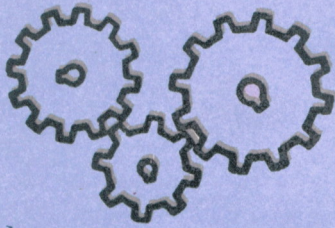


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Tension Over Russian Energy Flares in Europe

By SEAN CARNEY AND LEOS ROUSEK

PRAGUE—A plan for Central European countries to produce their own nuclear fuel using Russian technology has become another flash-point in the debate over the Continent's reliance on Moscow for its energy at a time of frayed relations over the conflict in Ukraine.

To its advocates in the Czech and Hungarian governments, the proposal to construct a fuel-assembly plant in the region would help countries in the European Union's east build more nuclear power plants, reduce their carbon emissions, and take more

control over power production. "I hope it will be possible to build a nuclear fuel plant somewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, and Hungary could take part in it," Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban said this past week, further signaling his eagerness to work with the Kremlin on energy issues.

But to its opponents, the proposal is tantamount to a step back into Moscow's orbit.

Building the plant would ensure that eastern countries already dependent on Moscow for energy would remain dependent on Russian nuclear technology for years to come, they say.

"It's important not to allow Russia to be able to blackmail us over energy issues," Slovak President Andrej Kiska said in an interview this month.

The concerns have reached Brussels, where EU officials are trying to craft a unified European energy strategy.

"That's very much [an issue] for the European Commission, to make sure we are progressing on energy diversification in all fields including nuclear," EU Energy Commissioner Maros Sefcovic said in an interview Tuesday.

In a television interview this week, Czech Prime Minister

Bohuslav Sobotka said the government wants to finish its plans by the summer.

The debate comes amid tensions between the EU and Russia over Ukraine. Eastern EU governments support the sanctions on Russia for its annexation of Crimea and its involvement, which Moscow denies, in the violence that has killed more than 5,000 in eastern Ukraine.

But at the same time some regional officials seek deeper commercial ties with Russia, especially in the lucrative energy sector, even if it creates conflicts with Brussels.

At issue are Russia-designed

nuclear reactors known as VVERs used in much of the EU's east, from Bulgaria to Finland.

Only two companies make fuel for VVER reactors: Pennsylvania-based Westinghouse Electric Co., a unit of Japan's Toshiba Corp., and Russian state-owned OAO TVEL.

Westinghouse says it wouldn't give its know-how to a plant that would compete against its own facility in Sweden.

A TVEL spokesman said the Russian company would work with the Czech Republic to assess the plant's feasibility, adding that it must be "economically justified."

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