

Non-Fiction

The Bridge – the political power of gas pipelines to Europe

Thane Gustafson demonstrates the realpolitik of energy supply in geopolitical relations with Russia



Bovanenkovo gasfield in northern Russia, which is connected to the network of pipelines crossing Russia and western Europe © Yuri Kozyrev/NOOR/eyevine

Ed Crooks YESTERDAY

After the US military killed Iranian commander [Qassem Soleimani](#) in a drone strike on January 3, one of the first diplomatic responses was an invitation from Vladimir Putin for Angela Merkel to visit Moscow. When the Russian president and the German chancellor met, Iran was not the only subject for discussion: they also found common ground on other issues, including the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline intended to connect their countries.

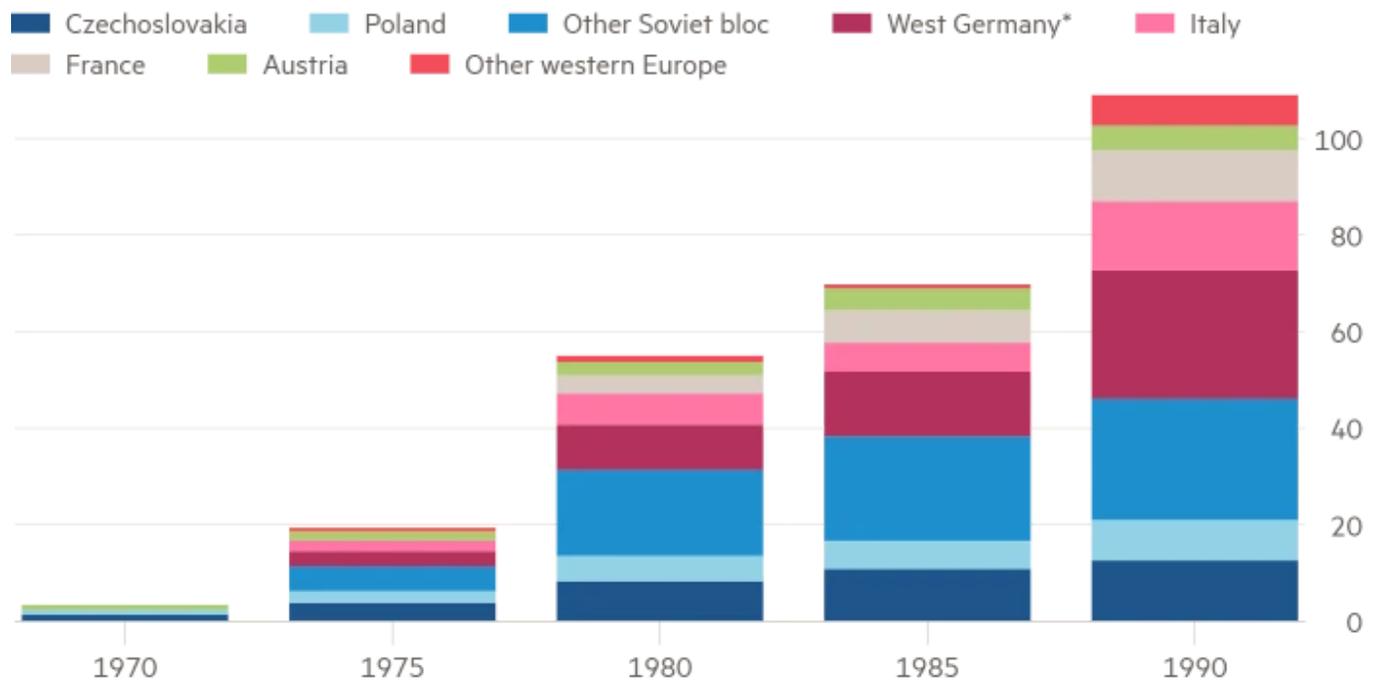
The project is opposed by the US, which has imposed a series of sanctions in an attempt to stop it, as well as by several other EU member states, including Poland. In Moscow, however, Merkel reaffirmed her rejection of their concerns and insisted that “despite the sanctions, it will be possible to complete Nord Stream 2”.

The fact that Germany is standing alongside Russia and against the US over Nord Stream 2 is a perfect illustration of Thane Gustafson’s theme in *The Bridge*, a history of the role of gas in European politics and business since the second world war.

International gas flows tend to hit the headlines only when they are disrupted, as they have been during the periodic disputes between Russia and Ukraine. But the web of connections that they represent has been an important part of Europe’s economic and political infrastructure for more than half a century.

In the Soviet Union's final 20 years, gas exports to Europe rocketed

Soviet gas exports (bn cubic metres)



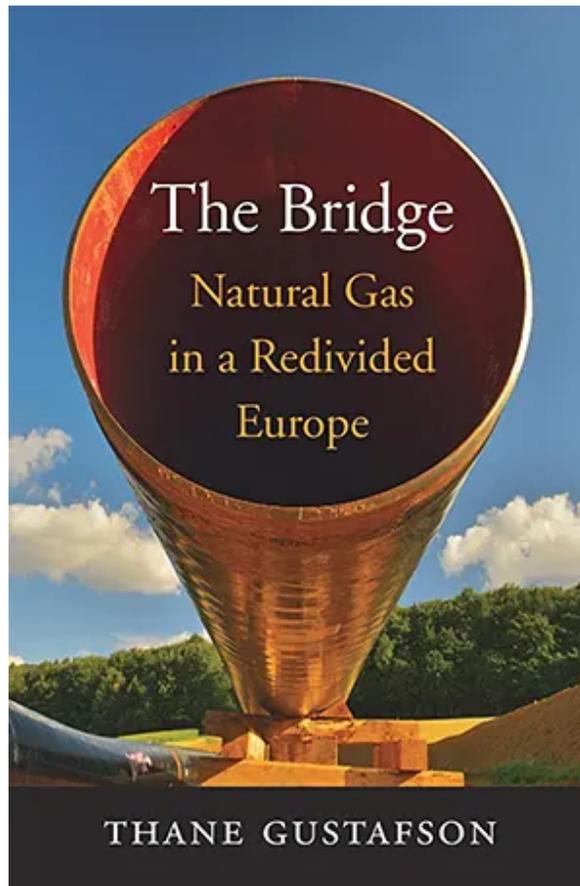
*1990 number for West Germany is for the reunited Germany

Source: Thane Gustafson, 'The Bridge'

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By exploring those links, Gustafson is able to tell a story that sheds new light on postwar Europe, as well as touching on many of the most important themes of that era: the rise and fall of the North Sea; the growing political power of environmental movements; the spread of free-market ideology; the centralisation of the EU, and the cold war and its aftermath.

Gas is sometimes talked about as a “bridge fuel”, in the sense that it can be a lower-carbon option to help the transition from a coal-burning past to a renewable energy future. Gustafson, a professor at Georgetown University, uses the metaphor in a different sense: he explains how gas has been a bridge between countries, political blocs and economic ideologies.



His previous book is [Wheel of Fortune](#), an authoritative history of Russia's oil industry in the first two decades of the post-Soviet era, and he had originally planned to write a companion book looking at gas. He quickly decided, however, that the Russian story could only be told properly in its wider European context. *The Bridge*, a richly detailed analysis written with a relaxed, lucid style, justifies that decision.

One of Gustafson's central themes is the way that economics have often trumped politics in the European gas trade. The first deal to import Russian gas through the Iron Curtain was signed by Austria in 1969 after huge reserves were discovered in western Siberia, and between 1970 and 1990 Soviet gas exports to western Europe soared from about 1bn cubic metres a year to about 60bn.

With gas production set to fall in the EU, the UK and Norway, the link to Russia remains crucial

and equipment contracts for western companies, along with the appeal of foreign currency revenues for the Soviet Union, were bigger than any geopolitical rivalry.

Even when cold war tensions were at their highest, gas continued to flow from east to west. In the early 1980s, when the Soviet Union planned to work with western European countries to build a new pipeline from the Urengoy gasfield in Siberia, to allow increased exports, the Reagan administration protested strenuously — but the project was still completed. The economic case for energy supplies

The gas bridge remained intact through the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and has grown stronger since. EU member states imported about 170bn cubic metres of Russian gas by pipeline in 2018, about 37 per cent of their total consumption, according to BP. With gas production set to fall in the EU, the UK and Norway, the construction of Nord Stream 2, at a cost of about \$10.5bn, is a signal that the link to Russia will remain important.

Imports of liquefied natural gas from the US and the liberalisation of EU gas markets have changed the industry, but the fundamental realities of demand in the west and huge reserves in the east have not changed.

Over the next few decades, however, another factor may be the most important: mounting pressure to take action on the threat of climate change. Many climate campaigners contest the characterisation of gas as a “bridge fuel”, arguing that its benefits relative to coal have been exaggerated and the need to cut emissions is so urgent that energy systems need to move to sources that are zero-carbon, not just lower-carbon.

Nevertheless, for as long as some fossil fuel power plants are needed to back up variable generation from wind and solar, and for as long as homes and businesses take to move to electricity for heat, there will still be demand for gas in Europe, Gustafson argues. The gas bridge has survived many upheavals in the past 60 years, and it is likely to survive for some time yet.

The Bridge: Natural Gas in a Divided Europe, by Thane Gustafson, *Harvard*, RRP£31.95, 506 pages

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