

Towards Economic Destabilization: Why Germany's Pursuit of Peace in Ukraine Is Paralyzed

Berlin's dependence on Russian gas and its deference to US policy puts it in a difficult spot, particularly with voters.

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Global Research, October 28, 2022

[Responsible Statecraft](#) 25 October 2022

Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Oil and Energy](#)

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There are growing fears that the energy shortages and price rises resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, European Union sanctions against Russia, and Russian cuts in gas supplies could lead to something approaching the "[de-industrialisation](#)" of Europe, as factories with high and inflexible energy needs shut down or relocate to other parts of the world.

Worries about this are especially acute in Germany, the industrial powerhouse of Europe, which has so far managed largely to avoid the steep decline in manufacturing capacity that has affected other European countries over the past two generations. As of 2021, manufacturing's share of German GDP stood at almost 20 percent, twice that of France.

Industry is critical not only to the German economy, but to national identity and the stability of its political system. After the catastrophic defeat and humiliation of the Second World War, the "economic miracle" of the 1950s, with its recreation of famous German industries, was central to the re-establishment of the nation's self-respect.

Industry's share of the German economy has fallen in recent years; but its representatives still form the core of the political base of the two largest political parties: unionized labor for the Social Democrats (SDP); and for the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), the "*Mittelstand*," the self-employed German middle classes, often from family-owned small and medium-sized industrial enterprises.

The CDU and SPD share of the vote has already [declined](#) considerably over the past two decades, in part — as elsewhere in the West — because of a belief among former industrial classes that they have been abandoned by the political elites. If Germany were to undergo the kind of rapid and radical de-industrialization experienced by Britain in the early 1980s, it

seems likely that Germany would see a surge of support for extremist parties: on the Right, *Alternative fuer Deutschland* (AFD); at the other end of the spectrum, *Die Linke* (the Leftists).

Under Germany's system of parliamentary government and proportional representation, this would lead to a situation of radical polarization and would risk either making parliamentary government effectively unworkable, or the handing of power to the extreme Right, as has just occurred in Italy. At this point, liberal democracy in Europe as a whole would lie in ruins. Incidentally, this in turn would deal a crippling blow to the ideological foundations of American global leadership.

Faced with this rather obvious danger — quite apart from the apocalyptic threat of nuclear war — it seems probable that previous German governments would have been doing their utmost to restore Russian gas supplies by bringing about a peace settlement or at least a ceasefire in Ukraine: mediating between Washington, Moscow, and Kiev and putting forward Germany's own peace proposals.

In the 1970s and 1980s, after all, the Social Democratic governments of Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt initiated [*Ostpolitik*](#) ("Eastern Policy"), the normalization of relations between West Germany and the Communist states of Eastern Europe that was inherited by the Christian Democratic government of Helmut Kohl. And both SDP and CDU governments agreed on the creation of new infrastructure supplying Soviet natural [gas](#) to West Germany and western Europe. These moves were conducted despite strong opposition from many in Washington.

By contrast, since the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine first emerged almost a year ago, there has been no serious autonomous German effort either to prevent the war or to bring it to an end. The German public is uneasy about the economic consequences of the war, but the German media, think tanks, and most of the political establishment seems completely committed to the U.S. and NATO line that peace talks are entirely a matter for Ukraine.

Without German leadership there is no possibility whatsoever of any European Union initiative for peace. The French will not act alone, and the smaller countries are incapable of doing so. During a recent visit to Berlin, I met a few independent thinkers who supported the idea of a German peace initiative. I met nobody who thought that it could actually happen at present. A general view was that only the imminent threat of nuclear war could shake the German establishment into any sort of action — by which time it could well be far too late.

What explains this change in Germany? And could the German approach change again?

A key part of the explanation is of course horror at the Russian invasion, and the destruction and atrocities that have resulted. This cannot however be the sole explanation. After all, both *Ostpolitik* and the construction of the Soviet gas supply network took place at the height of the Cold War, while East German border guards were shooting down fellow-Germans trying to flee to West Berlin, and while the Soviet Union was invading and occupying Afghanistan.

Part of the explanation for the paralysis of Germany's ability to act in pursuit of peace is that a [narrative](#) has taken hold and been accepted by most of the establishment, whereby previous German governments should be ashamed of their attempts to promote good relations with Moscow, and in particular of the way that they made the country dependent

on Russian gas.

This narrative has been assiduously promoted by Washington, by Poles and other East Europeans, and by the German Greens, who were not in government when these decisions were made and find this accusation a convenient stick with which to beat the other parties.

There is an easy answer to this accusation — but it is one that the German establishment (and indeed Western establishments in general) cannot make, for it would involve accepting the degree to which they were previously engaged in deceiving their own populations.

The establishment of Soviet gas supplies to Germany obviously preceded the fall of the Soviet Union and the expansion of NATO into eastern Europe. Leading experts and former officials, including [Helmut Schmidt](#) in Germany, warned that NATO expansion was likely to lead to war. The German government, like other European governments, however told its people that NATO expansion was essentially risk free — because if they had they addressed these risks and proposed in consequence a radical reduction in Russian gas supplies, with resulting steep rises in energy prices, a majority of Germans would most probably have turned decisively against NATO expansion.

Thus after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 (which followed closely on NATO declaration of a commitment eventually to admit Georgia and Ukraine), I asked a former member of the NATO Secretary General's staff whether NATO had had any contingency plan to defend Georgia in the event of war. He told me that not merely was there no plan, but also that no plan had even been discussed.

When I expressed incredulity, he explained that since Western publics had been assured that the expansion of NATO involved no risk of war, any official at NATO headquarters who suggested that it did would have been branded as an opponent of enlargement, and their careers would have suffered accordingly.

Aware of the danger of war in Ukraine, but afraid either to demand sacrifices and an acceptance of risk from German voters, or to defy Washington and split Europe by standing firmly for compromise with Russia, a succession of German governments took the path of least resistance: continuing dependence on cheap and plentiful Russian gas together with continual acquiescence to U.S. policies that they had been warned were extremely likely to lead to conflict.

The bitterly ironic result is that a combination of German policies founded firmly in political cowardice has now led Germany into the greatest dangers it has faced since the catastrophe of World War II.

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