

Did Putin Sabotage His Own Pipeline? Perhaps He's Not the only Irrational Political Leader

Forbes.com

October 6, 2022

Daniel Markind

This article originally ran on Forbes.com on October 6, 2022. All rights reserved.

Daniel B. Markind is a Forbes.com energy column contributor. The views expressed in this article are not to be associated with the views of Flaster Greenberg PC.

Blasts were heard at the Nord Stream 1 pipeline last week, and damage to the pipeline itself was detected underwater shortly thereafter. Russian sources indicated that the damage would further delay the delivery of natural gas from Russia to Germany, meaning as winter approaches that another source of energy for Europe will be unavailable.

Western sources accused Russia of sabotaging its own pipeline, thus giving Putin a convenient excuse to cut off Europe from Russian gas supplies as cold weather approaches. There is substantial controversy about who is behind this sabotage, but many believe it may have been Putin himself who ordered this done. If this is in fact what happened, it suggests two obvious things:

First, Vladimir Putin is so determined to use the energy weapon against Europe in an attempt to break its solidarity with Ukraine that he will even destroy his own infrastructure.

Second, Putin remains confident enough in his other markets for gas and oil – namely China and India – that he will engage in such extreme tactics, despite both the long-term loss of credibility from Westerners who rely on Russian gas and the significant physical damage to its own pipeline network.

This truly is a remarkable moment. If Putin did this, then he appears convinced that the West's greatest vulnerability is its inability to wean itself from reliance on his energy. If past is prologue, he may even be right about that assessment. In any case, Putin will obviously do everything he can to press that advantage to the fullest.

Perhaps not surprisingly, but highly illogically, cities in the Northeast part of the United States, like Boston and New York, seeing this extreme gambit by Putin, have reacted by doubling down to increase their own vulnerability to him. Instead of finally adopting the most obvious and rational approach of acting to swiftly complete the existing pipeline system to move gas from the Marcellus Shale region of Northeastern Pennsylvania to the Eastern seaboard of the United States, which would ensure that Northeast cities and states will have ready supply and will have successfully insulated themselves from any more of Putin's shenanigans in the future, the Northeastern United States has astonishingly done the exact opposite.

Continued

Falling over themselves to claim the mantle of “green” energy without any real thought to what that actually means in today’s technological and political climate, Northeastern governors have literally done nothing to change their previous position of allowing Putin to hold a whip hand over them should 2023 deliver a cold winter.

Meanwhile, Russia’s gas, as it has been in the past, might be the best, if not only, alternative to heat and power the Northeast given the continuing absence of a usable pipeline system to connect that region to the Marcellus Shale deposits. Even Putin’s possible attack on his own pipeline does not seem to have changed this irrational thinking.

In the winter of 2018, spot prices for natural gas skyrocketed when the thermometer dropped precipitously, supplies ran short, and Boston and New York City actually had to turn to Russian ships delivering Putin’s gas in liquified form lest their citizens, quite literally, freeze to death. Imagine what will happen when Putin’s gas will now not come at all.

To the detriment of us all, ideology and politics continue to triumph over practicality when it comes to this country’s energy policies. The reality is that immense quantities of relatively clean burning natural gas remain trapped in northeastern Pennsylvania and the Southern Tier of New York State. But for the absence of usable pipelines to deliver that gas to where it is most needed, the gas is ready to be tapped and delivered easily to US markets, if not being available for delivery worldwide when locations, like Europe, may find themselves without any source of energy during the winter months due to the aggressive actions of someone like Vladimir Putin.

Contrary to what many in the environmental community would have us believe, and as an interim step before our development of renewable energy can become self-sustaining, burning natural gas would actually help clean the environment and aid significantly in combating climate change. It would reduce existing CO2 emissions (as we switch from coal to natural gas), provide money to struggling farmers in those regions, and increase American national security overall.

Despite the seemingly solid logic and economic reality of the above, our politicians will not willingly access this gas. Too much in the grip of unrealistic assumptions by certain members of the Green movement that selectively focuses only on environmental costs to energy sources from fossil fuels, while ignoring the concomitant costs from premature reliance on sources that it considers to be “renewable” as well, our political leaders will illogically follow the path of Europe and increase our political vulnerability while simultaneously managing to harm, and not improve, our world environment.

One wonders how historians in fifty years-time will view today’s political class. They refuse to take intermediate steps that both would clean the environment and increase national security – the proverbial “win-win” solution – preferring instead to take a maximalist approach that eschews those obvious environmental benefits and that politically plays into the hands of a man who is ruthless and calculating enough to, possibly literally, destroy his own pipeline.

Continued

We can only hope our sons and daughters will not have to risk the ultimate sacrifice because of the policies of those who claim to be pro-environment but who would do everything they can to expose both it, and our children, to greater risk without thinking through the consequences in a rational and principled manner.

Climate change is, undeniably, an existential risk to our future and that of our children. But it appears some have forgotten that we live in a world of many other existential risks that, in their own way, are every bit as dangerous to our short- and long-term survival as is climate change.

ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

Daniel Markind