? Did the nuclear energy not become part of the searched for national identity, which Austria had been lacking for so long (Hloušek and Sychra, 2004, pp.11–12)?

Hypothesis 5: Polarisation of opinions is caused by the nationalisation of the topic: the attitude towards nuclear energy becomes intertwined with national identity.

For a long time now nuclear energy has been a source of tension in the Central European space, and this tension is tangible both in the internal politics of the countries and in international relationships. The cause is the differing views on the admissibility of nuclear energy espoused by the various political movements and interest groups, which substantially influence the overall long-term policies of the states. Conflicts both domestic and international over this issue are usually resolved by peaceful means, militant means of asserting interests have appeared, however (Mareš, 2002), and their importance could increase in the future.

Simplifying the matter somewhat, one could speak about a clash between ‘nuclear nationalism’ and ‘eco-nationalism’. One can speak of nuclear nationalism if most citizens of a state strongly defend the need for their own NPPs and connect them with their national interests; they are supported in this by the majority of the political representation. Opposite attitudes, both at home and abroad, are intolerantly refused. One could speak this way about the Czech Republic, for instance. Anti-nuclear ‘eco-nationalism’, on the contrary, is an interest, formulated nation-wide, in removing nuclear
energy not only from one’s own territory, but also from neighbouring countries as well. This demand is connected with further intolerant pressure on countries which do employ nuclear energy. An example of this is Austria, specifically, the forceful policies pushed by the populist FPÖ (Centrum strategických studií, 2001, p.6).

Austria already protested against these power plants during the communist period. After these regimes fell, Austria’s representatives believed they would convince their neighbours about their attitudes on nuclear energy. It transpired, however, that the emphasis on nuclear power was not linked exclusively to the communists (even if their voters are among the proponents of nuclear energy), but that it pervaded the new political elites (connected with the energy generating lobby), including the new and influential ‘thatcherite’ right (Vráblíková, 2010, p.382).

Austria attempted to connect the issue of nuclear energy safety with its consent to EU accession for the post-communist countries, but in the end it did not pursue this issue forcefully. The referendum on EU accession demanded by various political forces in Austria was not called, either. In domestic politics of both the post-communist countries and Austria, the issue of nuclear energy was mingled with other sensitive topics, such as the historical legacy of the post-war transfer of Germans, or questions of labour migration and crime (Centrum strategických studií, 2001, pp.6–7).

Discourse in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in the Czech Republic, put the domestic opponents of nuclear energy, especially the environmental organisations co-funded from Austria, in a very specific position. They were stigmatised as ‘traitors of their own country’ or Austria’s ‘fifth column’. The term ‘eco-terrorism’, generally overused in the Czech Republic at the time, was often casually employed by the power structures to label the environmentalists (Mareš, 2008, p.103). The most important direct actions of the environmentalists in the Czech Republic were the blockades of the Temelín construction site in the 1990s; subsequently, the bulk of the environmental movement toned down (Binka, 2009) and increasingly started to employ lobbying (Císař, 2010, p.746).

A curious case of the nationalisation of the issue was a banner written in German saying ‘Austrian football – no, Temelín – yes’, which the Czech football hooligans put up during the international match Czech Republic versus Austria 2003; the UEFA disciplinary committee subsequently fined the Football Association of the Czech Republic (Smolík, 2008, p.105).

Occasional blockades of the border crossings and roads in the border zone by Austrian opponents of nuclear power have been influencing Czech–Austrian relations, and this has continued since the Czech Republic’s accession to the Schengen area in 2007. These blockades seek to manifest a primarily anti-nuclear and non-nationalist orientation.

Germany’s decision to abandon nuclear energy subsequently to the Fukushima events provoked criticisms from the Czech side. The incumbent Czech president Václav Klaus, who is constructing for himself a high profile as an opponent to environmentalism, naturally assumed a leading position among the critics. Although Klaus has so far mostly been vocal on the issue of global warming, where he opposes Al Gore (Mareš, 2008, p.103), in this case he criticised Germany’s decision, emphasised that the Czech Republic is sticking with nuclear power, and pointed out the alleged influence of lobbyists who push alternative energy sources (Klaus, 2011).

The management of the ČEZ, the Czech utility company, subsequently voiced concern that Germany will also push for shutdown of NPPs in the Czech Republic
(Česká tisková kancelář, 2011). But this may also be about building a position, as after the decommissioning of German NPPs the energy companies of Central and Eastern Europe could obtain a marketing advantage, to sell power from their existing and potentially also newly constructed power plants (Euroskop, 2011). Obviously, increasing the density of NPPs in the area would escalate the tensions between the pro- and anti-nuclear nations.

5.3 Which way is the balance of discussion on nuclear energy shifting in Germany and for what reasons?

Hypothesis 6: Contemporary Germany follows the trend of Austria in the 1970s.

Comparing current events in Germany with the developments in Austria in the 1970s, we see a number of similar points. First, the considerable pressure to decommission NPPs is coming from the general public – anti-nuclear demonstrations are held all over Germany, opinion polls show great misgivings about nuclear power, etc. This ‘bottom-up’ change creates pressure on the political sphere, and a change occurs in how opinions are politically represented, with no party now arguing for persisting with nuclear energy. On top of that, this transformation is rapid – both the conservatives and the liberals are changing their opinions not gradually, but suddenly.

In looking for the causes of these changes, we cannot point towards specific characteristics of the party system (as we did in hypothesis 4A); before the nuclear disaster in Japan, the distribution of political parties’ opinions on nuclear power was even. Both proponents and opponents of nuclear power had political representation, the former in CDU-CSU and FDP, the latter in SPD, the Greens and die Linke (2010). The difference from Austria was therefore that not all parties changed their opinions at once.

A variant of hypothesis 4B seems more promising: the historical success of the Greens in the traditional bastion of the conservatives, Baden-Württemberg, is explained precisely as a consequence of the pro-nuclear stance of CDU, unpopular and untenable after Fukushima (e.g. Myhre, 2011).18 The message of the conservatives’ loss in the March election was amplified by the fact that it was the first loss after 58 years of continuous CDU rule in this rich federal state. If after Fukushima CDU is unable to win even in a traditionally conservative state, the question must be asked how devastating the result would be in less conservative German federal states (Ewing, 2011, p.7).19

Hypothesis 7: The present plan to decommission nuclear power plants is only a temporary concession and part of the general reaction to the disaster in Japan; present changes are thus not permanent.

The plan to decommission NPPs in Germany can also be understood as a temporary concession to public opinion. Accepting the explanation offered in hypothesis 5 does not necessarily mean that the changes on the political scene will be permanent. Will the emotional mood in society recede and the mobilising potential of this topic decrease? If that were to happen, would the plan to decommission the NPPs be kept?

The present media image and of course the politicians’ statements do not afford us many opportunities to speculate on the temporariness of these changes. But we need to bear in mind that nuclear energy policy has already been changed in Germany three times in the past decade. First, the coalition of SPD and the Greens decided in 2001 that the NPPs should be decommissioned gradually until 2020. The subsequent government of
CDU-CSU and FDP, led by Chancellor Merkel, decided that the NPPs would remain operational until 2036. In March and May 2011 these designs were re-evaluated and the present plan would have Germany abandon nuclear power by 2022.

Hypotheses 5 and 6 certainly do not contradict each other. On the contrary, if we admit an attempt to increase their electoral gains as the main motivation of the present shift of opinion among conservatives and liberals, potential further shifts in opinion are certainly not ruled out. Some analysts expect a substantial increase in energy prices due to the significant drop in generating capacities, and this could reverse public opposition against nuclear energy.

6 Concluding remarks

In terms of political support for nuclear energy, the region of Central Europe is a very specific area. The long-term division into countries strongly supporting nuclear power and countries radically opposing it is unique in the global context. The post-communist countries are increasingly reliant upon nuclear power, whereas in Austria (and now in Germany as well) a strictly negative stance to nuclear power has been establishing itself for a long time now. Another particularity of this issue in the Central European space is the fact that there is no real political opposition to the attitude prevailing in the individual countries – Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary and Poland are dominantly pro-nuclear, whereas neither in Austria nor in Germany would find today a relevant political actor offering an alternative to the moratorium on NPP construction.

We believe that investigating the reasons for this constitutes a highly relevant topic for both political theory and political practice. For theory, it is interesting that the classic scheme by which opposing opinions are supposedly articulated in the political spectrum does not work; a look into both past and present (Germany) allows us to understand the process by which a certain topic is eliminated from regular political discussion. As a further research field, connecting this topic with the securitisation concept (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 14–20) suggests itself, was nuclear energy securitised in these countries and thus excluded from the sphere of regular politics, as indeed the theory assumes? Is it true that concerns about security (for the opponent of nuclear energy, the possibility of a disaster is the clincher, whereas for the proponents it is the interruption of energy supply) play the main role in this area? Each of the hypotheses voiced above offers a range of interesting theoretical and empirical findings for further investigation. The nationalisation of the theme of nuclear energy in particular is a unique phenomenon in the global context.

On the practical level, it is obviously important to understand the specifics of the region in order to be able to predict future development, not only in the domain of nuclear energy, but also as far as energy security and changes in geopolitical distribution of power are concerned. And crucially, energy security is gaining importance. In an age when the need to secure energy raw materials substantially influences international relations, those responsible request long-term predictions and an understanding of the factors influencing public opinion on nuclear energy. If we were to accept the hypothesis that the developments in Germany prefigure the post-Fukushima attitude towards nuclear energy more generally, the findings can also be important for the wider region (most recently Switzerland is abandoning nuclear power). Each of the explanatory hypotheses presents a relevant view of nuclear energy in the Central European space.
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Notes

1 Switzerland also decided to abandon nuclear power and discussions on the future of nuclear power are taking place in many other European countries.

2 France is first with 75% of nuclear energy produced by NPPs and Belgium second with 54.7%.

3 The anti-nuclear rhetoric is not too old; however, as up until 1978 Austria was planning a series of six NPPs. The Austrian citizens, however, decided in a referendum by a narrow majority of about 20,000 votes (0.5%) not to put the already constructed NPP Zwentendorf in operation.

4 The shutdown in Germany of seven reactors built before 1980 led to a hike in the price of electricity of 18% (Strouhal, 2011).
This result is not entirely surprising in the global context, as many eco-activists consider nuclear power a suitable and environmentally friendly source of energy. In 1996, an NGO called Environmentalists for Nuclear Energy was founded, which was supported by the prominent personalities of the environmental movement such as James Lovelock or Patrick Moore, one of the founders of Greenpeace.

Although LINKE has been in opposition for a long time and did not therefore participate directly in the government policy of decommissioning the NPPs, it makes strong pronouncements against nuclear power, among other things because large energy concerns which operate the power plants allegedly limit democracy and decision on the local level; see for example die Linke, 2010.

It was precisely the PiS chairman and prime minister at the time, Jarosław Kaczyński, who opened the discussion about nuclear energy in 2006 (Polanecký and Haverkamp, 2011, p.20).

Polska Jest Najważniejsza (PLN), which split off PiS, similarly supports nuclear energy; however the party’s parliamentary future is quite uncertain.

The party suggests that the referendum be held concurrently with the autumn 2011 parliamentary election (NewsWeek.pl, 2011).

For instance by apologising to Austria for poorly informing the country about Slovak nuclear power plants (Vrubelová, 2010).

The main reasons for this are the very generous policy of the preceding character and the liberal character of the SaS, not reservations about nuclear energy in general (Polanecký and Haverkamp, 2011, p.18).

One could see an early expression of these tendencies in Futurism, which glorified technology at the beginning of the 20th century and stood outside communist influence.

Definition of dependency on energy import: “Energy dependency shows the extent to which an economy relies upon imports in order to meet its energy needs. The indicator is calculated as net imports divided by the sum of gross inland energy consumption plus bunkers”. (Eurostat, 2010).

Although the countries of Central Europe mostly import nuclear fuel from Russia, the nature of this fuel (which can be stored for a long time in advance and where switching suppliers is relatively easy) does not allow its being used for power politics, and neither is there the risk of long outages caused by supply cuts in the infrastructure.

According to the 2009 Eurobarometer poll, only 4% of Austrians thought that the share of nuclear energy in the total energy production should be increased (Eurobarometer, 2010, p.26).

The turnout was about 64% of those eligible to vote (Patterson, 1979, p.6).

Here SPÖ and the other parties fought Switzerland’s plan to build an NPP close to the border, and the Austrian parties therefore thought that the potential opening of Zwentendorf would weaken their negotiating position with Switzerland (Weisch, 1988, p.2).

A recent opinion poll has shown that 71% of citizens believe that the Chancellor’s change of conviction is motivated solely by an effort to do better in elections (Spiegel, 2011).

Analysis of the 2011 German election needs to proceed with great caution. The widespread opinion that CDU’s slump is caused by opposition to nuclear power must be viewed as only one of the possible factors. The first German election in 2011 took place in Hamburg in January, i.e. before the Fukushima disaster. Here CDU was crushed as well, losing 20% of the vote and its main rival SPD managed to obtain absolute majority (Nordsieck, 2011).

A summary of several studies dealing with the economic impact of decommissioning the nuclear power plants can be found in European Forum for Sustainable Development (2011) older calculations based on the original plan of SPD and the Greens in, for example, Bode (2009).
**List of abbreviations**

*General*
NPP – Nuclear Power Plant
NGO – Non-governmental Organization

*Political Parties*

**Czech Republic**
ČSSD – Česká strana sociálně demokratická – Czech Social Democratic Party
KSČM – Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy – Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia
ODS – Občanská demokratická strana – Civic Democratic Party
SZ – Strana zelených – Green Party
TOP09 – Tradice, odpovědnost, prosperita 09 – Tradition, Responsibility, and Prosperity 09
VV – Věci veřejné – Public Affairs

**Hungary**
FIDESZ – Magyar Polgári Szövetség – Hungarian Civic Union
JOBBIK – Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom – Movement for a Better Hungary
LMP – Lehet Más a Politika – Politics Can Be Different
MSZP – Magyar Szocialista Párt – Hungarian Socialist Party

**Germany**
CDU – Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands – Christian Democratic Union of Germany
CSU – Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern – Christian-Social Union in Bavaria
FDP – Freie Demokratische Partei – Free Democratic Party
LINKE – Die Linke – The Left
SPD – Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands – Social Democratic Party of Germany

**Poland**
PiS – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – Law and Justice
PO – Platforma Obywatelska – Civic Platform
PSL – Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe – Polish People’s Party
SLD – Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej – Democratic Left Alliance
Austria
FPÖ – Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs – Freedom Party of Austria
ÖVP – Österreichische Volkspartei – Austrian People’s Party
SPÖ – Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs – Social Democratic Party of Austria

Slovakia
KDH – Kresťanskodemokratické Hnutie – Christian Democratic Movement
MH – Most – Híd – Bridge
SAS – Sloboda a Solidarita – Freedom and Solidarity
SDKÚ – Slovenská Demokratická a Kresťanská Únia – Slovak Democratic and Christian Union
SMER – Smer-Socialná Demokracia – Direction-Social Democracy

Slovenia
DeSUS – Demokratična Stranka Upokojencev Slovenije – Democratic Pensioners’ Party of Slovenia
LDS – Liberalna Demokracija Slovenije – Liberal Democracy of Slovenia
SD – Socialni Demokrati – Social Democrats
SDS – Slovenska Demokratska Stranka – Slovenian Democratic Party
SLS – Slovenska Ljudska Stranka – Slovenian People’s Party
SNS – Slovenska Nacionalna Stranka – Slovenian National Party