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The explosions that tore through Russia's pipelines to Europe are still causing rifts years on

3 HR AGO

By  Joseph Ataman



A gas leak at Nord Stream 2 as seen from the Danish F-16 interceptor on Bornholm, Denmark ...



Paris — It was a late September night when muffled blasts and a stream of bubbles broke the surface of the Baltic Sea. Explosions had ripped through

the two Nord Stream gas pipelines, Russia's gas highway into Europe, months after Moscow's full invasion of Ukraine. Years later, shockwaves from that night are still rippling across the continent.

The 2022 attack on the hugely controversial pipelines triggered an international whodunnit, with suspicion falling immediately on Russia and even the US being forced to deny involvement.

Today, intrigue continues to swirl around the blasts even as Germany readies a prosecution against the **suspected Ukrainian saboteurs**. And Poland's efforts to stymie the case – seemingly to shield its ally Ukraine - has thrown up new tensions in Europe.

Germany seems determined for Nord Stream to get its day in court, filing arrest warrants for two Ukrainian men – Volodymyr Zhuravlov, who was detained in Poland, and Serhii Kuznietsov, who was detained in Italy - suspected of involvement in the blast.

Leaders of other nations have cast doubt on whether criminal proceedings should be brought against those allegedly responsible.



Ukrainian diver Volodymyr Zhuravlyov walks free from court after a judge denied Germany's extradition request and lifted his pretrial detention at the district court in Warsaw, Poland, October 17, 2025. *(Omar Marques/Getty Images)*

A decision by a Polish court in mid-October to free Zhuravlov, after slow-balling the man's extradition, has severely undercut Berlin's hopes of a prosecution. In the eyes of the judge, if the Nord Stream blasts were a Ukrainian act of sabotage, that would be a justified response to an unprovoked invasion.

"If Ukraine was indeed the organizer of this act of aggression, then only Ukraine can be held responsible for this event," Judge Dariusz Lubowski said in his verdict halting Zhuravlov's extradition to Germany, CNN affiliate TVN24 **reported**.

The 49-year-old Ukrainian claims he had nothing to do with the attack and that he was in Ukraine at the time it happened, according to TVN24.

German prosecutors allege Zhuravlov, a “trained diver,” was “part of a group of individuals who placed explosives on the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines near the island of Bornholm in September 2022.” The team allegedly used fake identities to rent a yacht to ferry them and their equipment to the blast site.

Serhii Kuznietsov, a 49-year-old former Ukrainian soldier and an alleged coordinator of the operation, was detained on a German warrant in Italy in late August.

Kuznietsov’s defense lawyer Nicola Canestrini told CNN that the Ukrainian denies any wrongdoing and he is currently appealing Italy’s Supreme Court’s decision to extradite him to Germany.



Serhii Kuznietsov is loaded onto a prison police van to be taken back to jail, after appearing before Italy’s Bologna Court of Appeal, which confirmed his arrest on August 22, 2025. (*Massimiliano Donati/Getty Images*)

“Europe’s problem, Ukraine’s problem, the problem of Lithuania and Poland, is not that Nord Stream 2 was blown up, but that it was built,” Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk told journalists in early October.

“It is certainly not in the interest of Poland, nor in the interest of decency and justice, to prosecute or extradite this citizen to another state,” he added.

Tusk’s stance reflects long-standing concerns over the pipelines within Europe and beyond.

As far back as 2007, Poland’s then-defense minister Radek Sikorski **railed** against the proposed Nord Stream 1 pipeline as, “the most outrageous attempt by Mr Putin to divide and damage the EU.”

Europe’s dependency on Russian hydrocarbons has faced opposition from US administrations going back to the White House of George W. Bush. That feeling has long been bipartisan: as Republican Senator Ted Cruz told senators in 2019: the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, “if completed, would make Europe even more dependent on Russian energy, even more vulnerable to Russian blackmail.”

In Europe, the Polish stance exposed divisions in Europe.

“Shocking” was how Peter Szijjarto, foreign minister of Hungary – one of Russia’s few allies on the continent and the recent recipient of a **US exemption** allowing them to continue buying Russian oil and gas - described Tusk’s stance.

“One thing is clear: we don’t want a Europe where prime ministers defend terrorists,” he **wrote on X**.

For many in Europe’s north, the attention on who blew up Nord Stream is a distraction from remembering how it was built in the first place.



A worker emerges from the entrance to a pipeline on April 8, 2010 near Lubmin, Germany. (*Sean Gallup/Getty Images*)

Lithuania's former foreign minister Gabrielius Landsbergis told CNN that, if you take the legal case in isolation, "it might force us to forget how we got there." The Polish government's position "has quite a lot to do with their internal politics, their president being from a very nationalist party,"

Helga Kalm, deputy director of Estonia's International Center for Defence and Security, told CNN. "It's their sign of showing Germany that they're doing the wrong thing" in pursuing a prosecution that could harm Ukrainian interests.

Many in Europe's post-Soviet countries, Poland chief among them, finally feel vindicated after decades of warning against the push from European powers like Germany to warm ties with Russia.

Hunt for 'justice'

Both **Denmark** and Sweden – whose waters sit astride the Nord Stream pipeline – declined to pursue cases into the blasts, with Sweden citing a lack of jurisdiction.

Yet Germany has forged ahead.

“It’s a rule of law state,” Stefan Meister, an expert on Eastern Europe from the German Council on Foreign Relations, told CNN

“I think this is particularly for domestic purposes,” he added. With right-wing populists the AfD challenging the credibility of state institutions, allowing German justice to follow its course is about, “the credibility of the system and the institution and the ruling political elites,” he said.

Germany was the driving force in Europe behind the Nord Stream pipelines.

And it reaped the benefits. In 2016, nearly 30% of German gas needs were met by Russian suppliers, funnelling gas through the Nord Stream 1 pipeline, according to **German government figures**.

Germany’s chancellor between 1998 and 2005, Gerhard Schroeder, went on to try to join the board of Russian energy giant Gazprom and became chairman of Russia’s oil giant Rosneft after leaving office.



Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Gazprom's Chief Executive Alexei Miller (R) shake hands during a news conference for the Russian natural gas monopoly Gazprom on March 30, 2006 at the headquarters in Moscow, Russia. *(Evgeny Malyshev/Pressphotos/Getty Images)*

Likewise, the pipelines became totemic of the dependence on cheap Russian hydrocarbons that critics felt Europe traded for a principled stance on Moscow's aggression in Ukraine in 2014 and Georgia in 2008.

Former Chancellor Angela Merkel attracted special criticism for her conciliatory approach to Moscow.

In Merkel's recently released memoir, she rebutted accusations that Germany had been dependent on Russian gas, writing, "particularly in the case of Nord Stream 2, even though no gas had ever been transported through this pipeline... It was a relic of a failed investment."

Given how interwoven many in German politics were with the push to construct the Nord Stream pipelines, today many politicians would welcome distancing themselves from the case, Meister said.

“My impression is they want to wash themselves clean,” he said.

Need for clarity

The fog around the case only serves to feed tensions in Europe at a time when unity against Russia, and an unpredictable ally in the US, is all-important. Russia’s efforts to sow divisions abroad are well documented but here the Kremlin may have achieved one of its goals without lifting a finger.

Nord Stream risks “further questions and maybe fractures within the alliance,” Landsbergis said. “Especially at a time where we’re no longer at peace, that should be remembered.”

Whatever the result of Germany’s quest for judicial satisfaction over Nord Stream, Russian gas won’t be flowing south like it did before 2022.

Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Europe has battled to wean itself off a decades-long dependence on Russia gas. The loss of Nord Stream only hastened that.

Russia’s share of EU imports of pipeline gas dropped from more than 40% in 2021 to about 11% in 2024, according to EU figures.

“The right place for Nord Stream 2 is at the bottom of the sea, in pieces,” Estonia’s Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna said in March.

Additional reporting by Philippe Cordier.



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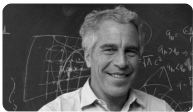
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