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Gastastrophe

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Thanks to a series of astonishingly foolish decisions, Europe has allowed Vladimir Putin to control much of its energy supply. Here's what it needs to do.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 9th March 2022

As Russia threatens to cut off the fossil gas on which much of Europe depends, the continent's storage facilities are a crucial line of defence. So you'll be glad to hear that Germany possesses a [massive gas storage reservoir](#), under the town of Rehden, in Lower Saxony. The biggest strategic reserve in western Europe, it can hold enough fossil gas to supply 2 million households for a year.

You'll be less delighted to discover who owns it. It belongs to a company called Astora. Astora is a subsidiary of the Russian state company Gazprom. Altogether, it owns about one-quarter of Germany's gas stores. All of them are [almost empty](#). They have been run down to 10% or less of their capacity. According to the German minister for economic affairs and climate action, these storage facilities have been "systematically emptied".

Idiocy is nested within idiocy like a stack of Russian dolls. Germany has allowed private companies to control its strategic reserve, and has imposed no legal requirements on how much gas the reserve should hold. Nor has it prevented companies controlled by foreign states from owning it. Instead, [like the UK](#), it has ceded this crucial security issue to a mysterious deity it calls "the market".

With the Nord Stream 1 pipeline, Germany hooked itself to Russian gas, even as

analysts warned that this might become a major strategic liability. Their warnings have been vindicated: this is the pipeline Russia is now threatening to shut in retaliation for sanctions. As if to reinforce its dependency, in 2005 Germany commissioned a second pipeline, Nord Stream 2. The approval was rushed through by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, just before he left office. Within weeks, he was appointed to run the Nord Stream AG shareholder committee, overseeing the pipeline's construction. He later joined the boards of several Gazprom companies, and became chair of Rosneft, the Russian state oil company.

Why does Germany need Russian gas so badly? Partly because in 2011, after the Fukushima disaster, the federal government decided to shut down all its nuclear plants, owing to the risk of tsunamis in Bavaria. The nuclear shutdown is to Germany what Brexit is to the UK: a needless act of self-harm, driven by misinformation and the irrational allocation of blame.

Within two months of this ruling, Gazprom and the German company RWE signed a memorandum of understanding. It stated that “in light of recent decisions by the German government to reduce their nuclear power programmes, we see good prospects for the construction of new modern gas-fired power plants in Germany”. In 2019, Angela Merkel explained to the World Economic Forum: “We will have phased out nuclear energy by 2022. We have a very difficult problem ... we cannot do without baseload energy. Natural gas will therefore play a greater role for another few decades ... it's perfectly clear that we'll continue to obtain natural gas from Russia.” Germany now relies on Russia for 49% of its gas supply.

Technically and politically, it seems to be too late to reverse this crazy decision, which replaced a low-carbon source of electricity with a high-carbon source. As a result of these stacked idiocies, Russia doesn't have to wage war on Germany to inflict deadly harm. It needs only to cut off the gas.

A similar dependency afflicts much of Europe, which collectively receives 41% of its gas imports and 27% of its oil imports from Russia, as well as almost half its

imported coal. While our government has promised to phase out Russian oil by the end of 2022, this year alone the UK is likely to fund his war machine [to the tune of £2bn](#) in payments for liquefied gas.

Gas and oil, and the banks that finance them, are among the Russian businesses that [have not been sanctioned](#) by the EU, the UK and the US, though they represent, by a long way, Russia's most important source of foreign exchange. Why not? Because we have reduced ourselves to craven dependency on that despotic government, through a dismal failure to wean ourselves off fossil fuels. While we sternly condemn Vladimir Putin, we quietly slip him the money required to sustain his atrocities in Ukraine. Like a ruthless pusher, he exploits our addiction.

Even before the invasion of Ukraine, Europe had a gas crisis, and households faced soaring heating bills. Today we have a gastastrophe. We are lucky in just one respect: that Putin invaded Ukraine in the spring, rather than the autumn. Now we have until October – when major heating demand kicks in again – to implement the comprehensive energy transition that should have happened years ago.

Can it be done so quickly? Yes. When governments want to act, they can do so with great force and effect. When the US joined the second world war, it transformed itself from a largely civilian economy to a military economy [in a similar period](#). Manufacturing, services, administration: all were comprehensively retooled. Almost everyone, in one way or another, was mobilised to support the war effort. The federal government [spent more money](#) between 1942 and 1945 than it did between 1789 and 1941. With similar determination and resources, rolling out a massive programme of home insulation, heat pumps, renewable energy, public transport and other mature technologies, we could [transform ourselves](#) from a high- to a low-carbon economy just as swiftly and decisively.

And, perhaps, go further. On the promise of a scientific discovery that was only three years old, in late 1941 President Roosevelt [approved a strategic](#)

[programme](#) to develop two entirely new technologies. Both were delivered in less than four years. That these were nightmare technologies (explosion and implosion nuclear weapons) does not detract from the principle: when governments use their power, the old rules that are held to determine what is possible no longer apply. I wonder what would happen if governments invested similar resources and political will in the development of kinder nuclear technologies, including new designs for small modular reactors and [the fusion programme](#). I suspect things could shift at extraordinary speed.

The measures needed to forestall environmental catastrophe [are the same](#) as those required to release ourselves from dependency on the autocratic governments and ecocidal corporations that control the world's fossil fuels. Starving the Russian military machine of funds, preventing the collapse of life on Earth: we can do both at once. So what are we waiting for?

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