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# ‘We need a master plan for energy policy in Europe’

German social democrat Matthias Miersch on extending the life of nuclear reactors, the expansion of renewable energy, and alternatives to Russian gas

**German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has proclaimed the advent of a turning point, the *Zeitenwende*. Does this also apply to energy policy and industrial policy, or only to security and defence issues?**

> It clearly also applies to energy and industrial policy. This war has shown us how important energy policy really is. We have to change course accordingly. To give an example: over decades we have created a legal culture in which individual interests had enormous power to obstruct the interests of the general public, for example when it came to expanding the role of renewable energy. We have to put the common good back at the heart of things, especially with regard to energy policy.

**Our Eastern European neighbours warned Berlin not to become dependent on Russian energy imports, and Russian gas in particular. Did German policymakers put too much faith in the ‘change through trade’ approach?**

> From today’s perspective, of course, we have relied too much on Russia for gas. However, we also always have to consider possible consequences for the climate and the environment. The carbon footprint of American fracked gas transported by ship is not exactly favourable. So there were compelling arguments in favour of cooperation with Russia, especially since, for example, the Dutch – and similarly the Norwegians – have decided to massively reduce gas production because of the risk of earthquakes.

**At the beginning of the year, the government still considered gas to be a cost-effective and therefore crucial transitional technology on the path to a climate-neutral economy. Does Berlin now have to rethink completely or is it possible to simply switch suppliers?**

In every crisis lies an opportunity. We can now make much faster progress in the expansion of renewable energy than in recent years. Thanks to the traffic light coalition of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals, we can remove some blockages that could not be tackled with the Conservatives. I hope that the European Union and all member states will join in this massive effort, so that in the future renewables will be the preeminent source and the future will no longer be seen as being in fossil fuel or nuclear power.

**At the same time, the European Parliament this week approved the classification of gas and nuclear power within the EU Taxonomy as sustainable green investments. Doesn't this risk diverting the necessary investments away from renewables?**

I would have preferred the European Parliament to make a different decision. But when we see the risks that investments in the construction of new nuclear power plants still entail, then I have reason to hope that conscientious investors will prioritise renewables. As far as gas-fired power plants are concerned, it is clear from international decisions on climate protection that their lifespan is finite. Everyone knows that only renewables are truly sustainable. That's why the future belongs to them.

**In order to solve the energy crisis, isn't Germany currently building new infrastructure that will bind us to fossil energies for decades to come, for example liquefied natural gas?**

Our fossil era is supposed to end by 2045 at the latest. That is relatively soon. But if our concern is to ensure security of supply, it is still a long time. The bridge into the era of renewables must not be endless, but it is necessary. What is needed is the creation of a logistics and infrastructure that we can continue to use in the hydrogen era.

**How do you assess the latest decisions and proposals coming out of Brussels, such as the RePowerEU programme, the EU Commission's proposal for ending dependence on Russian fossil fuels as quickly as possible?**

It's going in the right direction. But we need to do much more. We need to improve investment opportunities and we need to move on legal questions concerning subsidies and permits, for example in the interaction between nature conservation and energy generation. We need a master plan for energy policy in Europe.

**In the current supply and cost-of-living crisis, nuclear power is also coming back into focus, as the decision with regard to the EU**

**Taxonomy also suggests. Is this also true for Berlin?**

We need to problematise nuclear power within the European Union. It is not a sustainable form of energy. There are immense problems associated with the use of nuclear power, starting with the uranium supplies, which also come from Russia. It is a dangerous technology, as we are currently seeing again in the debates over nuclear reactors. The question of final storage remains unresolved. 30,000 generations coming after us will be burdened with nuclear waste. France has recently had to shut down a large number of its nuclear power plants for a wide variety of reasons and has been dependent on imports from other countries, such as Germany. For construction projects actually under way, the need for subsidies is insanely high. And we see delays. We have to be honest within the European Union and say: we can have only one shared goal, and that is the greatest possible expansion of renewables.

**There are still three nuclear power plants running in Germany that will be shut down at the end of the year. Why don't we at least extend the lifetimes of these three nuclear power plants in view of the energy crisis?**

There is a clear commitment under the coalition agreement, even if some Liberals are now calling for an extension of the operating life. The safety requirements are very stringent, and safety must always be guaranteed. Thus, there would first have to be an assessment of whether costly retrofitting would be necessary to allow the plants to continue operating after 2022. Currently, the power plants are designed for operation until the end of 2022 – and not beyond. In addition, the plants no longer have any fresh fuel assemblies. These cannot be bought off the shelf; they have to be specially manufactured and then approved by the nuclear authorities. So it is hardly likely to help for the next winter. We also need alternatives in the heating sector and a substitute for gas. Electricity is not the biggest issue. So these three nuclear power plants are certainly not the solution.

**Germany is often accused of taking too ideological a view of the nuclear issue. For instance, what about the new generation, and in particular small modular reactors, known as SMRs?**

They are not at all market-ready. The whole debate reminds me of nuclear fusion, which has also been talked about since the 1970s as a solution that is always just around the corner. There is no alternative to the massive expansion of renewables.

**In April, Germany had already announced that it would be able to do**

**without Russian oil by the end of the year and accordingly supported the EU demand for a 100 per cent oil embargo. Under pressure from Hungary, however, this has now turned out to be very half-hearted, with oil transported via pipelines being exempt. Is it possible in this fashion to achieve the goal of hitting the Russian economy hard?**

Absolutely. These are the largest sanctions packages ever adopted. This is without question an important signal towards Russia. But of course we know that Russia is trying to find alternative buyers. These sanctions are therefore only one piece in the larger mosaic of measures to counter Russia's war of aggression.

**At the very start of the Russian attack on Ukraine, Berlin was under intense pressure. There were insistent calls for a very rapid boycott of gas, together with the argument that this would end the war, as Moscow would be deprived of important funds. Berlin did not yield to this and warned of the serious consequences of an import ban. What are these in concrete terms?**

In these discussions, everyone is longing for simple solutions to end this conflict. But things are not that simple. This applies to the question of which weapons are supplied by NATO or by the countries of the European Union, and it also applies to the question of an embargo. We always have to recognise that many states did not agree to the UN resolution against Russia. All these countries are potential buyers of Russian oil and gas. So it isn't just a case of pulling a lever and then the war is over.

The Federal Republic of Germany is also the only highly industrialised country to have made a legally binding decision to phase out coal and nuclear power at the same time. Because of this, we have a different energy infrastructure from other countries. If gas were to be cut off here from one day to the next, there would be harmful consequences for large parts of the economy and for consumers. Ultimately, the Chancellor has sworn on the constitution that he will prevent harmful impacts on the population. A gas embargo must therefore be handled with caution.

**When can we realistically expect to be able to turn off the Russian gas tap in Germany?**

That depends on what alternative agreements can be concluded. We are negotiating with Qatar, with Canada, and also with Norway. We have new LNG terminals in the planning stage that will be built in a very short time. We have set up a legislative, planning, and approval process the likes of which has never been seen before. The construction of these terminals could well be completed in 2023. In

the past, Germany has relied too much on Russian gas. So this new infrastructure makes sense in order to enable us to be more flexible. But of course we must also significantly accelerate the expansion of renewables. In the long term, they are the best alternative to Putin's gas.

**We would have to speed up the energy transition enormously and make massive additional investments. This will increase the prices for energy and heat in the short to medium term. Citizens and businesses are already groaning under the yoke of historically unprecedented high energy prices. How can these conflicting goals be balanced and a solution found, in particular from a social-democratic perspective?**

The price hikes reveal what is in some cases clearly speculative behaviour. I would like to see clearer signals from the European Commission that something is being done to counter this profiteering and that the issue of taxing profits is also being addressed. However, it is also a matter of acting together on the global market and countering this speculation through European market power.

We should also be honest when it comes to costs. We are already experiencing climate change. If we do not take countermeasures, its economic consequences will be much greater. So every investment in good renewable energy infrastructure is an investment in the future. For social democrats, energy policy is providing public services. The state has to intervene here to set the general direction and has to invest massively. This applies to the European Union as well. It also applies to hydrogen infrastructure, which we must conceive of on a European scale. This will involve billions of euros. But it is an investment in the future.

**The focus at the next UN Climate Change Conference COP 27 in November will be on financing issues in particular. In the coming years, Germany and Europe will spend enormous sums on expanding their defence capabilities. They will need to provide support for their citizens and the economy. They will need a lot of money for the restructuring of energy systems. In the final analysis, will the necessary funds for providing massive support to the Global South for climate adaptation, as was promised, not be available?**

That's precisely what must not happen. That is why Germany is focusing so much on forging alliances during its G7 Presidency. We will only achieve security and peace on this planet if we implement the Sustainable Development Goals. That can only be done globally. Of course, we need a lot of money for investments and for adaptation to climate change. But the capital is there, it just has to be taxed

sufficiently if necessary. And we have to break up completely wrong-headed structures, such as financial speculation on food. This is not something that can be solved at the national level.

*This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.*

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**Matthias Miersch**
Hanover/Berlin

Matthias Miersch is a German politician and criminal defense lawyer who serves as the Chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) parliamentary group in the German Bundestag.