

David McWilliams

Germany has sealed Kyiv's fate – Putin's gamble is paying off



Vladimir Putin's gamble all along has been that the West is too comfortable and self-absorbed to take any pain for Ukraine. This week, Germany proved him right. The news that Germany is not even prepared to trade off a percentage point of gross domestic product for Ukrainian lives will have heartened Putin.

Germany has made its choice. It will not risk any of its creature comforts in the face of war crimes. It will not sanction Russian gas. It will not imperil, even in the short term, the interests of corporate Germany for human rights, the sovereignty of nations or any so-called western values. It has hung Ukraine, and by extension all of its democratic eastern neighbours

from Estonia to Romania, out to dry. Germany has also given the two fingers to Washington.

We all know the reason Germany is special. It is a country that is held and holds itself to higher standards, precisely because it is Germany. Regular visitors to the country appreciate the sense of a nation still traumatised by Nazism, a people still suffering from some collective post-traumatic stress disorder. It is palpable. Despite its economic and cultural heft, Germany is haunted. It does not have the permission to lead Europe, nor does it trust itself to do so.

At the heart of Europe lies this extraordinary country. From the death of Bach until 1933, Germany was Europe's absolutely

dominant intellectual, philosophical, theological, mathematical, scientific and cultural force. Germany won more Nobel prizes than the UK and America combined. Its position, a square geographic bloc, defined by the Rhine to the west, the Danube to the south, the Elbe to the east and the Baltic to the north means that everything European goes through Germany – and Russia knows this.

If you think I'm giving Germany a harder time than other countries, you are right, I am, because Germany is the most important player. Where Germany goes, so does Europe.

Tragically, Germany allowed itself to become Russia's hostage, addicted to cheap, free-flowing Siberian energy. Last June this column described Germany as being run by a "carbon coalition", gobbling up fossil fuels to drive its world-beating export industry.

Industrial carbon addict

Behind the luxury brands and reliability of the hyper-successful German economy lies one fact: industrial Germany is a carbon addict marooned in a post-carbon world.

Since 1950 Germany has been burning fossil fuels and turning the result into cars, trains, heavy machinery, plastics, petrochemical products and food. It has exported most of this, resulting in the largest trade surplus per head in the world. The carbon model was so successful for the Germans that all their institutions – political, financial and ideological – were constructed to maintain it.

The Bundesbank kept inflation low to ensure that wages did not go out of control. Those wages were negotiated collectively, taking their lead every year

from the IG Metal trade union, which sets a floor and a ceiling on country-wide wages.

Industry, underpinned by low inflation and manageable wages, fed off the graduates of an education system, annually throwing off engineers, mechanics and designers to work in the fossil fuel-burning manufacturing sector.

The main political party, the CDU, was designed to prop up the interests of this amazingly successful industrial effort dependent on fossil fuel. Germany was run by a "carbon coalition", which brought together industry, political institutions, political parties, the central bank and the technical education system, not to mention the national transport system of roads and railways and, of course, agriculture, all based on burning fossil fuels.

Those words back then were written as a warning that Germany, the home of Europe's environmental movement, is in fact captive to carbon. There was no prescience about Putin, Russia and Ukraine, merely the assertion of energy fragility. Now we know just how fragile Germany is.

By asserting that it will not even turn off an outside-heater to help the Ukrainians, Germany has sealed Kyiv's fate. Putin's gamble is paying off. The West is not muscular, we are weak. We are in the ransom business rather than the justice business. The EU's position is purely transactional.

Germany has put its post-1990 three-card trick – importing cheap Russian energy, fuelling German industry to export stuff to China – before everything else. Yet even the most pessimistic German economists believe that a sudden stop tomorrow is manageable.

66

Germany will not risk any of its creature comforts in the face of war crimes. It has hung Ukraine, and by extension all of its democratic eastern neighbours from Estonia to Romania, out to dry

The Financial Times reported that a "full EU embargo on Russian energy would trigger a major recession in Germany, sending output down 2.2 per cent next year and wiping out more than 400,000 jobs, according to the country's top economic institutes".

This sort of temporary slump is not anywhere near as dislocating as Covid, and the bizarre thing about all this is that Europe has the money to compensate Germany. What did the pandemic show us? It revealed that we can shut down our economies for two years, with little or no permanent damage. We can do this because we have built strong institutions and democratic governments in which the financial world believes.

We are the world's savers, sitting on a nest-egg that allows us to absorb economic pain. That's the purpose of saving, to tide you over in bad times. We have among the deepest financial markets in the world and

a central bank that can print money at will, to protect us from unpleasant shocks. As the pandemic revealed, we have the wherewithal to brazen this out, to reorientate our energy needs to other producers. We have the reserves for three or four months and, with our cash, other producers can be persuaded to increase production.

Do the right thing

Let Russia sell cheaply to China or India; Europe has the means to buy expensive energy from the Gulf, west Africa and the United States. Will it cost us? Sure it will, but what's the point of being rich, if not to buy yourself time in a crisis and do the right thing?

The right thing is to make it as expensive as possible for Russia to kill people. It's really that simple. If Nato won't help them in the field, then the psychology of standing behind Ukraine is all-important. If we in western Europe feel removed, think about what eastern Europeans, living on the Russian border, feel about Germany's choice this week. They will not forget or forgive.

In the 1940s, the German Protestant anti-Nazi pastor Martin Niemöller wrote about moral integrity and the contagion of cowardice in the face of bullies. His famous words are worth repeating today:

"First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a socialist.

"Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist.

"Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew.

"Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me."



HOSTING REFUGEES MAKING IT WORK

Offering a home to fleeing refugees is rewarding but there are plenty of challenges, too. Kindness is the vital thing, but it's also important to set limits, says one host



Joanne Hunt

daughter Camila (3) and Taisiia's English fiancé. "They had met online before the war. When the war started she got out to Poland and flew to Dublin."

Leaving a bombed Zaporizhia and her family behind, Taisiia arrived with a small haversack and little spoken English. "They were a lovely family. There was a great feeling of really hands-on being able to help someone," he says.

Their brief stay was instructive. "You had people using the kitchen, you had people in the sitting room... but we knew it was relatively short term and we were just helping someone."

Once granted their UK visas, the family moved on. When Nataliya and her children arrived, John was more prepared. "I knew I had to have something rather self-contained and I'd have to split the house, even along imaginary lines."

He and Uti converted the utility room into a self-contained kitchen, buying an electric hot plate and microwave. The playroom became a dining room with a single bed. Across a shared hall the family uses a double en-suite room too.

"What we had learned was that as a family for this to work we maybe had to set limits and have certain rules," he says. "We knew we had two children arriving, they have been torn away from their home and they need some sort of normality. We can't leave this to someone else, we've got to be proactive."

The local principal arranged school plac-

es and the community rallied to provide for the family. Nataliya, an accountant, speaks some English. Her children are picking it up quickly in school. Their teacher, sheltering in a bunker in Ukraine, sent homework until Ihor and Zlata started school. The hosts and their guests talk every day and have meals together.

John has helped Nataliya with getting PPS numbers, opening a bank account, getting a medical card and registering with a local doctor. "You are fully supporting them until they get to a point where they are starting to receive social welfare. At that point they are looking after themselves," he says.

He has asked for a weekly contribution of €20 towards electricity, heat and refuse. "I don't think that is going to cover it so, yes, there are financial implications. I'm certainly not complaining. I'm really, really happy that I have done this."

His house insurance provider Zurich updated his policy at no cost.

Written agreement

Having a written agreement is important, he thinks. "Our agreement states I'm offering emergency accommodation; my offer starts on this date and we can review it again at a certain date, what the weekly contribution is, and simple things like what rooms in the house we are offering and that we respect each others' privacy and keep the property clean."

This will help his family stay the course, he feels. "If I had gone the way we did with the first family I think both families would be shattered, we would all be using the kitchen together, sitting down together, we'd be in each others' space. I think the vital thing is kindness. Having some rules doesn't hinder good relations."

It's important the Government lets host families know the bigger picture, says John.

"I'm not happy with Leo Varadkar saying 6,000 refugees are staying with 'friends and family' – I don't want the Government assuming they are staying with us and that they can forget about it. These families are going to be forgotten. There will be few offering accommodation if they think it is going to be a few years with no plan."

Nataliya's husband remains in Ukraine. "We've had times when Nataliya came to us and she was quite upset," says John. "The place was being bombed in Lviv and her mum was sheltering in the bathroom in the apartment block they came from and that was quite distressing for us to hear it live on a Zoom call."

The psychological reality for many fleeing is that they are bringing the war with

66

If your husband or your partner is over there, the safety over here doesn't necessarily compensate for the sense of terror and danger he is involved in

them, says psychotherapist Edward Boyne of the Tivoli Institute. Host families must be mindful of the toll of war and not expect too much from them.

"Their minds are over there," says Boyne. "They will be half here with us, and the other half will be over in Ukraine, maybe even less than half here with us. And that's alright."

Accommodation doesn't solve everything. "If your husband or your partner is over there, the safety over here doesn't necessarily compensate for the sense of terror and danger he is involved in," he says. "It is very hard for them to start any kind of healing process when they are very stressed by that."

Some of the women arriving will have had violence perpetrated on them and their children, he says. "We are getting more facts about that as a weapon of war."

The Tivoli Institute is seeking private sector funding for a free counselling service for refugees, staffed by Ukrainian therapists who have themselves fled. "We already have seven highly qualified Ukrainian therapists who have contacted us. They want to help," he says.

The emotions of those arriving may range from guilt at having survived to being on edge, anger, rage, anxiety and depression, says Boyne. Irish hosts can offer psychological space as much as physical space. "Don't expect too much of them, which is all about them feeling, 'I'm okay whichever way I am'," he says. "Our best gift is our patience and our sense that however you are, it's alright," says Boyne.

Nataliya and others attend a coffee morning run by Hillside Evangelical Church in Greystones, a hub for the growing refugee population. The team there helps with clothing, school places, job applications and medical needs.

"It just kind of happened organically," says Deacon Rachel O'Sullivan. "This is what we try to do as a church body, love people in the best way we can, and at the moment that's in a very practical way with the people of Ukraine. You can't underestimate the value of saying 'I'm sorry this is happening to you and I want to help.'"

Archil, his wife, Yulia, daughter Sofia (11) and mother-in-law Halina arrived on March 12th having fled Kiev. They attend the Hillside hub too. Their host, mother-of-two Davina Naughton, is also accommodating another family in her home near Greystones. "I never could imagine that Irish people are so kind, especially what I saw from Davina. It is absolutely unbelievable," Archil says.

Living in a stranger's house is different, but being with others has helped him. "When you are getting out of this crazy

stress, it is really better with others so you can talk. Otherwise you will sit and think of everything."

A university graduate who had his own business, the future he envisaged is gone. "All of this because of one person, Putin."

Being offered a job by Irish company Ecopipe.ie two weeks ago has been a lifeline for Archil. He would like to see Government aid for Ukrainian refugees channelled into jobs. "Give the benefits to a company who will hire a Ukrainian," he says. "To sit and think about what is happening in your country, who is dying, and to go every week to the post office to collect €200 is more stress. We want jobs."

Host Davina looked for Ukrainian families whose children matched her children's ages. She has moved into her 10-year-old daughter's room with her three-year-old son, putting extra beds in the playroom and in her bedroom.

"I was lucky because I had the space. Some people approach it with putting rules in, but I said, look, let's feel at home and we can sit down in a couple of weeks and see how it's going. We haven't needed to do that."

Sharing food

The families share food. "Everyone makes a dish, they are put on the island and everyone helps themselves. It's nearly like we are living in a commune," she says. Bathrooms are loosely assigned.

Parenting styles can differ and that can be a challenge. "When you take another family under your roof you are showing your child that. My children are battling me now for a little extra time on the iPad," she says. "I've had good chats with the mums and when we have put the kids to bed we have stayed up and maybe had a glass of wine together."

It hasn't been plain sailing, but she didn't expect it to be. "You need to accept that there will be sacrifice, you are going to have to make a compromise for the greater good."

There have been laughs too. "The three-year-old and my three-year-old argue. Russian on one side, and English on the other, and the two of them are getting their points across."

She feels asking her guests for a contribution "changes things" and she hasn't done so. "The thing that does concern me a little bit is I normally take in students for a little bit of extra cash... what isn't great is there is no [Government] support for hosts, even a contribution."

The Red Cross have said 12 months, but I don't know how possible that is in my situation with no help towards the bills when I am on my own."

■ John Geraghty, who is hosting a Ukrainian family at his home in Co Wicklow, with his dog Meeka. He has turned the playroom (above) into a dining room and put a single bed in it. The family also uses another double bedroom with own bathroom.

PHOTOGRAPH: ALAN BETSON