

# A Nuclear Divide

**Europeans' attitudes towards nuclear power and radioactive waste seem to depend on whether their countries have nuclear power plants or not.**

Public opinion regarding nuclear energy production appears to be strongly divided in the European Union. Nearly identical shares of respondents express support for nuclear energy (44%) and opposition to it (45%). It is however clear that Europeans on average primarily have rather "moderate" opinions about nuclear energy: only relatively low proportions position themselves on the extreme ends of the scale.

Support for energy production by nuclear power stations has grown significantly in the European Union (EU) since winter 2005, when the previous survey of Europeans' attitudes towards nuclear waste was conducted. In the three-year period between these surveys, climate change has become a high priority around the world. The measures to combat climate change have become an ever-present topic in public debates throughout the European Union. Nuclear power's important role in reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions compared with other sources of energy has inevitably affected public opinion — and this is something that the results of this survey clearly show.

Since 2005, Europeans became more inclined to be both "totally" and "fairly" in favour of nuclear energy production. In total, support increased by 7 percentage points to 44% and there has been a 10 percentage points decline in the share opposed to it (45%). Meanwhile, Europeans became slightly more likely to have no opinion about nuclear energy.

## Knowledge and Support

Respondents' level of support for nuclear energy varies strongly from country to country. It stands out, however, that citizens in countries that have operational nuclear power plants are considerably more likely to support nuclear energy than citizens in other countries. There is a strong link between these two variables — support for nuclear energy and existence of nuclear power plants in one's country — that is clearly emphasised by the fact that all countries with an above average strong sup-

port for nuclear energy do actually have nuclear power plants. The strongest support is found not only in the Czech Republic and Lithuania but also in Hungary, Bulgaria, Sweden, Finland and Slovakia, where six in ten respondents or more are in favour of energy production by nuclear power stations.

An exception to this pattern in public opinion can be found in Romania and Spain. These are the only two EU countries with operational nuclear power plants, where the level of support for nuclear energy is below the EU27 average.

One ground for the Spanish and Romanian results might be found in an earlier Eurobarometer study that showed that the Spaniards and Romanians were less aware of the fact that their countries have nuclear power plants than respondents in other countries with nuclear power plants in operation. Hypothetically, this relatively "low" level of awareness of one's own country's situation, as far as nuclear energy is concerned, leads to a less positive attitude about nuclear energy.

The lowest support for nuclear energy is, however, clearly found in countries that have no nuclear power plants. The least support for this type of energy is found in Austria, Cyprus and Greece, with around eight in ten respondents confirming that they are opposed to this type of energy.

An analysis of the evolution of public opinion at country level reveals that there has been a positive change in attitudes towards nuclear energy since 2005 in a vast majority of EU countries. A significant increase of support was recorded in 17 out of 27 EU countries, while there was a significant decrease of support in only two countries.

Since winter 2005, nuclear power gained considerably more public support in Italy, Poland (both +13 percentage points), Ireland (+11) and Greece (+9), which are all countries without operational nuclear power plants. This tendency is however also strongly visible in Germany and Spain (both +8). Latvian pub-

lic opinion, in contrast, tended to be less supportive towards this type of energy production. The drop in Cypriot figures does not indicate stronger opposition to nuclear power, but rather that an increasing share does not have an opinion on the subject.

## Nuclear Energy vs. Other Energy Sources

In order to test public opinion regarding some beneficial effects of using nuclear power, respondents were given three statements underlining the relation between nuclear energy and greenhouse gases, nuclear energy and oil dependence and nuclear energy and other energy sources in general.

It appears that the vast majority of the European public agrees that nuclear power is advantageous because it allows EU countries to diversify their energy sources (64%), as well as decrease their dependence on oil (63%), and because it emits less greenhouse gases than, for instance, oil and coal (62%).

## Nuclear Energy vs. Radioactive Waste Solutions

Respondents who hold a negative opinion about nuclear energy were asked whether they would change their attitude if there were a permanent and safe solution for managing radioactive waste. The results clearly show that these safety aspects are of crucial importance. 39% of these respondents say that a permanent, safe solution for radioactive waste management would make them change their opinion about nuclear energy. A relative majority (48%) would however remain opposed to this type of energy and another 8% say that they do not think that there is any solution.

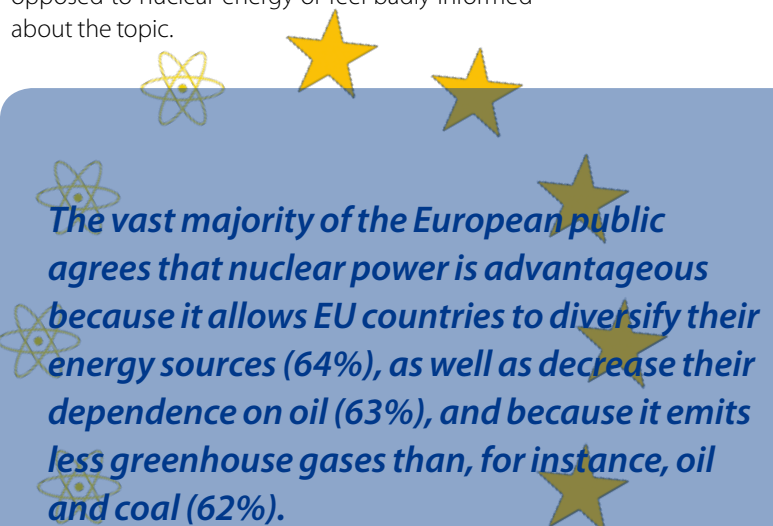
When it concerns the timing of finding a solution for dealing with radioactive waste, European public opinion is very clear. More than nine in ten (93%) Europeans on average see an urgent need to finding a solution to the problem now, rather than leaving it unsolved for later generations. Just over seven in ten respondents do not see any safe way of getting rid of high level radioactive waste.

Deep underground disposal is seen as the most appropriate solution for long-term management of high level radioactive waste by a relative majority

(43%) of respondents in the EU as a whole. However, over a third (36%) is opposed to this idea.


## Conclusions

There is a clear relation between knowledge about radioactive waste and the existence of nuclear power plants in a country. The tendency is that citizens in countries with operational nuclear power plants are more knowledgeable than those in countries without nuclear power plants. Knowledge levels are also higher amongst supporters of nuclear energy and people who feel well informed about radioactive waste than among those who are opposed to nuclear energy or feel badly informed about the topic.



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Furthermore, information about the way radioactive waste is managed is most trusted when it comes from independent sources, like scientists and environmental nongovernmental organisations.

Finally, the results of this study reveal that Europeans now have a more positive attitude towards nuclear energy than in 2005. An increased level of knowledge about radioactive waste management among citizens would probably ensure the continuation of this trend in an upward direction over the next few years. 

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*The 2008 "Attitudes Towards Radioactive Waste" Eurobarometer survey is a follow-up to three previous surveys that were conducted in 1998, 2001 and 2005. A full copy of the report can be found online at: [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm)*