

Ukraine Emerges as Battleground in US–Russia Nuclear Contest

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A pivotal nuclear showdown is simmering behind Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine, as Kyiv pushes its international partners—primarily the U.S.—to kneecap one of

While Ukraine's troops weather fresh Russian winter offensives in the south and east of the country, Kyiv's energy minister is advancing a long-term plan to pivot away from Russian-designed and fueled nuclear energy reactors, the export of which has given the Kremlin powerful leverage over a raft of European nations.

Proposed international sanctions on Moscow's nuclear industry have thus far floundered given the country's uranium exports still account for a large chunk of the global supply, especially for Soviet-designed reactors. But more cooperation between Kyiv and U.S. nuclear firms, Ukraine believes, can address that problem.



A Russian soldier is pictured during a visit by a delegation from the International Atomic Energy Agency to the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in southern Ukraine on March 29, 2023. Ukrainian Energy Minister German... [More](#)

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"It means that we [can] destroy the dependence [on] and monopoly of Russia in this nuclear fuel supply," German Galushchenko told *Newsweek* in an exclusive interview.

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Here's the solution.

A spokesperson for Russia's state-owned Rosatom atomic energy corporation declined to comment on Galushchenko's remarks when contacted by *Newsweek*. The Russia Foreign Ministry did not respond to an emailed request for comment.



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Russia's Nuclear Hold

Nuclear issues have loomed above Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine since its opening hours in February 2022. President [Vladimir Putin](#) and his top officials have repeatedly threatened escalation using nuclear weapons, especially in the case of direct [NATO](#) intervention.

Meanwhile, the Russian seizure and occupation of the [Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant](#) in the south of the country means the constant danger of disaster there.

"The situation is dangerous," Galushchenko said of the Zaporizhzhia station, which has been disconnected from its Ukrainian power supply eight times since February 2022.

"Everyone understands that it's only a question of time until the accident happens," he said. "It could be today...The problem is that the Russians don't care."

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Kyiv has long sought sanctions on Moscow's nuclear industry, but Western partners have been hesitant given the potential impact on global nuclear energy markets.

"I think it's very important to push them, at least to punish them somehow," Galushchenko said. "Sanctions is the only way."

Targeting Russia's nuclear industry, Galushchenko added, would be going after one of Russia's few remaining strategic "intellectual exports," given the country's long history at the forefront of the nuclear industry and its global footprint.

But immediate sanctions would be punishing for the West. Russia is the sixth-largest uranium producer in the world, and in 2022 supplied the U.S. nuclear industry with around 12 percent of its uranium needs. Europe relied on Russia for 17 percent of its uranium in the same year.

Rosatom is the world's largest producer of enriched uranium—a vital component for civilian nuclear energy and nuclear weapons—responsible for nearly half of the globe's annual haul in 2021.

"You cannot just stop [buying from] here and buy there," Galushchenko acknowledged. "It takes time."

He described the hesitance of Western partners as "absolutely reasonable."

\$2 billion for nuclear fuel enrichment. Canada is expanding its uranium mining footprint, while the U.K. is pumping hundreds of millions of pounds into its own enrichment efforts.



Ukrainian Energy Minister German Galushchenko speaks at an event to mark the first loading of Westinghouse nuclear fuel into VVER-440 reactors at the Rivne Nuclear Power Plant, in Varash, Ukraine, on September 10, 2023. Galushchenko... [More](#)

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Kyiv is pushing its own atomic project to further bolster the Western nuclear industry. Ukraine currently operates four nuclear plants and 15 reactors, all of which are VVER designs initially produced in the Soviet Union and now Russia. However, the six VVER reactors at Zaporizhzhia are no longer contributing energy to the Ukrainian grid.

Kyiv has now partnered with the U.S. manufacturer Westinghouse Electric Corporation to assist its pivot to Western nuclear infrastructure. Two AP-1000 reactors are being planned for the Khmelnytskyi power plant in the west of the country and two other VVER-1000s are being built there using equipment garnered from Bulgaria.

which operators are currently tenant on Rosatom. The first batch of Westinghouse VVER-440 fuel was loaded into reactors at Ukraine's Rivne station in September.

Galushchenko hopes Ukraine's pivot to new reactors and new sources of VVER fuel will interest other European nations still using Russian-designed reactors, among them Hungary, Slovakia, Finland, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. Indeed, concern about nuclear fuel access is central to sanctions-skeptic sentiment in Budapest, Bratislava, Sofia and beyond.

"Russia still plays a role in the world uranium market, but again, that is a question of time," the energy minister said. "When the role of Russia will be decreased, not allowing them—for instance—to manipulate the situation on the world uranium market, or at least to manipulate the prices, I think that after that the sanctions would be provided."

Even the most resistant European nations can be won over, Galushchenko said.

"I think that is more the issue of bargaining for getting some [money from the EU](#) or some other benefit," he suggested of hesitance in some continental capitals regarding nuclear sanctions on Russia.

"You cannot say that these people do not understand what is going on, or do not understand what dependence is... I do not think that they would try to provide Russian interests in Europe," he said.

Europe's Battery

Ukraine wants to fill the energy gap left by Europe's transition away from Russian exports, whether gas, oil, nuclear, or otherwise. The country began exporting electricity westwards in summer 2022, having disconnected from the Russian grid as soon as the full-scale invasion began.

"For Europe, that could be also very important in the question of security of supply," Galushchenko said, suggesting Ukraine is the only country that could easily provide a substitute for the loss of Russian energy.

[Moscow's bombardment campaign](#) against Ukrainian energy infrastructure from fall 2022 was partially motivated by Kyiv's new westward electricity exports, the minister said.

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strengthens the European Union and the European energy system, he said. That is also a big geopolitical issue on the part of the civilized world."



Ukrainian Energy Minister German Galushchenko is pictured in Lviv, Ukraine, on August 21, 2023. Galushchenko told Newsweek the ongoing war offers the U.S. a prime opportunity to cut down Russia's nuclear export industry.

LES KASYANOV/GLOBAL IMAGES UKRAINE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Westinghouse is already working on new projects in Poland, Bulgaria, Romania and other European nations. Another U.S. company, Holtec, is also working with Ukraine on storage for spent nuclear fuel.

This provides a great opportunity for the U.S. to become a key player in Europe's nuclear sector, Galushchenko said.

"This is really a moment when we could do this together, because that is in our strategic... interests, to do this together with American companies," he said.

criticism from some sections of society and the media for its shift towards western technology. The minister blamed Russian influence networks still strong within Ukraine despite the war.

"Unfortunately, there are some 'freaks' here who took money from Russia," he said. "Maybe some without money who are just working for the Russians."

"That is more an issue for our special bodies, who engage in fighting with Russian propaganda," Galushchenko added. "The protests are going on, and I'm sure that all of them are paid for."

"For them, that is really a challenge, what we are doing...I really don't care about all these Russian freaks, because, in fact, we have the results."

2/9/24 4:25 a.m. ET: This article has been updated to include a response from a Rosatom spokesperson.

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