

A FAILED FOREIGN POLICY? GERMANY'S RELIANCE ON RUSSIAN ENERGY.

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The former Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, recently made her first public appearance since Putin's latest invasion of Ukraine, in early June 2022. In it, she stated, justifiably so, that she does not feel any responsibility for Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion in late February earlier this year. She rightfully put the blame on Putin. Yet at the same time, a growing consensus amongst pundits and political analysts have pointed out that German policy towards Russia under Merkel's tenure was – in retrospect – naïve, and may inadvertently contributed as a catalyst for Putin's geopolitical ambitions.

Germany is arguably the strongest emblem of Europe's purposeful integration – and dependency on – Russia's energy sector, and the subsequent consequences and ramifications in light of the war in Ukraine. The German logic resonates with its historical analysis and experience; for Merkel, this integration was meant to make Putin reliant on the EU for political and economic stability. In turn, the hope was that history would not repeat itself, thus offering an enticing fragment of historical redemption.

That noteworthy and positive motive backfired, however. We now know that the party that has become more reliant in this trade exchange is the EU rather than Russia, even if the Russian economy is currently in tatters as sanctions bite both in the short- and long-term. Nonetheless, the EU has yet to show where it would replace Russian energy sources in the short term, with US LNG being the latest option currently floated. In the meantime, the rise in energy prices made sure that Putin benefited from the supply shortages in Europe. So, Germany's strategy of integration has been criticized, despite its positive intentions. This integration now means that many politicians in Europe are fearing a cold winter and spiteful criticism of the EU's handling of the looming energy crisis.

The sabotage, likely Russian, of Nordstream pipelines further exacerbate the fears of the coming winter and its impact on European energy market and associated socio-economic impacts – pipelines that Germany were the strongest European advocate for, and integral parts of its energy transformation.

A Brief History of Germany's Energy Policy

In order to analyze German energy policy, it is important to establish a brief record of Germany's reliance on Russian gas prior to her tenure. Former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder is the one who greatly contributed to Germany's reliance on Russian energy in the first place – a contribution that earned him a cushy gig in the position as chairman of the North European Gas pipeline, which functions as a subsidiary to Gazprom, the largest Russian supplier of natural gas to Europe.

In recent years and months, Schröder repeatedly failed to criticize Putin and even called Putin a “flawless democrat” on one occasion.¹ In light of criticism surfacing against Schröder in the last few years, he claimed that his position on German energy was in line with the political position of most in Germany because Russia was a “reliable partner” in its deliverance of energy to Europe. “Even in the toughest times of the Cold War, there were never any problems,” he said and he didn't expect that to change.² The position of the German people toward Russia has shifted because of human rights abuses and genocide that is raging in Ukraine. Many believe that this shift in energy reliance is justified and necessary, but Schröder still persists that one day Germany will have to come back to Russia as a trade exporter when the war is over because of rare earths they receive from Russia, which “cannot simply be substituted.”³ Politicians across the EU have understandably called for sanctions against Schröder as a result of his comments and personal ties to the Kremlin.

As the gas lobby has subsequently successfully advocated for gas as a transitional fuel in the green transformation, Russian gas was welcomed by German industry and policymakers as opposed to stronger investments into renewables. Thus, Germany tied its energy fate with that of Russia, foregoing the level of investments in green energy seen in, for instance, Denmark, Sweden or other green leaders. Coupled with the abandonment of existing

¹ <https://www.dw.com/en/merkels-criticism-of-russia-over-energy-marks-shift-in-ties/a-2307173>

² <https://www.dw.com/en/gerhard-schr%C3%B6der-comes-under-increasing-pressure-over-putin-ties/a-61611841>

³ <https://www.dw.com/en/gerhard-schr%C3%B6der-comes-under-increasing-pressure-over-putin-ties/a-61611841>

nuclear power plants, Germany was before the war in a precarious position during its transition, which the war exacerbated immensely and which Putin thoroughly capitalized on.

Germany's past failures in relation to Ukraine

In light of the recent sabotage, Germany's decision to proceed with the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline despite evidence of Putin's desired expansionism in 2008, in Georgia; 2014, in Crimea; and from 2014 to 2022, in the Donbas, has backfired. This pipeline would funnel gas owned by the mentioned Gazprom under the Baltic Sea, avoiding both Poland and Ukraine, to Germany.⁴ In Germany the pipeline was widely termed a purely "economic project," denying that the deal was testimony to a special relationship between Germany and Russia.⁵ Both sides clearly benefited from the deal and the construction of the pipeline. In fact, in July 2021, the Kremlin praised the effort in a statement: "The Russian president praised the German side's steadfast loyalty regarding the completion of this purely commercial project that is designed to strengthen Germany's energy security."⁶ On the other side of the deal, many were critical. For example, the former European Council President Donald Tusk said, when commenting on Nord Stream 2, that it is a "mistake and will not best serve European interests. It is against our strategic interests, our security, and also our rules."⁷ Needless to say, these warnings were ignored.

⁴ <https://www.brusselstimes.com/191857/191857>

⁵ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/trump-scolded-germany-for-buying-gas-from-russia-heres-what-we-know>

⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-german-chancellors-nord-stream-russia-energy-angela-merkel/>

⁷ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/trump-scolded-germany-for-buying-gas-from-russia-heres-what-we-know>

Merkel's Legacy

As the longest-serving democratically elected leader in the EU, Merkel made her mark on EU politics over the 16 years as Germany's Chancellor. In that time, Merkel participated in more than 100 EU summits, with some even describing her as "the only grown-up in the room" in many of them.⁸ From the many crises Merkel had to tackle, like the euro crisis, the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, or Brexit, she was able to positively contribute to lesser and greater extents. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that Merkel was a staple of EU stability for some time. Critics of Merkel, who suggest that her legacy has been dampened by her continuing in Germany's reliance on Russian energy exports, should keep in mind that there are many factors at play in policy; it would be more accurate to state that many of these outcomes we are facing with today were unforeseeable events. It is tempting to look back in history and see the warning signs, but in the moment very few did and, arguably, could.

If we are to hypothesize about the past, however, we could say that there were ways to avoid the energy predicament Germany and much of the EU is in. If Germany chose to take the signs of Putin's expansionism seriously, then Germany might not have continued its agreements with Russia over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Merkel may have been critical of Putin's move to turn off Russian gas to the EU, but that criticism came far too late in the "special relationship" that was, at least, two decades in the making across all strata of Germany's elites.⁹ The pipeline has been heavily scrutinized for justifiable reasons since its inception, especially by those who warned the EU of Putin's ambitions. The war in the Donbas, if not in Chechnya, Georgia, or the annexation of Crimea, should have made Putin's aims clear.

Ultimately, Germany's naivety, as one of Europe's most powerful member states, is merely emblematic of a larger failure amongst national governments; faced with the prospect of cheap energy and domestic political victories, all chose, to various extents, to ignore the red

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58498231>

⁹ "It is not acceptable when there are no consultations about such moves," she claimed. "That repeatedly destroys confidence and you cannot build cooperation based on true mutual trust in this way." <https://www.dw.com/en/merkels-criticism-of-russia-over-energy-marks-shift-in-ties/a-2307173>

flags that we were faced with for more than a decade. Now, as war once again returns to the heart of the continent, member states and the EU itself pivots to this new reality, Germany included; the ramifications of the fundamental shift in German foreign policy cannot be overstated, raising the question of whether a slumbering giant has awoken to help deliver the EU into a new geopolitical era, or if the politics of convenience will once again emerge when the dust settles.