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United Russia Backs More Nuclear Power

By Yuriy Humber

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Senior United Russia deputies said Tuesday that the party would make sure that "substantial sums" from the federal budget were directed at the development of Russia's next generation of nuclear reactors.

The initial 1 billion rubles (\$33 million) allocated from the 2006 budget for the BN-800 fast neutron reactor project will be followed by regular financial backing, with the next installment possible before the end of the year, Viktor Opekunov, head of the State Duma's subcommittee for nuclear energy, said at a news conference Tuesday.

United Russia will also use its Duma majority to push for the use of the state investment fund, which is linked to the petrodollar-collecting stabilization fund, for the financing, said Andrei Burenin, a member of the Duma's Budget and Taxes Committee.

"In some areas of nuclear energy we have already fallen behind, but with the right support, Russia can maintain leadership in certain parts of it," Opekunov said.

Supporting innovation and research, along with diversifying the economy, was one of the main themes of United Russia's year-end congress, at which party leader and Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov vowed to make sure more budget funding went toward research into nuclear energy, machine-building and space technology.

"We want to invest in enterprises that can alter the economic map of our country, ... diminishing our country's reliance on natural resources," said Andrei Kokoshin, head of the Duma's CIS Affairs and Relations With Russian Nationals Abroad Committee.

In the nuclear sector, backing will primarily go to the development of fast neutron reactors — those that can process relatively highly enriched uranium or plutonium — and floating nuclear energy stations, a technology that Russia has been pioneering, Opekunov said.

The first BN-800 fast neutron reactor has been earmarked for the Belayarskaya nuclear power station and requires 46 billion rubles (\$1.59 billion) in investment, Sergei Kiriyenko, head of the Federal Atomic Energy Agency, said last month.

Although the allocation of 1 billion rubles is barely 2 percent of the required investment, the budget allocation for research and development on such a scale is "unprecedented," agency spokesman Sergei Novikov said Tuesday.

If the rate of funding picks up, allowing Russia to build BN-800 reactors within five to six years, the country could maintain a leading position in a niche many industry insiders call the future of nuclear energy, he said.

"A lot depends on United Russia's support. They are the controlling party in the parliament, and they are instrumental in allocating budget funds," Novikov said.

Nuclear energy has sharply risen to the top of the nation's political agenda, as and President Vladimir Putin met with his Ukrainian and Kazakh counterparts last week to agree on a strategy to unite their efforts in the sector.

The political will to develop nuclear energy technology that is both suitable for domestic needs as well as a commercially viable export will be key, Vladimir Orlov, director of the Moscow-based PIR Center, which monitors nuclear policy, said by telephone from Geneva.

"The BN-800 project could bring us a lot. Not many people have heard of it, but it is one of Russia's key projects," Orlov said. Potential export markets for fast neutron reactor technology would be China, India, Brazil and Southeast Asia, he said.

"These reactors are unique in that they cannot be switched to military use" as they are proliferation-resistant, Orlov said, referring to reactors that have fuel cycles that are almost impossible to turn from civilian aims to military purposes.