

Politics & Policy

Angela Merkel Should Finally Kill Nord Stream 2

After the poisoning of Alexey Navalny, stopping the controversial gas pipeline is Germany's "nuclear option" against Russia.

By [Andreas Kluth](#)

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A language Putin understands. *Photo: Bloomberg*

Like most people outside of the Kremlin, mainstream German politicians are outraged about the poisoning of Alexey Navalny, the Russian opposition leader who's being treated in a Berlin clinic and has just come out of a coma. Then again, they've been outraged countless times about whatever Russia under President Vladimir Putin has got up to. And their indignation has never amounted to much. This time something is different.

Just ask Norbert Roettgen, the chairman of the Bundestag's foreign-policy committee and one of three candidates to become the next leader of the center-right Christian Democrats, Chancellor

Angela Merkel's party. He thinks Germany and Europe must talk to Putin in a language the Russian leader understands: gas. Specifically, Roettgen wants to halt construction of a pipeline that runs under the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany and is already 94% built. A growing chorus of German voices agrees with him.

Called Nord Stream 2 because it runs right alongside an existing pipeline, this project, led by the Kremlin-controlled energy giant Gazprom PJSC, has for years been a geopolitical and diplomatic disaster for Merkel. Almost all of Germany's allies bitterly oppose it, from the Poles and Balts in the east to the French and Americans in the west. It's made Germany look like an unreliable and insensitive partner just as Merkel tries to keep the European Union and the transatlantic relationship from unraveling.

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So I have no doubt that Merkel has understood all along that Nord Stream 2 is a mistake. And yet, she has so far defended it in public. Just the other day, she averred that the pipeline, in which many private European companies have invested, should be kept separate from the Navalny case. Why?





Photographer: Bloomberg

The reason is that Merkel needs to keep the peace in her coalition, which includes the center-left and generally pro-Russian Social Democrats. Nord Stream 2 was always primarily their baby. The most shameless among them is Gerhard Schroeder, a Putin buddy who was Merkel's predecessor as chancellor and is now chairman of Gazprom's Nord Stream AG and Rosneft Oil Co. PJSC, another Russian energy giant. But even the SPD's current leaders have carried on backing the pipeline.

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The U.S. has made this domestic constraint on Merkel tighter. President Donald Trump keeps browbeating Merkel for making Germany "captive" to Russia, which is an exaggeration. And three U.S. Senators, including Ted Cruz, are campaigning to levy sanctions against a German port helping to complete Nord Stream 2. It happens to be in Merkel's own constituency.

Predictably, this has triggered every anti-American impulse from lefties and eastern Germans, and howls of "blackmail" across the political spectrum. Merkel cannot be seen to bow under this

American pressure. If nothing else had happened, Merkel would have been less willing than ever to bury the pipeline.

But something did happen: The confirmation from German military labs that Navalny was indeed attacked with novichok. The nerve agent was developed in the Soviet Union, has been used against the Kremlin's foes before and is outlawed by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

At Putin's direction, meanwhile, the Kremlin is playing the same game as ever, creating fictional counter-narratives to confuse and deflect. The point, as I've argued, is to display the naked power that allows Putin to abolish truth with impunity.

But this time that's too much even for some German Social Democrats to bear. One of them is Heiko Maas, the country's foreign minister, who told a German newspaper that he hopes "the Russians don't force us to change our stance" on Nord Stream 2. Merkel has now let it be known that she also thinks "it's wrong to rule out" a change in pipeline policy. Notice the subtle change.

Those who've watched her during her 15 years in office are reminded of another notable U-turn. In line with her party's policy at the time, she initially extended the life of Germany's nuclear power stations. But she knew that the German population was overwhelmingly against atomic energy. Then, in 2011, a tsunami caused three nuclear meltdowns in Fukushima. Merkel grasped that this was her opportunity to change direction. Instead of prolonging nuclear power, Germany started exiting it altogether.

She may view the crime against Navalny in the same way as Fukushima. The geopolitical case against Nord Stream 2 is stronger than ever, just as the economic case for it becomes ever weaker. In the coming days or weeks, Merkel therefore could – and should – seize this moment and end it.

It would have to be part of a joint decision by the EU in coordination with other NATO allies. So Trump can help things along by temporarily keeping mum for a change. Meanwhile, Putin still has a chance to save his pipeline by starting to cooperate honestly in the investigation of the novichok attack on Navalny. How likely is that?

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