

M: Making it easier to mine uranium in the EU



Mining of uranium ore in a Czech mine in 2011. Photo: Petr David Josek/AP

The EU must classify uranium as a critical raw material. It would simplify uranium mining within Europe and facilitate electrification and green transition, write Tomas Tobé and Jessica Polfjärd.

DEBATE | MINING

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We are currently engaged in one of the biggest projects in the history of the European Union: the journey towards a zero-emission society, with the goal of reaching net zero emissions by 2050. It is obvious that the way to get there is through the electrification of society and that large amounts of clean electricity will be needed to achieve the goals.

According to the Swedish Energy Agency, Sweden's electricity demand alone will increase from today's 140 terawatt hours to 210–370 terawatt hours by 2045. It gives a good indication of the challenges facing the EU.

Electrification stands on two legs:

The first is a secure and fossil-free energy supply. It is beyond all reasonable doubt that we need more renewables, but without nuclear power we will never meet climate goals, competitiveness or electrification. The soaring electricity prices of recent winters, together with Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, have highlighted the need for a predictable and carbon-free energy supply.

The second is a stable supply of all the raw materials and materials needed for, among other things, electric vehicles and next-generation batteries.

A welcome work **is therefore underway** that, done correctly, improves the conditions for extensive electrification. This is a new legislative proposal that will enable and incentivise the extraction of critical raw materials in Europe – the Critical Raw Materials Act.

It is an initiative that is needed. Both to enable the green transition and to secure the EU's access to metals and minerals. At present, the EU is dependent on other countries to cover the high demand. In 2021, for example, up to 90 percent of EU magnesium imports came from China.

The problem has arisen due to complicated permit processes and complicated regulations. Today, it is difficult to obtain permission to open a new mine and more and more companies do not see the EU as a profitable place for exploration.

The European Commission's proposal lists topics that are strategically important for the EU's economy and climate action. Projects aimed at

mining these metals and minerals should be able to obtain simplified permit processes and reduced bureaucracy. In addition, there is also advice regarding financing and applications, in other words it is about taking responsibility for tax money and prioritizing private over public capital.

A well-designed proposal may particularly benefit Sweden. We have a strong history of mining and several of the world's leading mining companies are located here. In addition, the discovery of significant amounts of rare earth elements in Kiruna testifies to the fact that there are good opportunities to develop the extraction of the metals required by the transition. In fact, just over half of the 30 substances that the European Commission classifies as strategically important are found in Sweden.

However, the European Commission's proposal has a serious flaw: of the metals and minerals classified as critical, one that should be considered critical is missing, namely uranium.

The Moderates in the European Parliament are therefore now taking the initiative for uranium to be classified as a critical raw material in the EU, in order to facilitate the permit processes.

It should still be up to the member states themselves to choose whether or not to allow uranium mining. However, the proposal is about making things easier in those countries that so wish.

A classification of uranium as strategically important would therefore stimulate new extraction on European soil.

This presents great opportunities for those countries and regions that accept uranium mining. Sweden, for example, has the largest uranium deposits in all of Europe. The Geological Survey of Sweden, SGU, pointed out already in 2018 when the red-green government introduced the current ban that "bans on uranium extraction risk negatively affecting Sweden's status as an exploration and mining nation".

Many European countries, including Sweden, are also investing in new nuclear power plants. That is right and proper, but it also means that we must secure the fuel, that is, uranium. Making it easier to mine uranium in Europe is one solution.

Ahead of the 2019 European elections, many argued that nuclear power is not an EU issue. During this parliamentary term, the Moderates have consistently refuted the claim, not least by ensuring that nuclear power is now classified as sustainable within the EU's framework for sustainable investments.

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...high time to ensure the supply of fuel for a broad expansion of nuclear power in the EU as of now. We therefore need to review the rules on uranium mining.

The question of classifying uranium as a strategically important raw material will be decided this week in a vote in the European Parliament's plenary. We hope that a majority will support the proposal.

Historically, votes linked to nuclear power have had small margins in the European Parliament – each vote can thus make the decisive decision.

Given the potential that this has for Sweden, it is up to our Swedish colleagues in the European Parliament to prove it. Our hope is that they will make an effort for a fossil-free Europe. It must be made easier to mine uranium within the EU.



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