

# **Christian Zeller: 'Ukrainian resistance has forced Germany to reconfigure its position towards Russia'**

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**What can energy ties between Germany and Russia tell us about the approach of Europe's largest country towards Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine. And how should ecosocialists approach the interrelated issues of climate, war, gas prices and international solidarity? Federico Fuentes discussed these issues with Christian Zeller, a professor of economic geography and editorial board member of the German-language journal, *emancipation – Journal for Ecosocialist Strategy*. Zeller is the author of *Climate Revolution: Why we need an ecosocialist alternative* (available in German).**

**Could you give us a sense of the importance of the energy ties between Germany and Russia. How have they developed over the years? And how have they been affected by the war?**

The delivery of Russian natural gas to Germany is an old story. Ever since 1973, when West and East Germany started importing natural gas from Russia, the importance for Germany of Russian natural gas — as opposed to industrially-produced gas — has continuously risen, to the point where it has become a critical source of heat for industrial processes in many industries, in particular the chemical and steel industry. With the collapse of East Germany, relations with Russia only intensified. For certain sectors of German industry, ensuring access to cheap natural gas from Russia was a strategic objective, as it was critical to market competitiveness. By 2020, Russian gas represented about 54-55% of natural gas used in Germany. Different companies, from West and East Germany, engaged in strategic collaborations with [Russian state-owned company] Gazprom over this time. One of these was Wintershall, a major multinational company that formed a joint venture with Gazprom, Severneftegazprom, to organise the delivery of natural gas from Russia. Wintershall was a 100% subsidiary of chemical giant BASF before the merger with DEA in 2019. Now BASF still holds 67% of the shares of Wintershall Dea.

On the other side, Germany was important to Russia, as its largest gas importer. In the years leading up to the war in Ukraine, Germany became the largest importer of Russian gas, surpassing Turkey, Italy, Belarus and France. So these energy ties were important for both sides.

To this we can add the Nord Stream 1 pipeline, which was built with the goal of intensifying these relations and opened in 2011. Later, Russian and German companies promoted and built the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which would have allowed Germany to become a kind of gas hub for distributing Russian gas within Europe. Importantly, the Nord Stream pipelines bypassed Ukraine, where the traditional East-West pipeline for transporting gas was located. Russian officials promoted the Nord Stream pipelines explicitly to bypass and weaken Ukraine. This coincided with the interests of German corporations and political authorities who trusted in safe and reliable gas supplies from Russia.

But this decades-long orientation is over due to the war — at least for now. This means the German elite, German industry, and the major German capitalist groups will have to undergo a strategic reorientation in pursuit of other sources of natural gas mainly in the form of LNG (liquefied natural gas), whether from the United States, Qatar or Azerbaijan. That's the challenge that they face right now. So far, they have been able to deal with this problem. Due to their enormous financial power German companies, backed by their government, have been able to buy LNG on the world market and outperform competitors with less purchasing power, especially in Asia. Of course, this relative success for capital is an issue that labour unions, environmental movements and socialist organisations should critically discuss.

### **Does the rupture in relations, together with sanctions on Russia, explain why gas prices have been rising?**

Many right-wing politicians and parties, such as the AfD [Alternative for Germany], argue rising gas prices are due to sanctions. Empirically, that is not true: prices were already rising before the war. The war is a contributing factor, but it is only that. There are many different reasons that explain the rise in gas prices; it is a complicated story that cannot be explained in a monocausal way. But I would argue the fundamental reason for rising prices is the energy transition crisis that Germany, and all other countries, face.

On the one hand, fossil fuel companies have been very careful to invest, given concerns over future prospects for their business due to the energy transition [away from fossil fuels] — though there are signs that due to increasing profit expectations, investment in fossil fuels is increasing again. On the other hand, renewable energies companies are not investing enough. Overall, there is a lack of investment from both sides. Moreover, states are not investing sufficiently in energy transition. This overall lack of investment has provoked scarcity, at a time where demand has continued to rise. These are the fundamental reasons for the rising prices.

There are many other reasons we can also add: the small economic boom that followed the pandemic; ecological reasons, for example France having to shut down more than half of its nuclear power reactors during the past summer due to not having enough water to run them safely, which created a major energy crisis in France; and, of course, the fact that the price of electricity and gas are connected because gas is a major source of electricity. There are many different reasons that explain rising gas prices: the war is just one additional factor.

It is important, however, to add that it was Putin who shut down the delivery of gas to Europe, and not Germany or other Western European countries. The argument is that the West was responsible for cutting off the flow of Russian gas to Europe because of its sanctions, but it was Putin who cut off gas exports. There was a constant flow of German money going to Russia up until Putin stopped the flow of gas. And there are many companies from Germany and other European countries still continuing their business in Russia. The question, of course, is why did Putin take this step? He expected that he could influence the political debate in Germany and Western Europe. But it did not work as well as he hoped, because most people feel some solidarity with Ukraine.

### **How has all this impacted on Germany's position towards Putin and the war? Is it the case that Germany has just followed the United States' position when it comes to the war in Ukraine?**

It is difficult to fully grasp this and it is important to acknowledge that there are different, often contradictory, elements and developments at play. From a more strategic viewpoint, rather than pursue an aggressive policy towards Russia, the main German capitalist groups have traditionally promoted good relations with Russia. The left who say the German government has implemented an

aggressive policy towards Russia are wrong. German business aims were to peacefully conquer the Russian market: that was the preferred method.

Even after [Putin's] annexation of Crimea, relations between the two remained steady. The two countries even cooperated in the military field: for instance, the multinational Rheinmetall provided arms and educational training facilities to Russia right up until 2019. In terms of weapons sales, the ties between Germany and Russia were stronger than those between Germany and Ukraine. Another example: Russia built two new gas-fired power plants with Siemens turbines on the annexed Crimean peninsula. In doing so, Siemens violated European Union decisions on sanction. Putin personally inaugurated the power plants in March 2019. The German capitalist class wanted these relations to continue. But the war has shown that Putin has his own project. What neither Putin — nor Germany or the United States — expected was the level of resistance we have seen from the Ukrainian people to this project. This has forced everybody to reconfigure their positions.

It is true that Germany is now dependent on other energy sources, such as LNG deliveries from the US, but also from other sources. But I don't see any proof that they have subordinated themselves to US interests; they continue to have their own interests and pursue them effectively.

### **So is Germany pursuing a different line to the US in this war?**

We do not have access to the communications between governments, between corporations, and between both of them. But within the German ruling class, there are different sensibilities, it is not homogeneous. The most credible position is that they want this war to finish sooner rather than later, though not necessarily under any conditions. There were already public statements in June, when the situation was more difficult for Ukraine, from heads of multinational companies such as Volkswagen and BASF, arguing the case for an exit path out of the war, and stating Germany had to consider how it could re-establish new relations with Russia. That seems like the most credible position, because for them it makes sense.

But the ruling class in Germany has been forced to reorient itself. In autumn, the Ukrainian resistance made gains thanks, in part, to the weapons it received, but mostly because of the level of resistance exhibited by the people themselves. Now the situation has become difficult with Russia preparing a new offensive. Thus, the successes of Ukrainian resistance, the threat of new Russian offensives and Ukraine's need for heavy weapons and tanks make it difficult to argue for an agreement with Putin. If there was no genuine resistance to the invasion rooted in the population, such weapons would be useless, and nobody would be discussing the issue of delivering tanks to Ukraine. The US used some of the most modern and sophisticated weapons in the world in Afghanistan, yet ultimately it was still forced to leave.

Similarly, cheap energy from Russia is no longer available until further notice and the Russian market will not recover for a long time. The same applies to Russian capital under much more difficult circumstances. Gazprom has lost its most important sales markets in Europe for the time being as a result of the war.

I would not exclude the possibility that some factions of the German capitalist class see the war as an opportunity to substantially weaken the Russian regime. But the most important goal for the majority of them is to find ways to re-establish business with Russia. Perhaps this will now require a change in the regime, but I am sure that they are ready to re-establish business either with Putin or with someone else. They do not want to destroy Russia; from the German point of view that does not make sense. Whether it is Putin or someone else, they still need someone to play the role of a gendarme in this big and heterogeneous country.

**Within this context, radical right forces across Europe have been organising protests against rising prices and calling for sanctions on Russia to be lifted. What can you tell us about these protests in Germany?**

The situation is not completely clear cut. There have been demonstrations organised by really reactionary right-wing forces, mostly in what was formerly East Germany. These were quite big, several thousands of people, and have extended into small towns, which is remarkable. This should be viewed as a real threat, because these forces are trying to use the explosion in gas prices — it was not just an increase, it was an explosion in prices by a factor of 5 to 7 — to organise mass protests and embed themselves in the population.

There have also been various left initiatives. One of these takes its name from the slogan of the Russian Revolution “Bread, Land and Freedom”, rephrasing it to “Heating, Bread and Freedom”. It was initiated by people around [Die Linke (The Left) parliamentarian and leader of the party’s social-conservative faction] Sahra Wagenknecht, with the support of some self-declared “Trotskyist” groups. Some years ago, Sarah Wagenknecht launched Aufstehen (Stand Up) as a kind of mass organisation that operated in parallel to Die Linke. It never really took off, but the networks that were established still exist and have become the basis for launching this campaign. It has a very minimalist social platform with four demands, the main one being a cap on gas prices. Campaign spokespeople have made the sanctions against Russia a major issue in their campaign, drawing an explicit link between the price rises and the war, and arguing the need for peace negotiations and lifting sanctions. They essentially argue a pro-industry line [that Russian gas is essential for German industry] and defend Russia’s position on the war.

A separate initiative was launched by the German edition of *Jacobin*. It has adopted the name of the British campaign, Enough is Enough, though in other ways it is quite different. It has six simple demands: 1000 euros for everybody in winter to spend on warm clothes, etc; wage rises; a cap on gas prices; a broad demand for greater public control over the energy system; increased company taxes; and an extension of the €9 ticket that allows unlimited regional train travel for a month beyond its current 9 month period, to cover summer. The campaign does not say anything about the war or sanctions. Die Linke activists have taken up this campaign in some cities.

Another, much broader, initiative was launched by major trade unions, environmental organisations and ATTAC, an organisation that has been critical of globalisation. From one point of view, their platform is more minimal: for example, they are demanding €500, not €1000. But, in another sense, they are more integrative in their vision. This initiative talks about the ecological crisis, which is why they are supported by [school climate strike group] Fridays for Future, whereas the others do not mention the climate issue. They also express, in a very general way, their solidarity with Ukrainian people. The initiatives by the more traditional left lack this ecological dimension, which is problematic. It shows there is no real connection between, on the one hand, the climate movement — in particular the young people leading this movement — and solidarity with Ukrainian resistance, and, on the other hand, the more traditional left.

But several months after they were initiated, it seems clear that none of these campaigns have been able to mobilise significant numbers of people. The announced and hoped-for “hot fall” never materialised. The government succeeded in managing the crisis. The trade unions, trapped in their conformist logic of locational competition, did not mobilise. None of the campaigns were able to offer a credible perspective and alternative. What’s more, they did not take into account the ecological need to reduce the overall energy consumption of our society.

**Yet, the link between war and climate change seems extremely evident. What should an ecosocialist response in this scenario look like?**

An ecosocialist perspective needs to integrate three interrelated elements.

The first is social security for people and defense of real wages. This is the focus of many of these initiatives, which is good. It is important to demand wage rises. But we must also include another aspect that is rarely mentioned, and which should be the focus, namely the expansion of social infrastructure. What is the best way to collectively protect people? By defending and improving social infrastructure: housing, healthcare, care in a broader sense, public transport, education. Generally speaking, we need cities of shorter distances. Such a perspective begins to incorporate the ecological dimension, because if we improve social infrastructure, we reduce the material and energy throughput in society.

The second element is the ecological question. We have to accept that the globe is warming and that the Earth system is changing — and fast. Yet the urgency of the ecological situation has not been fully understood by many on the left. It seems that global heating is something that is happening somewhere else in the world but not at home. They address the ecological question in a superficial way, as if it is just an add-on: if the add-on works, good; if it doesn't, or it is too complicated, they just drop it. But the ecological question has to be integrated into everything we do. This means, firstly, overcoming the energy transition crisis by speeding up the move to renewables, rather than pursuing Russia gas as advocated by industry groups and Sahra Wagenknecht. Second, and just as important, this means a massive reduction in material throughput and energy consumption. This requires a complete industrial conversion, including the dismantling of certain industries.

The third element is international solidarity. In a general sense, this means taking into account that imperialist countries owe a huge ecological debt to the rest of the world. Carbon emission reductions in our countries must occur much more rapidly than elsewhere. In a more concrete and immediate sense, the movement has to express its solidarity with Ukrainians resisting Russian occupation. It should be noted that the Putin regime and its military complex relies largely on revenues from the fossil fuel industry.

We need to integrate these three pillars. Unfortunately, the traditional left has just focused on one pillar — the social — and from a very minimalistic perspective. It is as if they think that because left forces are weak, we need to put forward simple demands — a kind of social populism — hoping this will mobilise people and help the left win influence against the right. I am not convinced such an approach will work. Many people see the urgency of dealing with rising energy prices, but they also see this is not an easy issue to solve. They understand that you cannot resolve it by simply imposing price caps, because all that means is the state subsidising companies by paying the difference. That is why we need a much more comprehensive approach that also seeks a reduction in energy consumption and radical ecological measures.

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