

Germany: War, gas price protests and solidarity with Ukraine — An ecosocialist perspective

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Across Europe, protests have been growing over rising gas prices, with Germany no exception. Politicians have sought to blame Russian President Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine — or, alternatively, sanctions imposed by Europe — for the situation.

But is this the case? How should ecosocialists approach the interrelated issues of climate, war, gas prices and international solidarity?

Green Left's 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 also the author of [Climate Revolution: Why we need an ecosocialist alternative](#) (available in German).

To start with, how important were the gas ties between Germany and Russia?

Since 1973, when West and East Germany started importing natural gas from Russia, the importance of Russian natural gas for Germany has continuously risen. By 2020, it represented about 54-55% of natural gas used in Germany.

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. On the other side, Germany was important to Russia, as its largest gas importer.

To this we can add the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines, the latter of 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.

But this decades-long orientation is over due to the war — at least for now.

Does this 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.

I would argue the fundamental reason for rising prices is the energy transition crisis Germany faces.

On the one hand, fossil fuel companies have been very careful to invest, given concerns over future

prospects due to the energy transition [away from fossil fuels].

On the other hand, renewable energies companies are not investing enough. Moreover, the states do not invest sufficiently either 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.

It is important to add that it was Putin who shut down the delivery of gas to Europe, and not Germany or other Western European countries. There was a constant flow of German money going to Russia up until Putin stopped the flow of gas.

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?

From a more strategic viewpoint, rather than pursue an aggressive policy towards Russia, the main German capitalist groups have traditionally promoted good relations in order to peacefully conquer the Russian market.

Even after [Putin's] annexation of Crimea, relations between the two remained steady. In terms of weapons sales, the ties between Germany and Russia were stronger than those between Germany and Ukraine.

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. Germany is now dependent on other energy sources, such as LNG [liquefied natural gas] 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.

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

Within the German ruling class, there are different sensibilities, it is not homogeneous. But the most credible position is that they want this war to finish sooner rather than later.

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 reestablish new relations with Russia.

Now, the situation has become more difficult for them [to argue this case], again because of the Ukrainian resistance, which has been making gains recently.

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.

Radical right-wing forces have been organising protests against rising gas prices across Europe. What can you tell us about the protests in Germany?

There have been demonstrations organised by really reactionary right-wing forces, mostly in what was formerly East Germany. These have been 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 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 right-wing faction] Sahra Wagenknecht.

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, 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 has been 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 has been 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. 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 on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the more traditional left.

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. The urgency of the ecological situation has not been fully understood by some on the left. 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, immediate sense, the movement has to express its solidarity with Ukrainians resisting Russian occupation. It should be noted that the Putin regime 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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