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WHAT HELPS TO COUNTER DONALD TRUMP'S FOSSIL ROLLBACK?

THE ELECTRIC REVOLUTION AND CLIMATE NEUTRALITY THROUGH INTERNATIONAL CITY PARTNERSHIPS.

BY ARMIN OSMANOVIC

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The foreign policy of U.S. President Donald Trump breaks sharply with the post-war order in which the (Western) European states had comfortably settled. West Germany in particular benefited from the liberal global economic system and from the role of the United States as a (debt-financed) engine of growth. Germany also profited from the end of the Soviet Union, as with the collapse of state socialism the country not only regained national unity, but also enjoyed a major peace dividend, as the high military expenses of the Cold War could be reduced. Economically, Germany also gained from the introduction of the common European currency. With the euro, French and Italian industrial companies lost market share to German firms, as monetary devaluation was no longer available to them as a tool.

When China massively boosted demand for German machines and cars in the early 2000s and Russia supplied cheap natural gas for German industrial production, Germans basked in their economic model and in the conviction that they had made all the right economic policy decisions—giving them, in their view, the right to act as taskmasters in crisis countries such as Greece, Portugal, or Italy.

AN ERA ENDS: THE MERKEL YEARS

This "good old days" came to an end definitively with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which had been preceded by the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The low energy prices that had long benefited German industry rose sharply. In addition, the European Central Bank raised interest rates, further weakening the German economy because higher rates made investment more expensive and dampened consumption by private households and the state. Moreover, FDP's Finance Minister, Christian Lindner, in the former "Ampel" (traffic-light) coalition rejected countercyclical fiscal policy, making it far more difficult for Germany—compared with France, for instance—to overcome the energy shock macroeconomically. At the same time, Chinese demand for German machinery and automobiles began to decline.

For years the German automotive industry laughed off the electric car. Former Volkswagen CEO Piëch mocked Tesla's electric vehicles in 2014, calling them highly

flammable. VW would "not build cars that burn," Piëch sneered.[1] Ten years later,

the laughter has faded: China's electromobility strategy has resulted not only in two out of three new cars in China now rolling quietly on electric motors, but also in a sharp decline in sales of German cars in the Chinese market. All German carmakers and suppliers such as Bosch or ZF are suffering heavy losses and are trying to save themselves with restructuring programs that entail major job cuts.

But not only automakers are losing business in China; other German industrial firms are also losing ground in the Middle Kingdom. German exports to China are expected to fall by more than 11 percent in 2025, to around 80 billion euros.

The most recent blow to Germany's once-successful economic model is Donald Trump's tariff policy. The U.S. is Germany's most important export market after the EU, far ahead of China: 161.3 billion euros (2024) compared with 90 billion from China. Trump's import tariffs already left visible traces in the first half of 2025. German exports to the U.S. declined by 3.9 percent compared with the same period in 2024, falling to 77.6 billion euros. How German exports will fare in 2026 is difficult to predict, given the erratic nature of Trump's tariff policy.

A LOOMING SUBJUGATION

The economic problems that dominate German debate—circling mantra-like around global competitiveness, as they did in the 1990s after the end of the reunification boom—are certainly solvable if there is political will. For years Germany has stood accused in Europe because of its high trade surplus. Partners such as France and the EU Commission repeatedly call for higher public spending and higher wages in Germany to stimulate weak domestic demand. The new debt-financed special funds for infrastructure, climate protection, and military spending will support such domestic stimulus and help stabilize the German economy.

At the same time, Chancellor Friedrich Merz's threats of social spending cuts are counterproductive, as they

1 https://taz.de/VW-Mercedes-und-die-anderen/!6124498/

reinforce the widespread impression that Germany is in decline—discouraging consumers from making major purchases in such an uncertain environment.

Trump's plan to divide the globalized economy into geopolitical spheres of influence strikes at the foundations of Germany's foreign (economic) and development policy. Trump is willing to shatter what remains of the international order—which was already severely damaged before his second term—for ideological reasons. Nowhere is this clearer than in the existential issue of climate protection.

Trump's renewed withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement was expected. But the aggressiveness with which his administration now attacks climate protections became evident in both the U.S.–EU tariff agreement—which aims to force the EU to import more fossil energy—and in the sabotage of the international climate agreement on shipping. In his ideological fight against climate protection, which he mocks as "woke culture", any method seems acceptable. This apparently includes the intimidation of international negotiators at UN maritime climate talks in London, as The Financial Times reported.[2] These mafia-style tactics are also used in other areas of international politics to eliminate potential competitors.

This applies also to the dismantling of U.S. development policy—not merely ending USAID to save money, but actively undermining the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs were meant as a compromise between necessary environmental and climate protections and the development needs of the Global South. Trump wants nothing more to do with economic support for countries in the South that might someday challenge the U.S., just as China has done.

Trump uses the same method toward the EU, warning—together with allies in Qatar—that tariffs on imports from countries with weaker climate protections

2 https://www.ft.com/content/4e0a9a30-b014-4745-afe5-c841e36b41da?utm_source=chatgpt.com

could affect the price of American and Qatari liquefied natural gas.[3] The U.S. currently accounts for 13.5 percent of Germany's gas imports.

Trump and his followers view the EU as a vassal in the U.S.-dominated sphere of the world. They do not intend to grant Europe an independent political space—especially not in energy policy. Because Europe, and especially Germany, remain militarily dependent on the U.S., the German government has chosen to yield—unlike China, whose leadership refuses to be bluffed—also in matters of fossil energy policy.

ELECTRIC REVOLUTION AND CLIMATE NEUTRALITY – ROLE OF CITIES

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz does not openly deny the existence of climate change, unlike Trump, but he belongs to the camp of climate minimalists who believe it will not get as bad as climate science predicts. They argue humanity still has time, and therefore the old fossil industries can continue to be protected. This partly explains why Merz is not a driver of the electric revolution, domestically or internationally, even though he likes to speak about "new technologies for climate protection," as he did at COP 30 in Belém. German electric vehicles are also rare in Africa. While Chinese automakers are trying to roll out electromobility, German manufacturers hope to sell their old combustion models—cars they can no longer offload in China. Besides the first electric cars, nearly all solar panels, wind turbines, and batteries in Africa come from China. There is no indication that the German government intends to change this in the coming years. Instead, development money continues to flow—also in Africa—into building a hydrogen industry that will play only a minor role in rapid and effective climate protection, but that slows the electric revolution by reinforcing the impression that fossil gas can continue to be burned until hydrogen is ready.

With its current climate policies, Germany will not meet its obligation to become

3 https://www.gulf-times.com/article/713350/business/qatar-and-usa-send-open-letter-to-heads-of-state-of-eu-member-states-regarding-corporate-sustainability-due-diligence-directive

climate-neutral by 2045. More than ever, the responsibility falls to other levels of government—especially cities. The Hamburg referendum demanding stronger and faster climate action is promising, as is Berlin's tree-planting initiative, which aims for one million new trees by 2040.

Cities must drive the electric revolution themselves by electrifying public transport, prioritizing heat pumps, financially supporting balcony solar systems, and providing space for large battery storage facilities. Above all, cities will be the primary beneficiaries of electrification, as air pollutants and noise levels decrease. Alongside electrification, cities must also redesign the aging, car-centric urban space in favor of bicycles and shared scooters, as well as free buses and trams. Costly and climate-damaging subway expansion—such as Hamburg's new U5[4] —can be avoided if cities consistently reduce private car traffic.

Cities like Berlin, Hamburg, or Stuttgart are still cut in half by inner-city highways—anachronistic urban scars. These wastelands prevent cities from developing into so-called "15-minute cities"—livable places where residents can reach their daily destinations on foot or by bicycle. Successful urban redesign would also free up space for inner-city greenery that supports recreation, water management, urban climate, and even food production, as practiced in the French city of Annecy. [5]

International city partnerships were long focused on cultural exchange or historical remembrance. In recent years, climate protection has gained importance in these partnerships. In some cases, concrete climate partnerships or major climate programs have emerged.

Between German and African cities such programs can be found between Bremen and Durban, Hamburg and Dar es Salaam, Dresden and Brazzaville, Aachen and Cape Town. These partnerships often still follow the logic of traditional development projects: money and technology from the North are meant to solve problems

4 https://www.mopo.de/hamburg/hamburgs-neue-u-bahn-kostet-bis-zu-165-milliarden-euro/

5 https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2018/03/29/l-agriculture-urbaine-peut-elle-nourrir-les-villes_5277804_3244.html

such as wastewater treatment or waste management in the Global South. In the future, these partnerships should include joint climate goals so that German cities like Hamburg and Bremen, with 10 tons of CO_2 emissions per capita per year, can move toward climate neutrality together with cities in the global South, who emit much less.