

The West's Green Delusions Empowered Putin

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While we banned plastic straws, Russia drilled and doubled nuclear energy production.

How has Vladimir Putin—a man ruling a country with an economy smaller than that of Texas, with an average life expectancy 10 years lower than that of France—managed to launch an unprovoked full-scale assault on Ukraine?

There is a deep psychological, political and almost civilizational answer to that question: He wants Ukraine to be part of Russia more than the West wants it to be free. He is willing to risk tremendous loss of life and treasure to get it. There are serious limits to how much the U.S. and Europe are willing to do militarily. And Putin knows it.

Missing from that explanation, though, is a story about material reality and basic economics—two things that Putin seems to understand far better than his counterparts in the free world and especially in Europe.

Putin knows that Europe produces 3.6 million barrels of oil a day but uses 15 million barrels of oil a day. Putin knows that Europe produces 230 billion cubic meters of natural gas a year but uses 560 billion cubic meters. He knows that Europe uses 950 million tons of coal a year but produces half that.

The former KGB agent knows Russia produces 11 million barrels of oil per day but only uses 3.4 million. He knows Russia now produces over 700 billion cubic meters of gas a year but only uses around 400 billion. Russia mines 800 million tons of coal each year but uses 300.

That's how Russia ends up supplying about 20 percent of Europe's oil, 40 percent of its gas, and 20 percent of its coal.

The math is simple. A child could do it.

The reason Europe didn't have a muscular deterrent threat to prevent Russian aggression—and in fact prevented the U.S. from getting allies to do more—is that it needs Putin's oil and gas.

The question is why.

How is it possible that European countries, Germany especially, allowed themselves to become so dependent on an authoritarian country over the 30 years since the end of the Cold War?

Here's how: These countries are in the grips of a delusional ideology that makes them incapable of understanding the hard realities of energy production. Green ideology insists we don't need nuclear and that we don't need fracking. It insists that it's just a matter of will and money to switch to all-renewables—and fast. It insists that we need “degrowth” of the economy, and that we face looming human “extinction.” (I would know. I myself was once a true believer.)

John Kerry, the United States' climate envoy, perfectly captured the myopia of this view when he said, in the days before the war, that the Russian invasion of Ukraine “could have a profound negative impact on the climate, obviously. You have a war, and obviously you're going to have massive emissions consequences to the war. But equally importantly, you're going to lose people's focus.”

But it was the West's focus on healing the planet with “soft energy” renewables, and moving away from natural gas and nuclear, that allowed Putin to gain a stranglehold over Europe's energy supply.

As the West fell into a hypnotic trance about healing its relationship with nature, averting climate apocalypse and worshipping a teenager named Greta, Vladimir Putin made his moves.

While he expanded nuclear energy at home so Russia could export its precious oil and gas to Europe, Western governments spent their time and energy obsessing over “carbon footprints,” a term created by an advertising firm working for British Petroleum. They banned plastic straws because of a 9-year-old Canadian child's science homework. They paid for hours of “climate anxiety” therapy.

While Putin expanded Russia's oil production, expanded natural gas production, and then doubled nuclear energy production to allow more exports of its precious gas, Europe, led by Germany, shut down its nuclear power plants, closed gas fields, and refused to develop more through advanced methods like fracking.

The numbers tell the story best. In 2016, 30 percent of the natural gas consumed by the European Union came from Russia. In 2018, that figure jumped to 40 percent. By 2020, it was nearly 44 percent, and by early 2021, it was nearly 47 percent.

For all his fawning over Putin, Donald Trump, back in 2018, defied diplomatic protocol to call out Germany publicly for its dependence on Moscow. “Germany, as far as I'm concerned, is captive to Russia because it's getting so much of its energy from Russia,” Trump said. This prompted Germany's then-chancellor, Angela Merkel, who had been widely praised in polite circles for being the last serious leader in the West, to say that her country “can make our own policies and make our own decisions.”

The result has been the worst global energy crisis since 1973, driving prices for electricity and gasoline higher around the world. It is a crisis, fundamentally, of inadequate supply. But the scarcity is entirely manufactured.

Europeans—led by figures like Greta Thunberg and European Green Party leaders, and supported by Americans like John Kerry—believed that a healthy relationship with the Earth requires making energy scarce. By turning to renewables, they would show the world how to live without harming the planet. But this was a pipe dream. You can't power a whole grid with solar and wind, because the sun and the wind are inconstant, and currently existing batteries aren't even cheap enough to store large quantities of electricity overnight, much less across whole seasons.

In service to green ideology, they made the perfect the enemy of the good—and of Ukraine.

Take Germany.

Green campaigns have succeeded in destroying German energy independence—they call it *Energiewende*, or “energy turnaround”—by successfully selling policymakers on a peculiar version of environmentalism. It calls climate change a near-term apocalyptic threat to human survival while turning up its nose at the technologies that can help address climate change most and soonest: nuclear and natural gas.

At the turn of the millennium, Germany's electricity was around 30 percent nuclear-powered. But Germany has been sacking its reliable, inexpensive nuclear plants. (Thunberg called nuclear power “extremely dangerous, expensive, and time-consuming” despite the UN's International Panel on Climate Change deeming it necessary and every major scientific review deeming nuclear the safest way to make reliable power.)

By 2020, Germany had reduced its nuclear share from 30 percent to 11 percent. Then, on the last day of 2021, Germany shut down half of its remaining six nuclear reactors. The other three are slated for shutdown at the end of this year. (Compare this to nextdoor France, which fulfills 70 percent of its electricity needs with carbon-free nuclear plants.)

Germany has also spent lavishly on weather-dependent renewables—to the tune of \$36 billion a year—mainly solar panels and industrial wind turbines. But those have their problems. Solar panels have to go somewhere, and a solar plant in Europe needs 400 to 800 times more land than natural gas or nuclear plants to make the same amount of power. Farmland has to be cut apart to host solar. And solar energy is getting cheaper these days mainly because Europe's supply of solar panels is produced by slave labor in concentration camps as part of China's genocide against Uighur Muslims.

The upshot here is that you can't spend enough on climate initiatives to fix things if you ignore nuclear and gas. Between 2015 and 2025, Germany's efforts to green its energy production will have cost \$580 billion. Yet despite this enormous investment, German electricity still costs 50 percent more than nuclear-friendly France's, and generating it produces eight times more carbon emissions per unit. Plus, Germany is getting over a third of its energy from Russia.

Germany has trapped itself. It could burn more coal and undermine its commitment to reducing carbon emissions. Or it could use more natural gas, which generates half the carbon emissions of coal, but at the cost of dependence on imported Russian gas. Berlin was faced with a choice between unleashing the wrath of Putin on neighboring countries or inviting the wrath of Greta Thunberg. They chose Putin.

Because of these policy choices, Vladimir Putin could turn off the gas flows to Germany, and quickly threaten Germans' ability to cook or stay warm. He or his successor will hold this power for every foreseeable winter barring big changes. It's as if you knew that hackers had stolen your banking details, but you won't change your password.

This is why Germany successfully begged the incoming Biden administration not to oppose a contentious new gas pipeline from Russia called Nord Stream 2. This cut against the priorities of green-minded governance: On day one of Biden's presidency, one of the new administration's first acts was to shut down the Keystone XL oil pipeline from Canada to the U.S. in service to climate ideology. But Russia's pipeline was too important to get the same treatment given how dependent Germany is on Russian imports. (Once Russia invaded, Germany was finally dragged into nixing Nord Stream 2, for now.)

Naturally, when American sanctions on Russia's biggest banks were finally announced in concert with European allies last week, they specifically exempted energy products so Russia and Europe can keep doing that dirty business. A few voices called for what would really hit Russia where it hurts: cutting off energy imports. But what actually happened was that European energy utilities jumped to buy *more* contracts for the Russian oil and gas that flows through Ukraine. That's because they have no other good options right now, after green activism's attacks on nuclear and importing fracked gas from America. There's no current plan for powering Europe that doesn't involve buying from Putin.

We should take Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a wake-up call. Standing up for Western civilization this time requires cheap, abundant, and reliable energy supplies produced at home or in allied nations. National security, economic growth, and sustainability requires greater reliance on nuclear and natural gas, and less on solar panels and wind turbines, which make electricity too expensive.

The first and most obvious thing that should be done is for President Biden to call on German Chancellor Scholz to restart the three nuclear reactors that Germany closed in December. A key step in the right direction came on Sunday when Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck, the economy and climate minister, announced that Germany would at least consider stopping its phaseout of nuclear. If Germany turns these three on and cancels plans to turn off the three others, those six should produce enough electricity to replace 11 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year—an eighth of Germany's current needs.

Second, we need concerted action led by Biden, Congress, and their Canadian counterparts to significantly expand oil and natural gas output from North America to ensure the energy security of our allies in Europe and Asia. North America is more energy-rich than anyone dreamed. Yes, it will be more expensive than Russian gas sent by pipeline. But it would mean Europe could address Putin's war on Ukraine, rather than financing it.

Exporting gas by ship requires special terminals at ports to liquify (by cooling) natural gas; environmentalists oppose these terminals because of their ideological objection to any combustible fuel. So it's a good sign that Chancellor Scholz announced plans on Sunday to build two of these terminals to receive North American gas, along with announcing major new military spending to counter Russia.

Third, the U.S. must stop shutting down nuclear plants and start building them. Every country should invest in next-generation nuclear fuel technology while recognizing that the current generation of light-water reactors are our best tool for creating energy at home, with no emissions, right now. What you've heard about waste is mostly pseudoscience. Storing used fuel rods is a trivial problem, already solved around the world by keeping them in steel and concrete cans. The more nuclear power we generate, the less oil and gas we have to burn. And the less the West will have to buy from Russia.

Putin's relentless focus on energy reality has left him in a stronger position than he should ever have been allowed to find himself. It's not too late for the rest of the West to save the world from tyrannical regimes that have been empowered by our own energy superstitions.