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Consume, depend, unplug, repeat

Energy policy is power politics. For years, EU leaders failed to grasp this basic fact. Now there is only one way out: produce our own energy

'Drill, drill, drill!' — Donald Trump's call for more oil and gas is more than just bad news for the planet. His fossil fuel policy also threatens Europe's security. The US president wants to flood America with climate-damaging fuels and make the rest of the world dependent upon them. Under his erratic leadership, the US is striving to dominate global energy markets — not only for economic reasons, but also out of a desire for power.

The removal of Venezuelan President Maduro from power, the eyeing of Greenland's mineral resources, the threatening gestures towards allies — all of this follows a logic that is older than Trump's presidency, but has never been so bluntly articulated: whoever controls fossil resources dictates the rules. International law? An obstacle. The transatlantic partnership? Negotiable. The dignity of other heads of state? A minor issue.

In the first months of his second term, Trump abolished everything in his own country that had to do with climate and environmental protection — he even wants to burn up satellites in space that collect climate data. Wind farms are being stopped, US oil and gas companies are being courted, and environmental standards for drilling are being eliminated. Now he wants to bring the rest of the world into line with his agenda.

Energy policy is power politics. For a long time, German politicians failed to understand this truism, particularly with regard to Russia. The belief that Russian dictator Vladimir Putin could be converted into a democrat and kept in check through economic interests has failed. This naïve idea of 'change through trade' and supposedly reliable partnerships has, in 2022, brought Germany one of the biggest energy crises since the end of the Second World War. Now the Europeans are in the process of making the same mistake again. By now, at the latest, geopolitical events should be robbing all of us of our sleep.

Not a blame but a responsibility

There are many differences between the EU and the US. In terms of energy policy, however, there is one crucial difference: the US has oil and liquefied natural gas, which makes it self-sufficient and enables it to supply many countries. Germany and most of the 27 EU countries have no fossil fuels and have to import over 90 per cent of their energy. Without a steady supply of oil and gas, Germany would not be a world export champion, but a farming country.

No one is to blame for a country's lack of resources. However, the fact that Germany has developed too few alternatives to fossil fuels is a political responsibility. Our dependence on oil and gas imports forces us to put moral and strategic concerns aside. In every Bundestag debate, MPs insist on principles, emphasising, for example, our duty to help the Ukrainian people out of humanitarian considerations. They argue that supplying weapons to Ukraine also protects Germany from future Russian attacks. But we are sacrificing morality and strategic thinking for gas and oil.

Germany and the EU have fallen into a trap that is now snapping shut. In this new world – dominated by men like Trump, Putin and Xi Jinping – dependencies are mercilessly exploited for power politics. But Germany and the EU remain dependent on imports, without which neither factories nor cars nor heating systems would function. This makes Europe vulnerable to blackmail. Nevertheless, the debate on security revolves almost exclusively around armament and hardly at all around energy independence.

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One explanation is that Europe is hoping the Trump era will soon come to an end. But the US president is not an accident of history who will soon disappear. His political line is here to stay: his most powerful supporters are already making plans for the post-Trump era, with JD Vance as his successor.

It can be assumed that European governments are aware of the serious consequences of our dependence. There are already many warning reports. One comes from Mario Draghi, the former head of the European Central Bank. He is certainly not a radical left-wing thinker. In his report on Europe's competitiveness, he writes that Europe is in danger of becoming increasingly vulnerable to blackmail. Draghi speaks of a 'slow

agony' — a gradual decline. One reason for this, he says, is that 50 per cent of imports come from countries with which Europeans have no strategic partnership, meaning that in case of doubt, they can force us to pay higher prices or abandon us altogether. 'This dependence can become a geopolitical weapon', the report says. As long as Europeans decide to buy their energy from an old boys' club of oil autocrats, Trump supporters and backwards-looking business representatives, they are at their mercy.

These are not predictions; this is already happening. Four years ago, Putin turned off the Russian gas tap. Now, other once-reliable business partners are putting pressure on Europe. One way is through political blackmail: last year, EU Commission President von der Leyen had to agree to spend €750 billion on fossil fuels from the US to appease Trump in tariff negotiations. Recently, the US and Qatar imposed a harsh condition: the EU must weaken its supply chain law targeting climate goals and human rights in order to receive further LNG deliveries.

Dependence is weakness. Europe should therefore take it very seriously when the US government writes in its new security strategy: 'Restoring American energy dominance is a key strategic priority.'

This shows that exporting countries can put pressure on Germany at any time. Another possible scenario: the US or countries in the Middle East reduce their supplies or arbitrarily increase prices. German industry collapses, barely able to sell its products on the world market. Many citizens suddenly have to pay more for their fuel and heating, because German gas and oil reserves only last for a few weeks. A shortage threatens the whole of society: no cars run, no fields are fertilised, no steel is produced. This is a serious security problem — our everyday life only functions thanks to these imports. Without them, jobs will disappear, unrest will threaten, government crises will arise, and low-income earners will face real hardship.

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Meeting climate targets strengthens our security

But the federal government under Chancellor Merz seems to be ignoring

the warnings — just as German politicians have downplayed dependence on Russia for decades. In Brussels, the CDU pushed for the ban on the sale of new combustion engine cars from 2035 to be relaxed. This will slow down the European car industry's transition to electric cars that do not require petrol and diesel imports. Since taking office, Economics Minister Katherina Reiche has been trying to build as many gas-fired power plants as possible – as backup capacity for periods of low wind and low sunlight – without giving sufficient consideration to climate-friendly alternatives such as electricity storage. It is completely unclear when these planned gas-fired power plants will be converted to climate-friendly hydrogen. At the same time, she wants to continue to promote gas heating and is fuelling the false claim of a heat pump mandate, which in fact never existed. How Germany is supposed to achieve its climate targets with this policy remains completely unclear. Yet meeting climate targets strengthens our security because it drives the transition to renewable energies.

The major political misunderstanding is that solar and wind power are referred to as 'green' projects, primarily by the Union, but also by the AfD and other European right-wing populists. As if these cheap and domestic energy sources had a party membership card. Yet they make us less dependent on blackmail from the United States or the unstable Middle East.

With over 65 000 kilometres of coastline where the wind blows every day and the daily hours of sunshine in southern Europe, there are free domestic energy sources, made in Europe.

Of course, many will now object: Yes, but our solar panels and wind turbines come from China! And that is correct. Over the last 30 years, Europe has watched as almost all renewable energy technology has migrated to Asia. Chinese manufacturers produce extremely cheaply there. As a result, European companies have been filing for bankruptcy in droves for years. That is why we must take our dependence on China for renewables seriously. In the coming years, it will not only be a matter of phasing out fossil fuels as much as possible and reducing our dependence on them. It is just as important to make Germany and the EU the leading technology location for renewables once again. Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between dependence on renewables and dependence on fossil fuels. Gas-fired power stations, cars and oil and gas heating systems need a constant supply of fuel; without it, the technology is useless. The energy source itself

must therefore be imported on a permanent basis as long as the car is running or the gas-fired power station is operating. This dependence never ends.

A solar module, on the other hand, uses the sun as its energy source — free of charge and inexhaustible. There is no need for continuous imports. Neither LNG ships nor terminals, neither oil tankers nor a complex network of oil and gas pipelines under our soil are necessary. The dependency is one-off rather than perpetual. EU countries must therefore focus on their own resources. With over 65 000 kilometres of coastline where the wind blows every day and the daily hours of sunshine in southern Europe, there are free domestic energy sources, made in Europe. All we have to do is tap into them. Even if conservatives and right-wingers are currently calling for the opposite, the EU Commission's Green Deal is not only urgently needed climate protection, but also a piece of patriotism. After all, not being susceptible to blackmail ultimately protects European democracy.

This article is based on the book by Susanne Götze and Annika Jöres, 'Die Sicherheitslüge. Wie Europa sich mit Waffen schützen will — aber mit Öl und Gas erpressbar macht' (The security lie. How Europe wants to protect itself with weapons — but makes itself vulnerable to blackmail with oil and gas), which was recently published by oekom.



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