

The Russian-Ukraine Crisis Shows The Need for Real Solutions to Climate Change

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It is possible that Russian's invasion of its neighbor would never have happened if Europe had been serious about alternative to fossil fuels?

In certain ways, Europe has taken the lead in confronting climate change, including Germany's decision to phase out coal burning power plants, as well as, France's announcement to invest \$35 billion in nuclear and renewable energy.

Fossil fuels are the problem. Prompt removal of them is the only answer.

Yet, in other ways, European plans to confront climate change are problematic, if not wrongheaded.

The Russian/Ukraine crisis puts on display for the world to see how one such way of confronting climate change is deeply flawed, namely, crafting energy plans according to the concept of 'Net Zero Carbon Emissions,' or 'Carbon Neutrality.'

In short, it's possible that Russia's invasion of its neighbor would never have happened if Europe had been serious about the alternatives to fossil fuels.

The problem is apparent in European Union's 'Energy Union Strategy' from 2015, and its plan for how to promote energy markets, efficiency, decarbonization and research. From that strategic initiative, EU member countries decided to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% from 1990 levels by 2030. The overall goal is to be entirely 'carbon neutral' by 2050.

This focus on 'carbon neutrality' is where we find the problem.

For a business, government, or for that matter, international organization, to pledge to be carbon neutral means that greenhouse gases emitted into the atmosphere by that entity are balanced by a reduction of carbon emissions somewhere else.

For instance, a company may continue to burn coal - even increase doing so - if at some other place, that same business reduces its carbon footprint in some way such as planting trees or investing in solar energy.

Environmental groups, such as Greenpeace, argue that such a strategy for confronting climate change is 'greenwashing' as oil companies such as Chevron may claim that they are environmentally friendly in claiming to be 'carbon neutral', but really, just masking their pollutive exploits.

It is within this logic that we can understand the tense relationship that Europe has with Russia. Central to Europe's energy plans is the ready and constant supply of Russian natural gas. In 2015, when the First State of the Union Energy Strategy Plan was issued the "ongoing tensions between Russia and Ukraine" were referenced, as well as how "The (European) Commission takes note of the plans of commercial companies to build further pipelines connecting Russian and Germany through the Baltic Sea."

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The last report from 2020 makes similar references to both the ongoing tensions between Russia and Ukraine, and how natural gas will still be pumped from Russia into Europe.

In fact, as of 2019, 60% of Europe's energy needs were met via imports. Within that amount, natural gas has increasingly been used to meet the continent's fuel needs, approaching 25% of overall energy consumption in 2020.

Europe receives its natural gas through the Nord Stream pipeline, which runs under the Baltic Sea from Russia into Germany.

Meanwhile, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which is the principal pipeline that natural gas from Russia enters into Europe, has been the center of discussions pertaining to sanctions. Germany has waffled for months, with officials urging the U.S. not to place sanctions on Russian interests at the end of 2021. While apparently switching positions, recently stating that financial penalties should be seriously considered.

Only as Russia was invading Ukraine, did Germany decide to not certify the pipeline, which halts the flow of gas into Europe.

But the damage was already done, so to speak.

The European powers wrote natural gas - and Russia - into their strategic energy needs, due to the false belief that natural gas is the "transitional" energy source that could be utilized as countries move away from burning more pollutive fossil fuels for their energy needs.

There are multiple ways that this is a problem.

Among concerns, there's the fact that burning natural gas still emits carbon dioxide and making infrastructure changes to accommodate natural gas locks green gas emissions into the energy grid.

On the first point, we encounter what some economists call "Jevon's Paradox."

The nineteenth century British economist, William Stanley Jevons, found that technical changes made to increase coal burning efficiency - meaning using less at a particular site - led to more companies using the resource, and therefore, generating more pollution in the aggregate.

Transitioning to natural gas is no different - burning natural gas still emits carbon less than coal, yet as more and more companies adopt it, total greenhouse gas emissions will increase.

As for locking greenhouse gas emissions in energy infrastructure - we know that there are plenty of renewable energy sources that do not involve burning fossil fuels.

Not only solar and wind, but certain farming technologies, such as agroecology, are found to have a minimal carbon footprint.

For these reasons, placing Russia's natural gas into Europe's energy plans was a critical mistake, not only for the climate, but for overall security concerns in the region. Countries such as Germany have hesitated in firmly responding to Putin because of the European Union's "Net Zero Carbon Emission" strategic goal.

The still larger lesson here is with how we approach strategic plans to address the ongoing climate change crisis. Promoting "Carbon Neutrality" or "Net Zero Carbon Emissions" are examples of false solutions that do not get at the root of the problem.