

The Nord Stream Pipeline Explosions: Challenging False Narratives

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The claim that the Nord Stream gas pipeline was blown up by U.S. special forces, made last week by the investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, is being used to reinforce false narratives about Russia's culpability for the war in Ukraine.

On 26 September last year, explosions damaged three of Nord Stream's four pipelines, which run under the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany, and sent a large cloud of methane into the atmosphere. Russia has blamed the United States; western media suspected Russia itself of sabotage

Russian gas had been carried to Germany through the first pair of pipelines, Nord Stream 1, from 2012 until three weeks before the explosions.

Construction of the second pair of pipelines, Nord Stream 2, was completed in 2021, but authorisation to use them was denied by Germany on 22 February last year, in response to Russia's preparations to invade Ukraine.

In the seven months between then and the explosions, the western powers piled sanctions on Russia in response to the invasion. The Kremlin retaliated by ordering Gazprom, the state-controlled gas holding company, to reduce gas exports to Europe, and effectively wreck a business it had spent more than thirty years building up.

I do not know who blew up the pipelines. But here I will show that (i) Hersh's claims about the effect and purpose of the sabotage are factually incorrect, (ii) his account of the build-up to the explosion misses out huge chunks of the story and is grossly misleading, and (iii) his explanation for U.S. motivation is flawed, and his failure to examine Russian motivation is one-sided.

The effect and purpose of the sabotage

Hersh suggests that the Nord Stream pipelines provided Germany with cheap Russian gas that it

could not have got otherwise, and that, by blowing them up, the United States cut off Russia from an important source of income for the gas.

This is less than half the truth. Actually, the pipelines are part of a larger gas transport system that provided Germany and other European countries with gas for decades before the explosion – and could have continued to do so afterwards, but for the fact that, presumably on the Kremlin's orders, Gazprom stopped supplying it.

Hersh states that, with Nord Stream,

Putin would now have an additional and much-needed major source of income, and Germany and the rest of Western Europe would become addicted to low-cost natural gas supplied by Russia – while diminishing European reliance on America. In fact, that's exactly what happened.

These statements are factually incorrect.

First, Germany and other European countries became steadily more dependent on Russian gas imports through the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s – but this dependence was produced by a range of factors, of which the abundance and low cost of delivery of Russian supplies was one. But supply was never constrained by pipeline capacity, and the construction of Nord Stream did not make European countries “become addicted” to Russian gas.

Second, there was no European “reliance” on the United States for gas, and so Nord Stream could not diminish it. The U.S. did not start exporting liquefied natural gas (LNG) until 2016, four years after Nord Stream began operation. Even by 2021, after sharply increasing its exports to Europe, the U.S. provided less than one-twentieth of the continent's gas.

Third, Nord Stream did not provide “additional income” for Russia. It added capacity to the pipeline system. Its advantages were that (i) it is a more direct route from the new Yamal gas fields to Germany, and (ii) it reduced Gazprom's dependence on transit through Ukraine, a strategic aim since the mid 2000s.

Fourth, the gas going through Nord Stream was not especially “cheap”. It was mostly priced under long-term contracts linked to the price of oil (so when oil prices were high, it was very expensive), and some volumes were linked to European market prices of gas. The price never depended on the pipeline used.

Hersh writes:

Nord Stream 1 was dangerous enough, in the view of NATO and Washington, but Nord Stream 2, whose construction was completed in September 2021, would, if approved by German regulators, double the amount of cheap gas that would be available to Germany and western Europe.

This is factually incorrect.

Nord Stream 2 would have made no difference to the amount of gas, or the amount of Russian gas, available to Germany or anywhere else. It would only have given some commercial advantage to

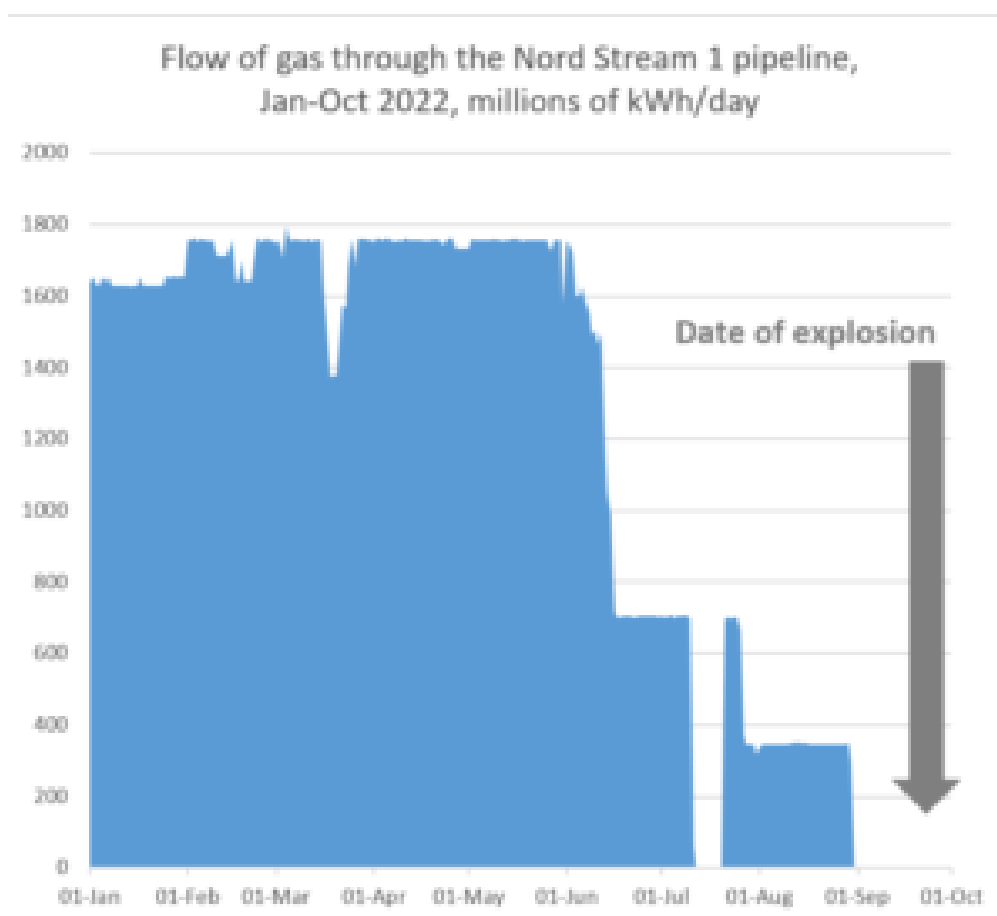
Gazprom, by enabling it to bring more gas to Germany along a shorter, non-Ukrainian route.

These details matter because Hersh gives the impression that, by putting the pipeline out of action, whoever blew it up struck a great blow at the Russian-German gas trade, and at Gazprom's finances.

This impression is completely false.

Because at the time of the explosions, neither Nord Stream 1 nor Nord Stream 2 were in use. For three-and-a-half weeks before the explosions, no gas had been transported through Nord Stream 1. This was an outcome of Russian policy decisions.

In June last year, Gazprom reduced the flows via Nord Stream to less than half their usual level. In July, the pipeline stopped for its usual annual maintenance. Then, Gazprom retroactively declared "force majeure" - a statement to its trading partners that it was unable to deliver gas due to factors beyond its control.



The chart, sourced from company web sites, shows the reduction of gas flows via Greifswald, where the Nord Stream pipeline arrives in Germany.

In August, a month before the explosions, the researcher Jack Sharples explained in detail how the reduction of flows was "part of a broader decline in the physical flow of Russian pipeline gas". In the previous year, 2021, Gazprom had not re-filled its storage facilities in Europe as it normally did. Over the winter of 2021-22, despite high prices, it did not offer volumes on European spot markets.

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the imposition of western sanctions, Gazprom demanded payment for gas in rubles, despite contracts setting prices in dollars or euros. Russia imposed its own sanctions on the Yamal-Europe pipeline through Poland.

This “self sanctioning” - failing to provide gas, including volumes it was contractually obliged to deliver - was a spectacular act of self-harm, effectively destroying a business that Gazprom, and before it the Soviet ministry of oil and gas, had worked to develop since the 1980s.

The gas cut-off, ordered by the Kremlin, once again subordinated the interests of Russian business to the state’s military adventure. It is a key feature of the mounting tension between Russia and the western powers. But it is not once mentioned in Hersh’s article.

The build-up to the explosions

The construction of Nord Stream 2 was disputed among the western powers. Hersh refers to a press conference by US president Joe Biden and German chancellor Olaf Scholz on 7 February 2022, where Biden said: “If Russia invades ... there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2. We will put an end to it.”

This is selective quotation, at best.

Biden was answering the question, “did you receive assurances from chancellor Scholz that Germany will pull the plug on this project if Russia invades Ukraine?” Everyone in the room understood, and anyone who views the clip will see, that this is a conversation about whether the United States could convince Germany to nix the project.

And on 22 February, that’s what happened. The Kremlin formally recognised the “people’s republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk - the clearest signal yet that it intended to invade Ukraine - and Scholz announced that German approval for Nord Stream was withdrawn. That meant the pipeline could not be used for the foreseeable future.

Any serious account of what led up to the explosions would have to explain this vital reversal of German policy. Hersh does not mention it.

In fact, he quotes his single source - an unnamed person “with direct knowledge of the operational planning” for blowing up the pipeline - saying that, by talking publicly about putting a stop to Nord Stream 2, Biden was giving the game away. Hersh writes:

Several of those involved in planning the pipeline mission were dismayed by what they viewed as indirect references to the attack. [...] Biden’s [...] indiscretion, if that’s what it was, might have frustrated some of the planners. But it also created an opportunity [because the operation need no longer be classified as covert].

This type of journalism is absurdly one-sided.

What did these shadowy figures think when Scholz announced - three weeks after the press conference, and seven months before the explosion - that Nord Stream 2 was a dead duck? How did they react when Gazprom stopped using Nord Stream 1? Hersh doesn’t tell his readers, because he doesn’t even refer to these turning-points in the story.

Scholz’s 22 February announcement - a public, political change of heart that froze Nord Stream 2 - was the culmination of a complex chain of events, in which Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine cut across the conduct of its gas sales.

As Russia and Ukraine set out on their post-Soviet paths in the 1990s, Russia’s dependence on

Ukraine to transit its gas to Europe, and Ukraine's dependence on imports of gas for its own use, had been sources of endless tension. This culminated in the "gas war" of January 2009, when supplies bound for Europe were cut off for two weeks.

In 2014, when Russia's ally Viktor Yanukovich was overthrown in Ukraine and Russia intervened militarily to support the eastern Ukrainian separatists, these tensions mounted. Plans to build Nord Stream 2, shelved for commercial reasons in 2011, were revived in 2015 with the participation of western oil companies. The western sanctions against Russia, imposed after the annexation of Crimea, were half-hearted, but by 2017 were sufficient to convince those companies to withdraw, or put the project at arm's length.

At this time, researching these events as a senior research fellow at the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, I disputed the mainstream western view that everything could be explained in terms of Russia using gas as an "energy weapon"; I believed that Gazprom's strategy reflected economic motives as well as the Kremlin's political imperatives. But as time went on, the latter became stronger. (See e.g. [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).)

On the American side, there was more talk than action on the Nord Stream 2 sanctions during the Trump presidency (2017-21), and it looked as though Gazprom, by pressing on regardless, would produce a *fait accompli* that Germany would accept.

When Biden's team arrived in the White House, they sought to draw a line under the issue. The U.S. government, like Germany, was wary of Russia, but ready to compromise. In May 2021, the sanctions were dropped.

Hersh calls this a "stunning turnaround". In fact it was a logical continuation of the western powers' approach: to contain, and use, the Kremlin - not to destroy it. In July 2021 Germany, the United States and Ukraine came to an agreement that, while the pipeline would go ahead, the western powers would provide funds for energy sector reforms in Ukraine.

This agreement states:

Should Russia attempt to use energy as a weapon or commit further aggressive acts against Ukraine, Germany will take action at the national level and press for effective measures at the European level, including sanctions, to limit Russian export capabilities to Europe in the energy sector, including gas, and/or in other economically relevant sectors. This commitment is designed to ensure that Russia will not misuse any pipeline, including Nord Stream 2, to achieve aggressive political ends by using energy as a weapon.

Nevertheless, Hersh claims that the U.S. administration was "floundering", and opted for a top-secret plan to blow up the pipeline.

How does he explain the July 2021 agreement? He does not mention it.

Possible U.S. and Russian motivations

By September last year, Germany, in line with the agreement, had blocked the use of Nord Stream 2. Gazprom had stopped using Nord Stream 1. No gas was flowing through the pipelines. The economic partnership between Germany and Russia was in ruins.

What, then, could be a U.S. motive for blowing up the pipeline?

I have no specialist knowledge of U.S. policy-making. I can speculate that, perhaps, someone in the United States sought to deepen this German-Russian rift. Perhaps, rogue elements in the U.S. military got ahead of themselves. Either way, it would to a large extent be slamming the door after the horse had bolted – and potentially causing great offence to Germany, the United States' major partner in Europe.

But the more ambitious motives that Hersh suggests – to stop German reliance on cheap Russian gas, to prevent Nord Stream 2 being used to double the supply of this gas, etc – simply do not accord with the facts.

Hersh writes that, after the explosion, U.S. media suggested that Russia may have been responsible,

but without ever establishing a clear motive for such an act of self-sabotage, beyond simple retribution. [...]

While it was never clear why Russia would seek to destroy its own lucrative pipeline, a more telling rationale for the President's action [to order it to be blown up] came from Secretary of State [Anthony] Blinken [who at a press conference described the “energy crisis” in Europe as “a tremendous opportunity to once and for all remove the dependence on Russian energy”, etc.]

This is poor, one-sided journalism.

The explosion came after the most significant ever shift in Russia's gas export policy, i.e. its decision, from 2021, to run down exports to Europe. It came after Gazprom, against all economic logic and to the detriment of its core business, stopped using Nord Stream.

Given these factors, one possible Russian motive for blowing up the pipeline relates to the procession of arbitration cases that Gazprom seems certain to face from the buyers of its gas – including Uniper, one of the largest, that effectively became insolvent last year – for failing to deliver under contract.

Gazprom's declaration of “force majeure” stands, at first sight, on shaky ground. “Surely it was you who, in June, reduced the volumes?”, the buyers' lawyers might ask.

Any arbitration settlement might consider the volumes Gazprom was required to deliver, stretching far into the future. A defence that referred to a major pipeline being out of action might be a stronger one.

A Gazprom pipeline has been blown up before to settle a commercial dispute, in Turkmenistan in 2009. (See this paper, pages 80-81, for details.) And since 2014 the Kremlin stuck to a strategy that damaged aspects of Russia's foreign economic relationships, in order to pursue its military adventure in Ukraine. So an economically illogical decision to destroy the pipeline, taken in wartime, is not inconceivable.

I repeat: I do not know who blew up the pipeline. It may have been a third party, not the United States or Russia. Or, either of them could have done it with a view to blaming the other side.

But to offer, as cast-iron, U.S. motives that do not accord with the facts – while denying the

possibility that there could be any Russian motives - is not journalism. It is more like propaganda.

Avoiding conspiracy theories

The Kremlin has justified its assault on Ukraine on the grounds that Russian sovereignty was threatened by "NATO expansion", and "leftists" in western countries have picked up this propaganda theme - that the US and its allies, rather than the Russian government, are to blame for Russian aggression.

This fits with a simplified view of the world in which the main enemy is U.S. imperialism, and the enemy of my enemy - even if it is an authoritarian, bloodthirsty representative of capital - is my friend.

Immediately after the pipeline explosion, hints from the Kremlin that the United States was responsible were amplified on line by such "leftists", as well as conspiracy theorists and Biden's extreme right-wing opponents in the U.S.

Instead of treating such theories with distrust, as any journalist is surely obliged to do, Hersh has lent his deserved reputation - built in the 1970s by reporting on the My Lai massacre, the Cambodia bombing and other U.S. war crimes - to such theories. And not for the first time.

In 2014, Hersh denied the responsibility of Bashar al-Assad's regime for a notorious chemical attack on a suburb of Damascus. Like the Nord Stream story, Hersh's article relied on a single unnamed source, and made no attempt to address a mountain of circumstantial evidence that contradicted it. In 2017, Hersh offered a similar, single-sourced explanation for another chemical attack, on Khan Sheikhoun, that was conclusively rebutted by other journalists (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

"Left" organisations and personalities retail Hersh's Nord Stream story uncritically, because it is what they want to hear. Dogma beats inquiry. Innuendo and false claims beat solidarity with the victims of Russia's scorched-earth war on populations, in Syria in 2014 and 2017, and Ukraine in 2022-23.

Re-forming critical public spaces means challenging the "great men" of the "left" when they offer blinkered, one-sided and untruthful explanations for the dangerous, uncertain realities we face.