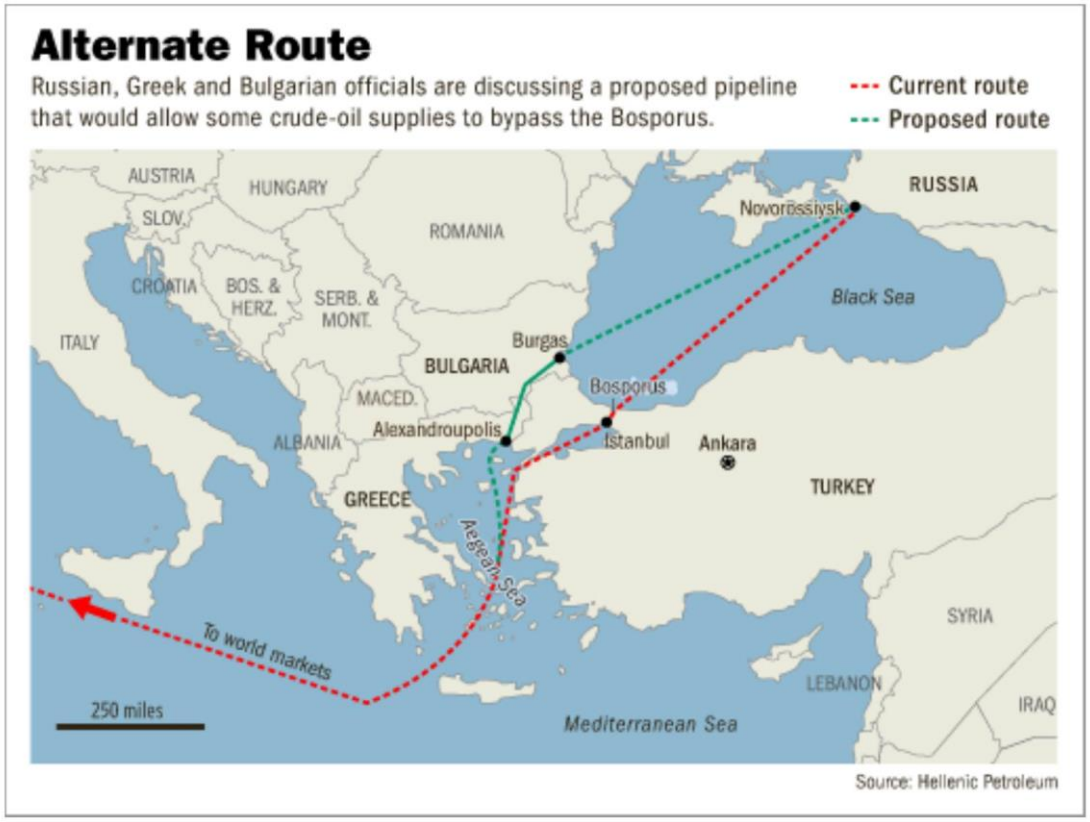
Presaging Nord Stream: The Geopolitics of the Burgas–Alexandroupoli Pipeline

Energy corridors are central to contemporary geopolitics because they shape both energy flows and power relations among states. Pipelines, in particular, create long-term spatial commitments that bind producers and consumers into structured interdependence, transforming geography into a source of political leverage [1]. Within this framework, the Burgas–Alexandroupoli Pipeline (BAP) should be understood not simply as an infrastructure project but as a strategic instrument embedded in broader geopolitical competition between Russia, the European Union and the United States [2].



Map 1: "Geostrategic Position of the Burgas–Alexandroupoli Pipeline" – showing Black Sea producers, transit states and Aegean outlet, (https://www.academia.edu/figures/1316063/figure-5-caspian-energy-geopolitics-the-rise-and-fall-of)

Chokepoints further enhance the importance of such projects. The Turkish Straits represent a critical bottleneck for Black Sea oil exports, combining congestion, environmental risk and geopolitical control [3]. By proposing an overland bypass through Bulgaria and Greece, the BAP aimed to reduce dependence on this maritime route and redistribute transit power within the region. This illustrates how infrastructure can reshape geopolitical space by altering the balance between competing actors [4].
Beyond physical geography, the BAP reflects the evolving concept of energy security, which now includes resilience, diversification and protection against political manipulation [5]. Pipelines are increasingly interpreted through the lens of "weaponized interdependence," where asymmetric dependencies can be used strategically. In this context, the BAP would have enhanced Russia's export flexibility

while raising concerns in the West about deeper structural dependence on Russian energy [6].

***Figure 1**: "Energy Security Strategy Matrix" – axes for Supplier Diversity vs Route Diversity, positioning BAP, TAP, TurkStream and Nord Stream, (https://www.iene.eu/articlefiles/working%20paper%20no%2026.pdf)*

At the strategic level, the BAP reflected rival visions for Europe: Western diversification away from Russian energy and Russia's effort to deepen long-term interdependence through infrastructure [7,8]. Even amid decarbonization, such infrastructure remains important for short- and medium-term energy security, making the BAP a useful case for understanding the changing architecture of European energy geopolitics [9]. The Burgas–Alexandroupoli Pipeline (BAP) can be best understood through a framework combining geopolitics, energy security and political economy. This approach is necessary because pipelines are both material infrastructures and politically contested objects shaped by competing narratives [10]. A realist perspective is especially useful, as it treats states as the main actors seeking power and security in an anarchic system. From this view, BAP served Russia's goal of bypassing the Turkish Straits and strengthening its leverage in European energy markets [11].

Critical geopolitics complements realism by stressing discourse, representation and political framing rather than material power alone. In the BAP case, narratives such as "economic opportunity," "energy dependence" and "strategic threat" shaped how the project was perceived and contested, helping explain its suspension despite its economic logic [12]. This links directly to energy dependence: when states rely on limited suppliers or routes, vulnerability increases. Although BAP diversified transit, many actors saw it as reinforcing Europe's dependence on Russian energy [13]. Diversification is the main response to energy dependence, aiming to reduce vulnerability by broadening suppliers, routes and energy sources. Yet diversification is also political, since each route reflects different geopolitical alignments. The BAP captures this paradox well: it reduced dependence on the Turkish Straits but was also seen as strengthening dependence on Russia, leading to conflicting strategic interpretations [14]. This links to weaponized interdependence, where control over key

nodes such as pipelines can be used for coercion. In this sense, BAP can be viewed as an early example of that broader dynamic [15].

Methodologically, the article adopts a comparative case-study approach, using BAP as the primary case and contrasting it with other major pipelines such as Nord Stream, TurkStream and TAP. This allows for the identification of patterns in how infrastructure projects are enabled, constrained or neutralized under different geopolitical conditions. The analysis also incorporates elements of process tracing to examine key decision points and critical discourse analysis to capture how narratives influenced political outcomes [16].

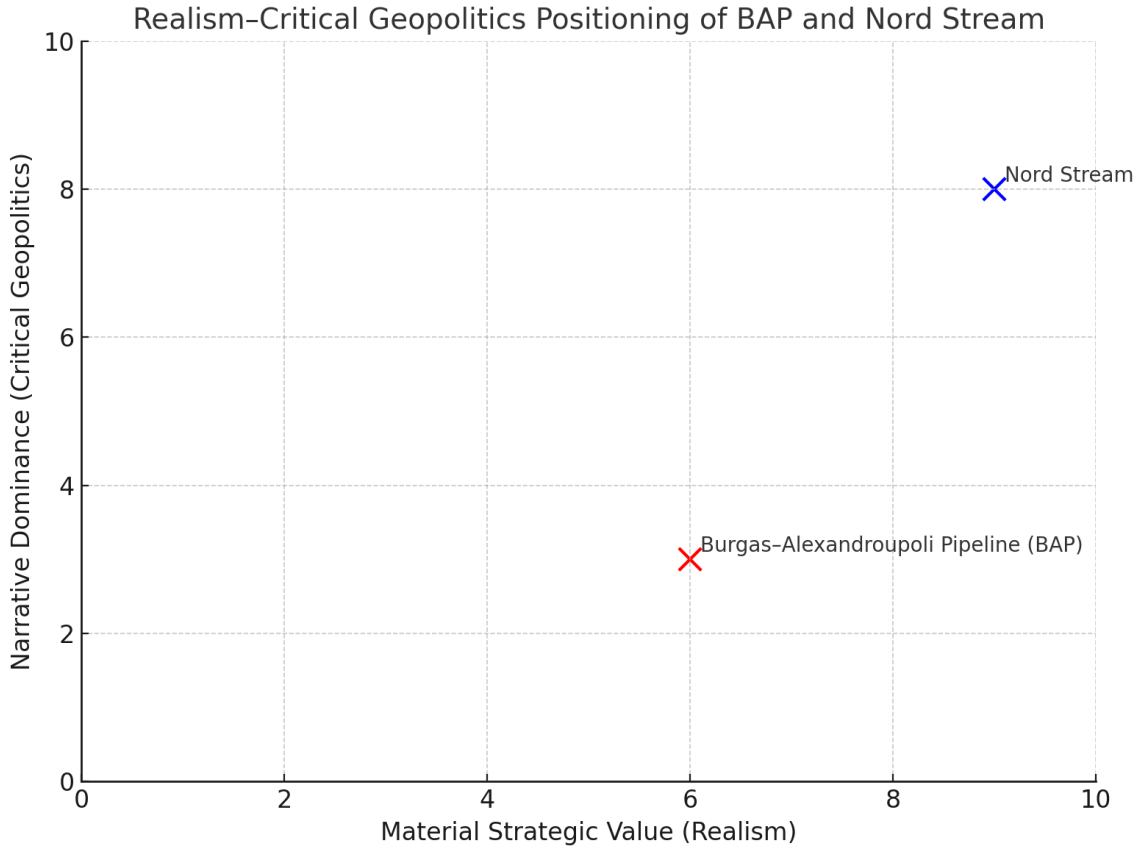


Figure 2: *Realism–Critical Geopolitics Positioning of BAP and Nord Stream*

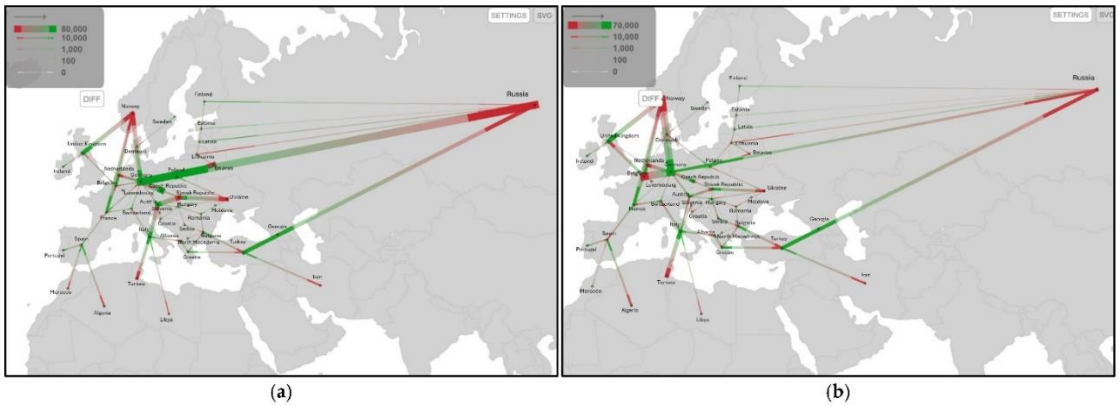
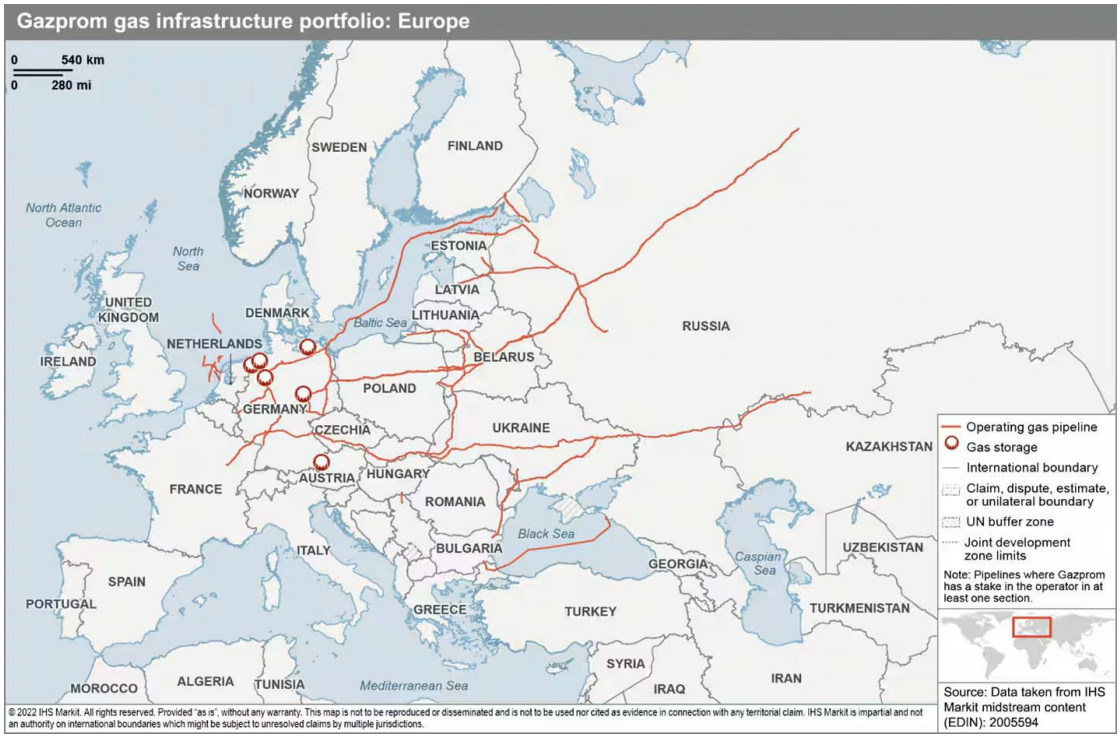


Figure 2: *The amount and distribution of the European gas pipeline network flows (a) before and (b) during the Russia–Ukraine conflict, (https://www.mdpi.com/1996-1073/18/7/1709)*

The theoretical framework combines realism, critical geopolitics, dependence theory and the concept of weaponized interdependence into a unified analytical model. This integrated approach enables a deeper understanding of the BAP, not simply as a failed infrastructure project, but as a case that reveals how material power, strategic geography and political narratives interact in shaping the geopolitics of energy corridors [17]. After the Cold War, Europe's energy order was shaped by both interdependence and geopolitical rivalry. Russia became a dominant supplier through its vast resources and inherited pipeline network, creating asymmetric dependence across much of Europe [13]. Its strategy used pipelines and long-term contracts not only for commercial purposes but also to bypass transit states and strengthen influence, a logic that also framed the Burgas–Alexandroupoli Pipeline [11].

The European Union responded by promoting diversification, particularly after supply disruptions involving Ukraine. New corridors, LNG terminals and interconnections aimed to reduce reliance on a single supplier. However, internal divisions among member states and existing infrastructure constraints limited the effectiveness of a unified strategy, resulting in uneven implementation across the region [14]. The United States has supported these diversification efforts as part of a broader geopolitical objective to reduce Russian influence in Europe. Through diplomatic engagement and support for alternative energy routes, U.S. policy has framed infrastructure development as a strategic tool rather than a purely economic activity [15].



Map2: Map of European Energy Import Routes, source HIS Markit

Southeastern Europe has become a key geopolitical crossroads in this context. Positioned between supply regions and European markets, countries like Greece and Bulgaria play a critical role as transit hubs. The BAP must therefore be seen as part of a wider competition over routes, influence and regional positioning [17]. Greece illustrates this complexity through its dual strategy. It has supported EU-aligned projects such as TAP and LNG infrastructure, while also engaging with Russian-backed

initiatives like BAP. This reflects a balancing approach between economic opportunities and geopolitical alignment [12].

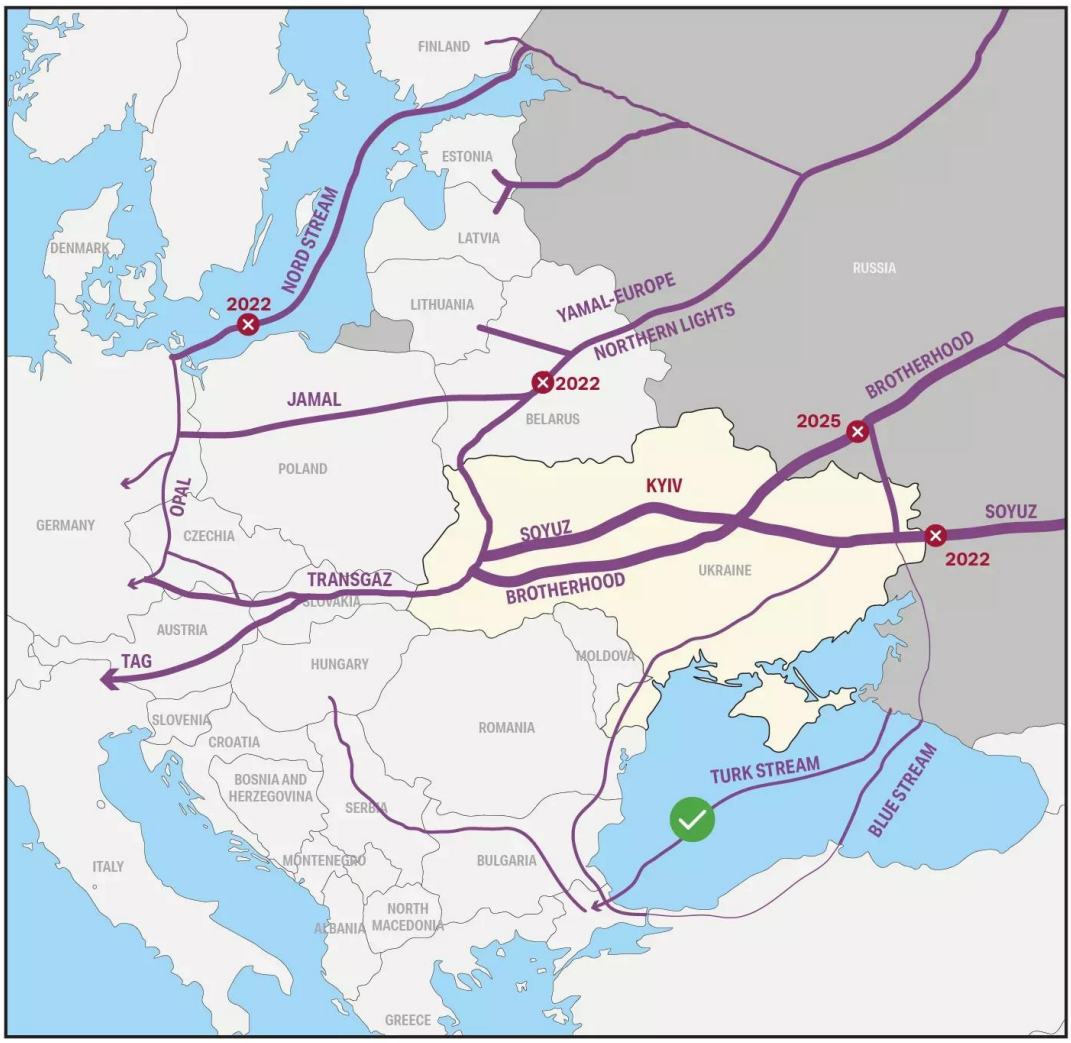
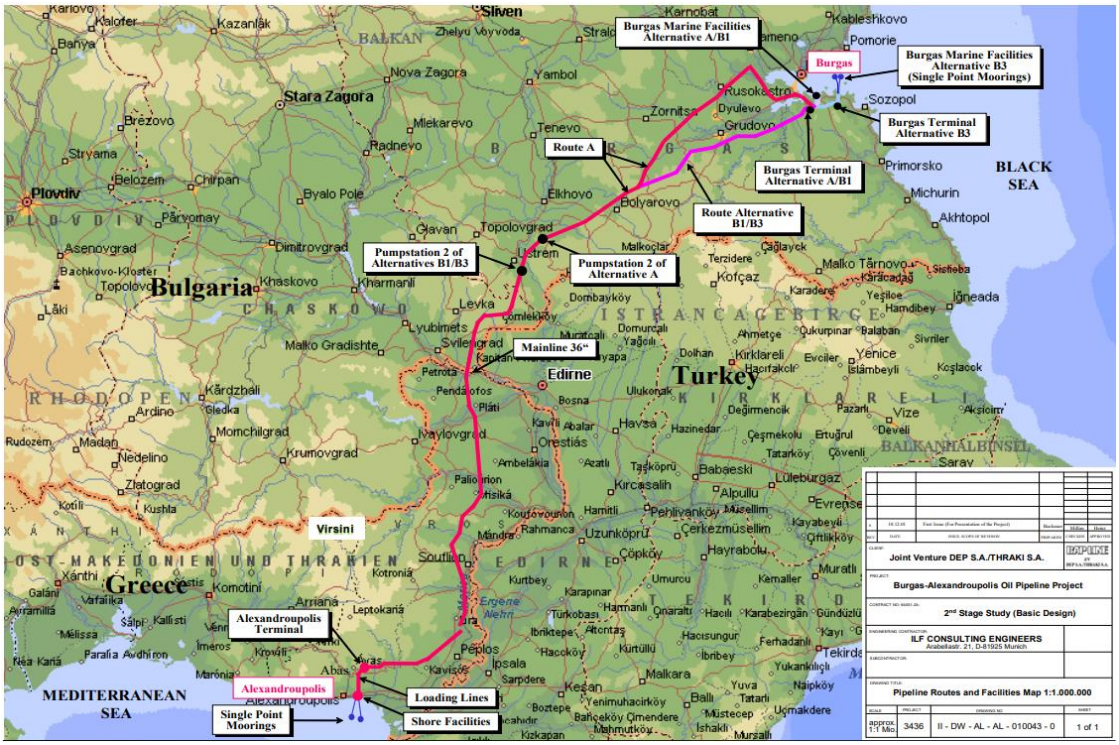


***Figure 4**: Russian pipeline infrastructure in Europe, (https://www.bruegel.org/analysis/europe-urgently-needs-common-strategy-russian-gas)*

Overall, the regional energy order reflects overlapping strategies of cooperation and competition. The BAP was not an isolated project but part of a broader reconfiguration of energy geopolitics, where infrastructure decisions are shaped by both market forces and strategic interests [16]. The Burgas–Alexandroupoli Pipeline (BAP) emerged in the 1990s as part of efforts to redirect post-Soviet energy routes toward global markets. It was designed to carry Russian and Caspian crude from Burgas on the Black Sea to Alexandroupoli on the Aegean, bypassing the Turkish Straits and combining commercial logic with geopolitical purpose [11]. The main actors had overlapping but distinct goals: Russia sought export flexibility, Bulgaria expected transit revenues and Greece aimed to strengthen its role as a regional energy hub [17].



Map 3: BAP Geographic Context, (https://www.iene.gr/2ndseeed/articlefiles/Session_III/Dimas_C.pdf)

Negotiations lasted several years and required complex trilateral coordination between Russia, Bulgaria and Greece. Intergovernmental memoranda and the creation of a joint project company showed gradual institutional progress, but they also exposed disputes over ownership, financing and regulatory conditions, revealing the difficulty of managing a cross-border infrastructure project [16]. Environmental and commercial objections later became decisive: local opposition in Burgas stressed oil-spill risks and tourism losses, while doubts over volumes, costs and competing routes weakened the project's economic credibility [14].

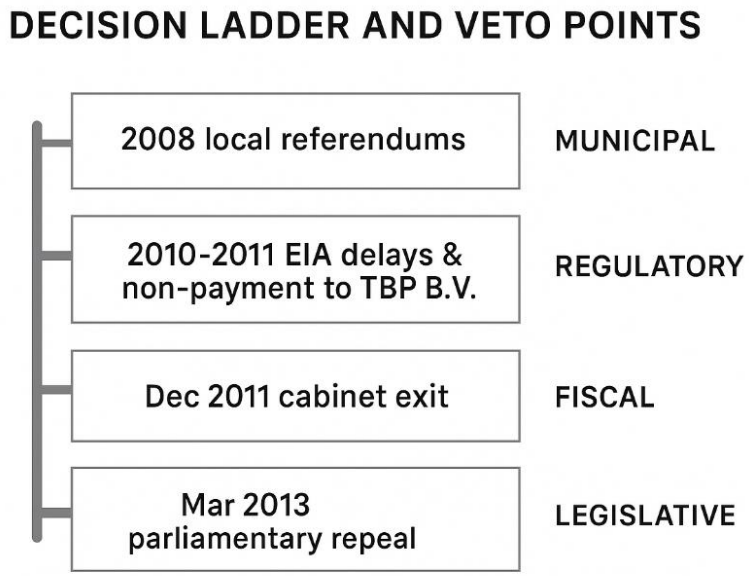


***Figure 5**: Decision Ladder and Veto Points*

The suspension of the BAP in 2011 cannot be attributed to a single cause but rather to the convergence of political, economic and strategic factors. Environmental concerns and financial uncertainties provided the formal justification, but broader geopolitical dynamics played a decisive role. Western pressure, particularly in the context of efforts to limit Russian influence in European energy markets, contributed to shifting political attitudes in Bulgaria and Greece. This reflects a pattern in which infrastructure projects become arenas of geopolitical contestation rather than purely economic decisions. (15)

Another important factor was the changing regional energy landscape. The emergence of alternative projects, such as the Southern Gas Corridor and later LNG infrastructure, reduced the perceived necessity of the BAP. As diversification strategies gained prominence within the EU, projects associated with increasing reliance on Russian energy became less politically attractive. This shift demonstrates how infrastructure viability is closely linked to evolving strategic priorities rather than static economic calculations. (12)

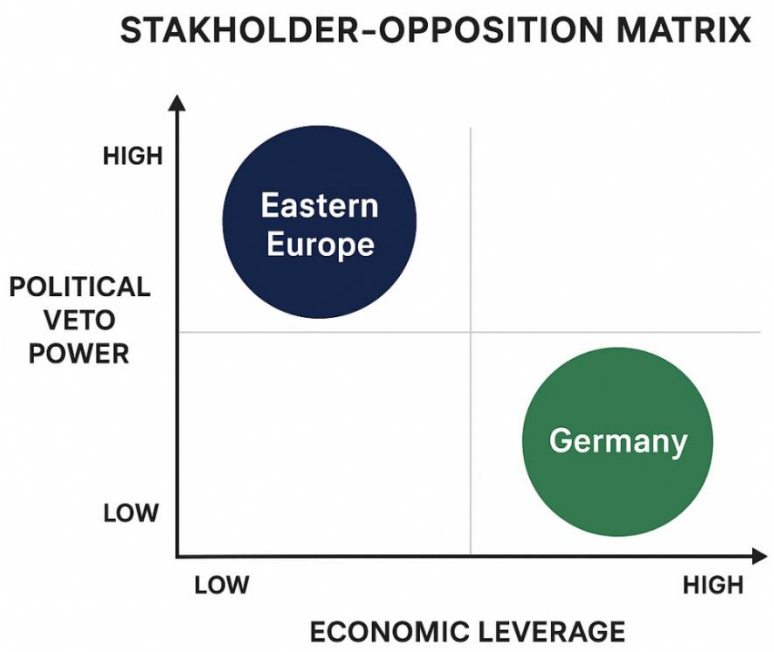
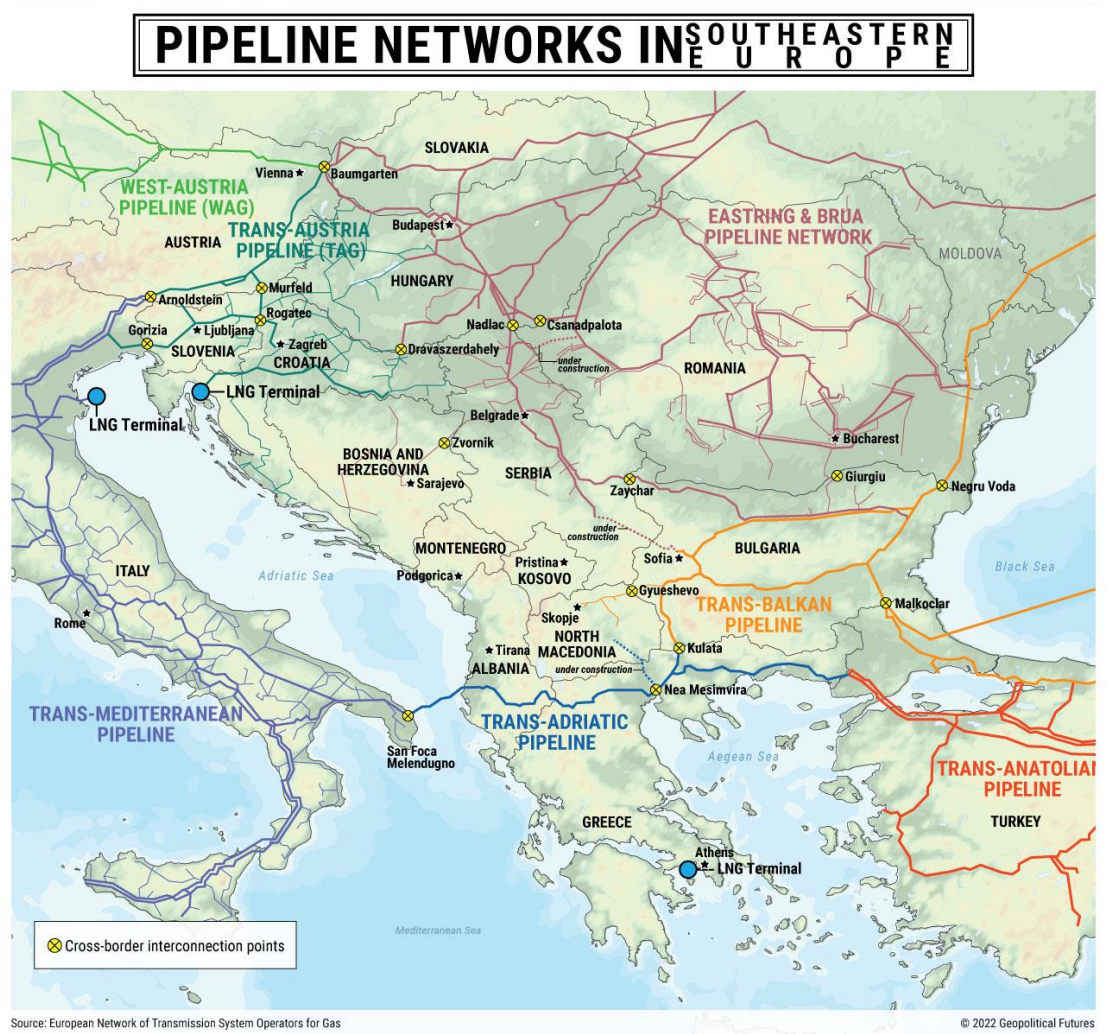


***Figure 6**: Stakeholder-opposition matrix*

Ultimately, the BAP case illustrates the vulnerability of onshore infrastructure projects to political interference and shifting alliances. Unlike offshore pipelines, which may be less exposed to domestic political pressures, the BAP's route through EU and NATO member states made it particularly sensitive to external influence and internal contestation. Its suspension highlights how geopolitical alignment, public perception and strategic narratives can outweigh economic rationale in determining the fate of major energy projects [13] In this sense, the Burgas–Alexandroupoli Pipeline serves as a revealing case study of pipeline geopolitics, demonstrating how infrastructure outcomes are shaped by the interaction of national interests, regional dynamics and global strategic competition [10].

The central comparative argument of this article is that the Burgas–Alexandroupoli Pipeline (BAP) functioned as an early precursor to the later conflicts surrounding Nord Stream. Both projects were designed not simply to transport energy, but to reshape geopolitical space by bypassing strategically sensitive transit routes and by locking producer–consumer relations into more durable patterns of dependence. In that sense, BAP anticipated the later European debate over whether major pipeline infrastructures should be understood primarily as market instruments or as geopolitical tools [18]. BAP and Nord Stream shared an important strategic similarity: both sought to reduce reliance on politically problematic chokepoints. BAP aimed to bypass the Turkish Straits through an overland Black Sea–Aegean corridor, while Nord Stream bypassed Ukraine and other transit states through a direct Baltic route to Germany. In both cases, route redesign was also a redistribution of political leverage, because it reduced the role of intermediary states while enhancing the supplier's export flexibility [19].



Map 4: Network diagram of Balkan interconnections (TAP, IGB, Alexandroupoli FSRU, BRUA corridor) showing redundancy and diversification in supply sources post-2022, (https://geopoliticalfutures.com/pipeline-networks-in-southeastern-europe/)

Their differences, however, are just as important. Nord Stream achieved construction and operation before becoming the target of sanctions, regulatory confrontation and, ultimately, sabotage. By contrast, BAP was politically neutralised before implementation. This suggests that onshore infrastructure crossing politically exposed

territory in Southeastern Europe may be more vulnerable to early-stage political blocking, whereas offshore infrastructure may survive longer but face greater strategic risk after becoming operational [20]. TurkStream and TAP offer useful contrasts. TurkStream, although geopolitically sensitive, benefited from Turkey's distinct balancing role and from a route structure that allowed Russia to preserve regional influence despite the erosion of other export channels. TAP, by contrast, aligned with the EU's diversification agenda and therefore faced far lower political resistance at the strategic level. The comparison shows that infrastructure vulnerability depends not only on technical design, but also on whether a project is perceived as reinforcing or reducing dependence on Russia [14].

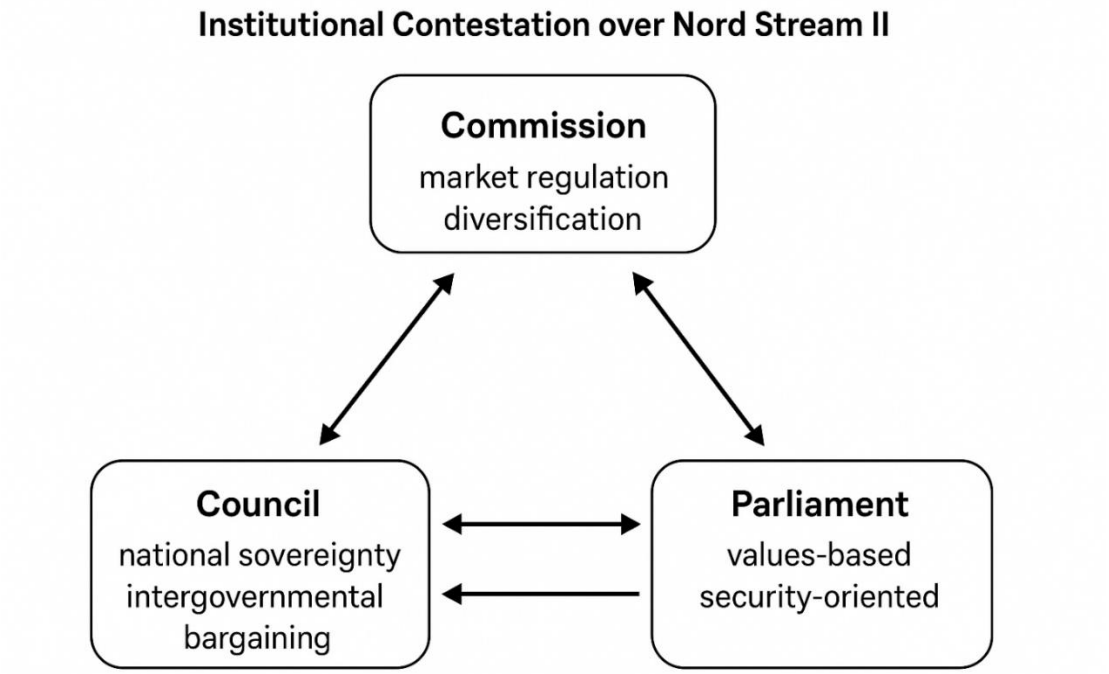


***Figure** 7: Institutional Contestation over Nord Stream II*

Institutional reactions also differed significantly. Nord Stream generated strong divisions within the EU, producing regulatory disputes, sanctions pressure and transatlantic tensions. BAP triggered concern earlier and more quietly, particularly because it intersected with Greek and Bulgarian domestic politics as well as broader Western attempts to limit Russian infrastructural penetration in Southeastern Europe. TAP, in contrast, gained legitimacy from its compatibility with EU energy security priorities. These variations demonstrate that institutional response is not neutral, but shaped by the geopolitical meaning attributed to each route [21]. From the standpoint of political sensitivity, BAP and Nord Stream both occupied a very high-risk category, though in different ways. Nord Stream became the emblem of Europe's overdependence on Russian gas, while BAP symbolized a possible extension of Russian strategic reach into the Black Sea–Balkan corridor. TurkStream remained sensitive but more adaptable within a multi-vector regional environment, whereas TAP was framed as part of the solution to European vulnerability rather than part of the problem [22].

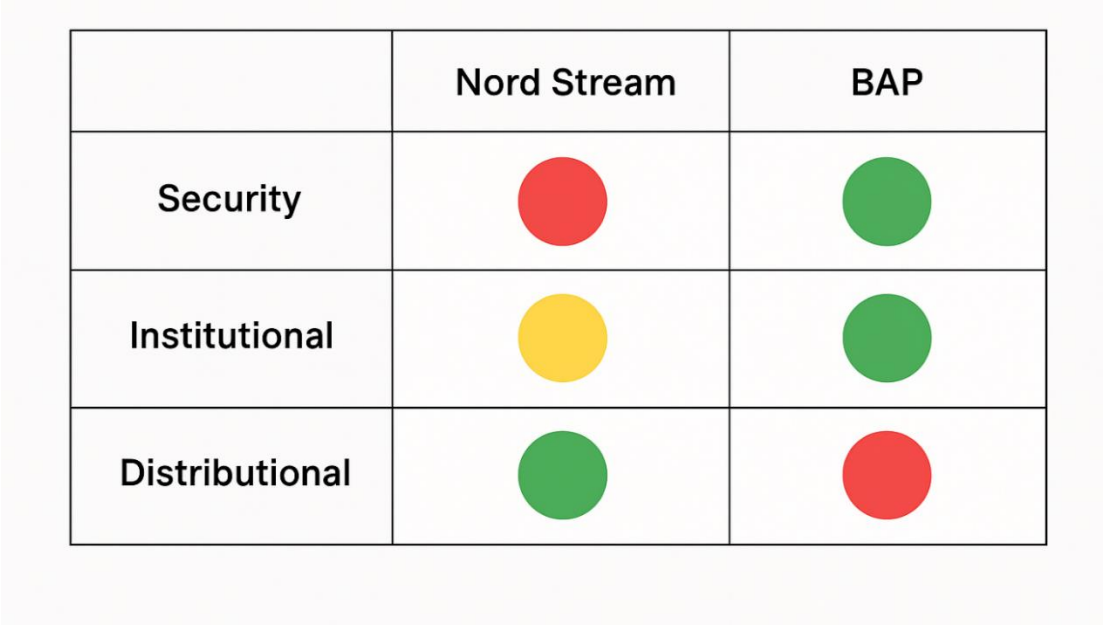
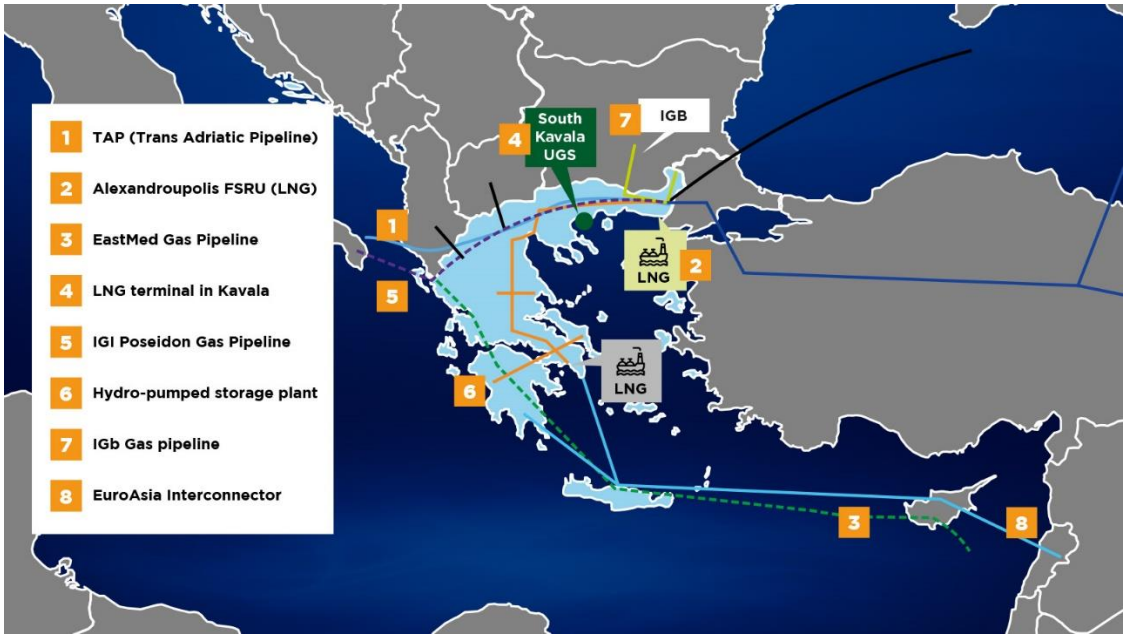


***Figure 8**: Comparative Risk Lens: Nord Stream vs. BAP (red/yellow/green risk markers)*

The comparison also supports the argument that political neutralisation may occur at different stages of a project's life cycle. BAP was neutralised before construction due to the convergence of environmental objections, commercial doubts and geopolitical pressure. Nord Stream was contested during and after implementation, showing that infrastructure can remain viable for years before strategic conditions turn decisively against it. This temporal distinction is crucial because it reveals that the politics of pipeline vulnerability do not operate only at the operational phase, but begin at the level of route design and strategic perception [16]. BAP should be seen as a presaging case of the Nord Stream crisis. It revealed earlier than most projects that pipeline politics in Europe are governed by more than cost-efficiency or transport logic. Strategic alignment, institutional legitimacy, geopolitical narrative and infrastructural exposure together determine whether a corridor is enabled, constrained, neutralised or attacked. In this respect, BAP was not a failed exception but an early warning of the conflicts that would later define Europe's energy geopolitics [17].

The suspension of the Burgas–Alexandroupoli Pipeline marked not a retreat, but a strategic shift in Greece's role within regional energy geopolitics. Greece moved from a potential endpoint of a Russian-oriented oil corridor to a key actor in EU-driven diversification and resilience strategies. This transition reflects broader changes in European energy security following increased geopolitical tensions and the need to reduce dependence on single suppliers [17]. Alexandroupoli has been central to this transformation. Initially linked to the logic of oil transit, it has evolved into a strategic LNG hub, facilitating the entry and redistribution of non-Russian energy across Southeastern Europe. This shift highlights the transition from fixed corridor-based systems toward more flexible and diversified energy networks [12].



Map 5: Greece's Energy Corridors and LNG Infrastructure, (https://newsletters.enterprisegreece.gov.gr/newsletter-articles/greeces-growing-role-as-energy-hub-for-southeast-europe-eastern-mediterranean/)

The post-2022 environment accelerated this repositioning. As the EU prioritized diversification, Greece gained importance as a transit and entry point connecting global LNG markets with Balkan and Central European demand. Its role is now defined less by a single project and more by its position within a broader interconnected energy system [14]. Greek energy diplomacy has adapted accordingly. While earlier strategies involved balancing between Western and Russian-backed projects, current policy aligns more closely with EU priorities, emphasizing diversification, interconnectivity and regional cooperation. This reflects a shift from bilateral engagement to network-based strategic positioning [10].

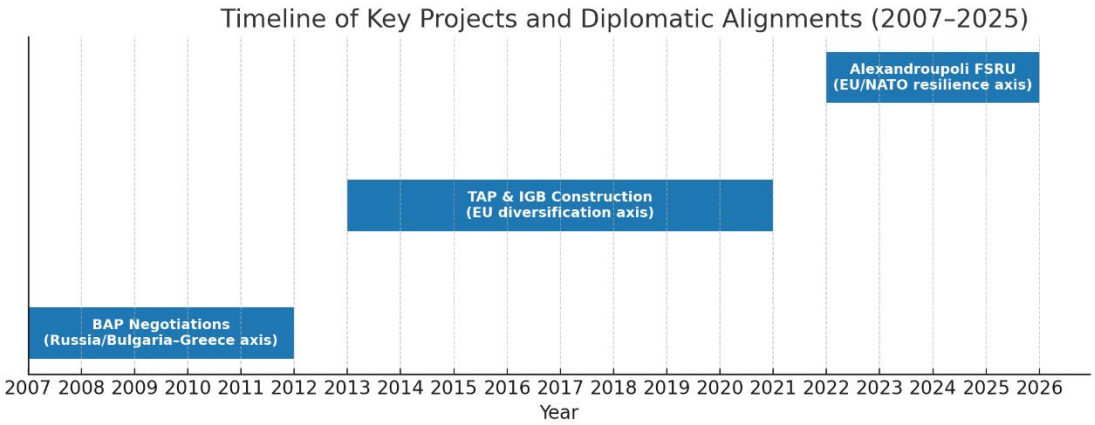


***Figure 9**: Timeline of key projects and diplomatic alignments (2007–2025)*

At the regional level, Greece's evolution contributes to a wider transformation from dependency on singular corridors to resilient energy systems based on multiple routes and sources. In this context, the failure of BAP can be understood as part of a broader structural transition rather than an isolated setback [13]. However, this new role also presents challenges. LNG infrastructure and diversification strategies require sustained investment and coordination, while long-term energy transition goals introduce

uncertainty regarding future demand and technologies. Greece must therefore maintain flexibility while adapting to evolving European energy priorities [16].

Map 6: Redistribution of gas from the Alexandroupolis FSRU to Europe, 2024, (https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/notes/port-alexandroupolis-strategic-and-geopolitical-assessment-2024)

Overall, Greece's trajectory illustrates how geopolitical repositioning can follow infrastructural failure. The shift from BAP to LNG and network-based connectivity reflects a transition from corridor geopolitics to resilience-oriented energy systems, placing Greece at the center of Southeastern Europe's emerging energy architecture [11].

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