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European Energy Crisis: Social Unrest and Calls for Change



Demonstrators take part in an anti-government protest rally in reaction to rising energy prices during the European Energy Crisis in Prague, Czech Republic, September 28, 2022. Source: REUTERS/ David W Cerny

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Europe's Winter Energy Crisis: Fuel for Eurosceptics and Russia's War



A demonstration organized by far-right German parties demanding the project restart of the shuttered Nord Stream 2 pipeline in Lubmin, Germany, September 25, 2022. Source: The Nation

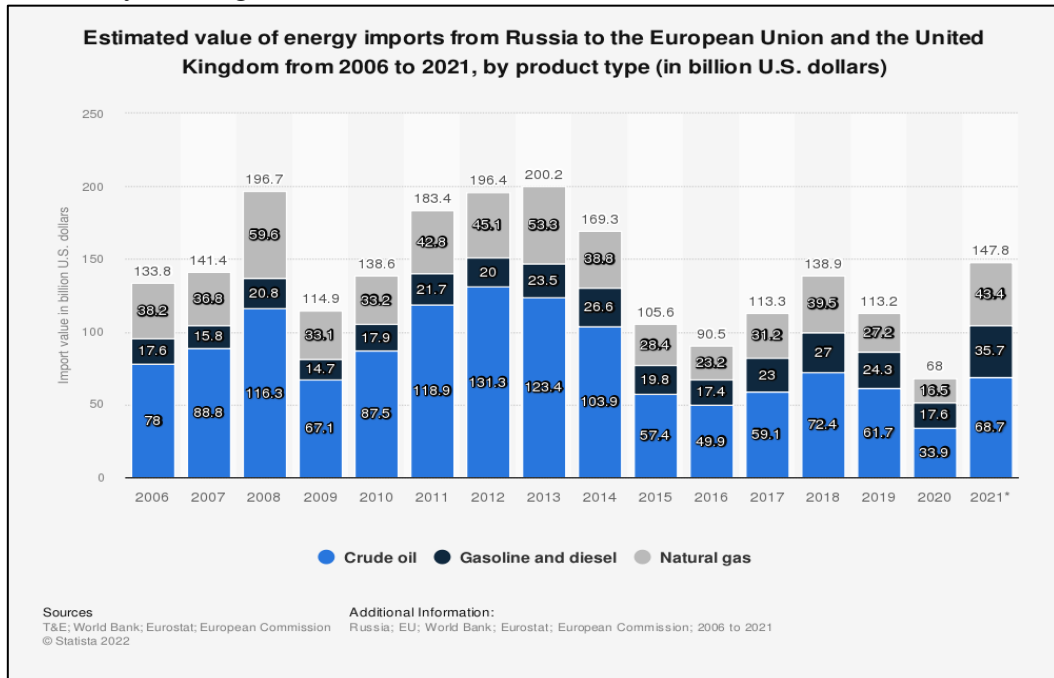
On September 25, 2022, pro-Russian Germans marched and held a rally within the industrial hub of Lubmin to support the resumption of Russian gas imports into Germany and the cancellation of economic sanctions levied against key Russian energy conglomerates. Orchestrated by far-right party leadership from dieBasis and Alternative für Deutschland (AFD), the protest was largely a response to drastically increasing energy prices and to the perceived failures of the German government to alleviate the situation.¹ Similar styled movements and political demonstrations have become increasingly common throughout the European Union's (EU) member states as its citizens begin to feel the longterm effect's of the sanctions levied against Russian President Putin's regime. With winter rapidly approaching and European energy bills skyrocketing, many alternative parties

¹ Süddeutsche Zeitung. "Left criticizes protest action for opening of Nord Stream 2." 26 Sep. 2022.

<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/ parteien-lubmin-linke-kritisiert-protestaktion-fuer-oeffnung-von-nord-stream-2-dpa.urn-newsml-dpa-com-20090101-220926-99-905945>

and political dissidents have begun to capitalize on this European-wide divide to criticize establishment parties and undermine EU institutions. The EU’s success or failure to resolve this unprecedented energy crisis will have resounding impacts on both the political landscape of the region going forward alongside the state of European dependency on Russian energy markets as a whole.

Ever since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Europe has had to struggle with weighing its domestic energy needs with its responsibility to champion liberal world values abroad against Russian irredentism. While the EU has taken steps alongside its allies to deter Russian aggression and curb future escalation utilizing economic sanctions and halting of Russian imports, these very same actions have internally ravaged EU energy markets and disproportionately affected the average EU citizen’s cost of living. This is in large part due to Russian energy imports accounting for nearly 45% of all EU gas imports and close to 40% of its total gas consumption as of 2021, an estimated value totaling around 147.8 billion U.S. dollars.² While the EU scrambles to find alternative energy sources and rid themselves of its Russian dependency, rising energy costs have pushed many Europeans to question if the domestic cost of the sanctions truly outweigh the benefits.



Estimated value of Russian energy imports to the EU in billions USD. Source: World Economic Forum

² International Energy Agency. “How Europe can cut natural gas imports from Russia significantly within a year” 3 March, 2022. <https://www.iea.org/news/how-europe-can-cut-natural-gas-imports-from-russia-significantly-within-a-year>

While many of these initial demonstrations started as simple frustrations over rising energy prices, some have evolved to include far more divisive messages and anti-establishment rhetoric by fringe groups and political parties. Both the far-right and far-left of the political spectrum have found a common cause in using this shared dissatisfaction to rally against the political establishment while boosting their own support base. As such, concepts like Euroscepticism, Anti-NATO sentiment, and Russian sympathizing can oftentimes be found disguised under the larger “affordable energy” messaging of the protests.³ A clear example is the September 3rd march in the Czech Republic in which over 70,000 demonstrators gathered in Prague to demand change. Orchestrated by fringe political groups such as the Czech Communist Party and the far-right “Czech Republic First” group, the protest criticized the Czech Republic’s NATO and EU membership alongside demanding the country be militarily neutral in regard to the Ukrainian conflict.⁴ This protest was held a day after the ruling Administration had narrowly survived a no-confidence vote amid opposition claims of inaction against inflation and energy prices.⁵ The protest would later be deemed “pro-Russian” and “against the interests of the Czech Republic” by Prime Minister Petr Fiala.⁶ The demonstration in the Czech Republic only assists in revealing the destabilizing effect the Russian sanctions are having internally and why the EU must be vigilant if it wishes to prevent further European division.

Russia has much to gain by keeping a stranglehold on European energy and as such surely has vested interests in undermining EU cohesion and promoting internal dissent. Outside of supporting the protests, Russia has pursued other paths to destabilize the EU’s unified policy. Hungary, oftentimes critical of the EU and its oversight, has independently signed an agreement with the Russian corporation Gazprom to reroute 5.8 million cubic meters of gas a day via the

³ Reuters. “Tens of Thousands Protest in Prague against Czech Government, EU and NATO.” 4 September 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/tens-thousands-protest-prague-against-czech-government-eu-nato-2022-09-03/>

⁴ Reuters. “Czechs Protest Handling of Energy Crisis, Membership of EU and NATO” 28 September 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/thousands-czechs-protest-governments-handling-energy-crisis-2022-09-28/>

⁵ Reuters. “Tens of Thousands Protest in Prague against Czech Government, EU and NATO.” 4 September 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/tens-thousands-protest-prague-against-czech-government-eu-nato-2022-09-03/>

⁶ Ibid.

TurkStream pipeline to Hungary.⁷ Hungary is traditionally the Kremlin's most vocal advocate within the EU, and its agreement is a break away from the supposed united front in resisting Russian aggression. This agreement also comes as a flurry of mysterious detonations damaged the subsea Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines.⁸ While there is no clear culprit, Swedish national security investigations have pointed to sabotage as being the most probable cause of the explosions. While neither of the pipelines were active, both still contained natural gas that was in the process of being delivered before the projects shut down. This damage to European energy infrastructure surely pushes the EU further into the spirals of the energy crisis and creates further internal discord. This unprecedented energy crisis has the potential to severely hamper European development over the following years and more importantly, might spark a new wave of political uncertainty.



A large disturbance caused by the breach in the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines off the coast of the Danish Island of Bornholm. Source: Danish Defense Command via AP

While there is uncertainty surrounding the future of European energy, there are hopeful signs that the EU will be able to outlast Russian coercion and the political uncertainty that it brings.

⁷ Reuters. "Hungary Finalizes Deferred Payments Deal with Gazprom- Minister." 12 October 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/hungary-finalises-deferred-payments-deal-with-gazprom-minister-2022-10-12/>

⁸ Brumell, Geoff "Seismologists suspect explosions damaged undersea pipelines that carry Russian gas." *NPR*. 27 September 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/27/1125401980/nord-stream-leaks-explosions-russia-natural-gas-sabotage>

European gas storage sites have been reported standing at a higher-than-usual 91% capacity with German sites having hit 95%, a level that was originally targeted to have been met by November 1, 2022.⁹ The chances of shortages and rationing have been drastically decreased and projections signal that these filled storages will assist in outlasting winter. Similarly, gas prices have begun to drastically fall due to mild temperatures and government intervention.¹⁰ While there is cause to celebrate, the EU must be vigilant in the following months if they wish to both maintain its populaces support while moving forward in becoming energy independent from Russia.



⁹ Dezem, Vanessa "Europe Gas Set for Weekly Loss as Germany Beats Storage Target" *Yahoo! Finance* 14 October, 2022.
<https://ca.finance.yahoo.com/news/europe-gas-poised-weekly-loss-064524029.html>

¹⁰ Liboreiro, Jorge. "Energy Crisis: Europe's gas prices hit three-month low as demand falls" *Euronews*. 11 October, 2022.
<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/10/10/europes-gas-prices-reach-three-month-low-as-consumer-demand-and-industrial-production-decl>