



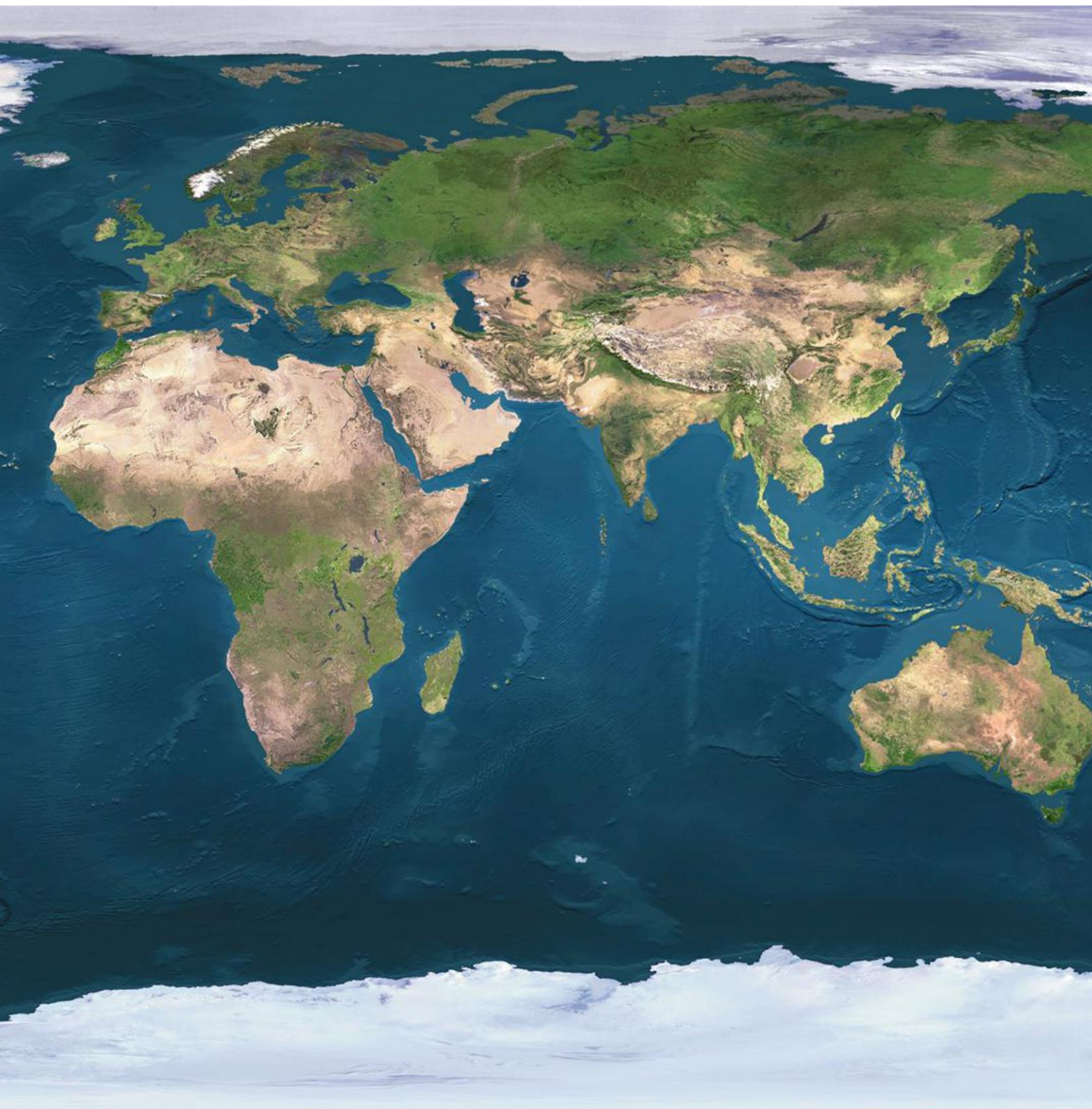
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Osservatorio Strategico

Part One

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The domestic and international rehabilitation of the Syrian regime

The freezing of the conflict and the *de facto* victory of the Assad regime

Begun as a civil war in 2011 and then gradually turned into a proxy war, since the second half of 2019 the conflict in Syria has seen a gradual freezing of the balance on the ground and a reduction in armed clashes (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). Even today, President Assad's loyalist forces, supported by Russia and Iran, do not have full control of all Syrian territory. In particular, Damascus has not recaptured the northern part of the country, where Kurdish forms of self-government, areas controlled directly or indirectly by Turkey, and areas under the control of various rebel or terrorist organizations continue to hold out. This is compounded by a limited presence of the so-called Islamic State, which, however, no longer holds an effective territorial dimension in recent years (Crisis Group, 2022)¹. While there has been no appreciable shift in the balance on the military front in recent months, it is on the political-diplomatic front where the greatest changes are evident. In particular, the last two years have witnessed a process of gradual acceptance of the *status quo* on the ground by the various actors involved, who have begun to treat the regime of Bashar al-Assad as a *de facto* winner of the conflict. A condition that is being followed more gradually by a normalization of Assad's leadership and his regime both domestically and internationally.

Domestically, there are two drivers of the normalization process. First, the launch in September 2019 of the Syrian Constitutional Committee (SCC) (OSES, 2022). SCC is a United Nations-mediated national dialogue, whose mandate is anchored in 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2254, formed with the aim of "reconciling" Syrian government forces with opposition forces as part of the Syrian peace process (UNSC, 2015). The ultimate goal of the committee's work is the approval of amendments to the current Syrian constitution or, alternatively, the drafting of a new constitutional text. Evolution preparatory to a national reconciliation that can bring a definite end to the Syrian civil war. SCC consists of two bodies. A large body of 150 representatives – 50 government appointees, 50 expressions of the oppositions, and 50 representatives of civil society – whose task is to approve the constitutional draft that will emerge from the work of a small body of 45 representatives – 15 from each of the three components of the grand assembly (OSES, 2019a; OSES, 2019b). Two sessions of the SCC were held in 2022, in March and May, altogether the seventh and eighth working sessions since the body's creation. The ninth session was supposed to be held in July, but it was then postponed indefinitely. The reasons for the suspension were not disclosed (Daily Sabah, 2022). Following the May session, UN Syria envoy Geir Pedersen noted how the slow pace at which the work of the SCC is proceeding risks making the whole process take years. On the other hand, however, Pedersen praised the important advances in the working method, which, however, have not yet led to an agreement on the content of the constitutional draft (Hamidi, 2022). It is clear that only in the long run can concrete results be expected from the national dialogue.

Alongside the work of the SCC, the process of internal normalization of Assad's leadership experienced a turning point in May 2021, when presidential elections were held seven years after the last time. Although there was no real democratic competition, Assad re-election as Syrian leader with 95.19 percent of the vote in favor represents from his point of view an additional element of internal legitimacy. According to official figures, there was a 78.64 percent turnout. It is to be regarded as an overstated number, considering the context of war, the impossibility of going to the polls for all citizens who had emigrated from Syria, and the fact that the elections were organized only in

¹ It should also be recalled that in February 2022 an American raid killed the then leader of the Islamic State, Abu Ibrahim al Hashimi al Qurayshi, on Syrian soil, three years after a similar operation eliminated the terrorist organization's first leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

territories controlled by the Syrian regime. Election consultation were called a «farce» by the United States, United Kingdom and European Union (BBC, 2021). This is Assad's fourth consecutive term as President, which will last for the next seven years, thus giving, even temporally, a horizon of what will be the Syria of the future in the medium term.

The international rehabilitation of the Syrian regime

Alongside the internal normalization of Assad's leadership, the other relevant ongoing dynamic is the progressive rehabilitation of the Syrian regime in the international stage (Saban, Khurfan, 2022). This is a dynamic ushered in by those same countries, such as the Gulf monarchies, that at the outbreak of the Syrian civil war had supported the fall of the Assad regime through funding and supplying arms to rebel organizations. This dynamic indirectly shows how even diplomatically the major powers hostile to Assad have accepted his permanence in power. Regionally, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was the first to rebuild a discreet dialogue with Damascus. Beginning in 2018, discussions began on the reopening of the Emirati embassy in Damascus (The New Arab, 2018). In the same weeks, the then Emirati Foreign Minister, Anwar Gargash, criticized the decision to suspend Syria's membership *status* in the Arab League. A measure he called counterproductive due to its inability to maintain an open channel of dialogue with Damascus (Al Wasmi, MacMillan, 2018). Six years after the closure, in December 2018 Abu Dhabi announced the reopening of its diplomatic representation in Syria (Reuters, 2018). Overcoming the most difficult months of the pandemic, bilateral relations deepened further in November 2021 when the Emirati Foreign Minister for the first time since 2011 paid an official visit to Damascus, where he was received by the Syrian President (Agenzia Nova, 2021). The visit was reciprocated by Assad, who last March went to Abu Dhabi, where he met with the ruler of Dubai and the then Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (Al Jazeera, 2022). The Emirati trip represented Assad's first visit to an Arab country since the outbreak of civil war in 2011.

Abu Dhabi has led the way for other countries in the region, starting with Bahrain. Manama in 2018 also reopened its embassy in Damascus, appointing a *chargé d'affaires*. Last June, six months after his appointment, the first Bahraini ambassador to Damascus presented his credentials (The National, 2022). A third relevant case is Jordan, which shares a long border with Syria. In September 2021, the Syrian Defense Minister arrived in Amman specifically to engage in negotiations on the security of the Jordanian-Syrian border (Middle East Eye, 2021a). As early as the following October, negotiations had advanced to such an extent that Jordanian King Abdullah II held a telephone conversation with the Syrian President, during which a road map was also discussed by which Amman intended to establish a path of gradual normalization with Damascus on both the bilateral and multilateral levels (Agenzia Nova, 2021).

Different and, in some ways, more arduous is the path that is leading to a rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia. Unlike its Gulf neighbors, Riyadh has not yet re-established full diplomatic relations with Damascus, although extensive discussions between the two countries have been ongoing since 2021 (Ayton, 2021). It is from May 2021 that a Saudi delegation visited Damascus, led by Riyadh's intelligence chief, Khalid al-Humaidan (Middle East Eye, 2021b). Negotiations between the two countries are still ongoing at a stage when it is precisely from Riyadh that talks have begun about Syria's reintegration into the Arab League. While bilateral paths, inaugurated by the UAE, have been witnessed so far, a return of Damascus to the Arab League would represent the final step in a path of normalization of its regional *status*. However, it is still unlikely that at the upcoming Arab League summit on November 1, to be held in Algeria, it will come to that. Algiers is among the top sponsors of a return of Damascus to the organization (The National, 2022). As stated repeatedly by the organization's secretary general, only once *consensus* is reached among all members can Syria's reintegration into the organization be voted on. Compared to the Arab countries, more defiladed still is Turkey. In August, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu

revealed that he met with his Syrian counterpart in Belgrade in October 2021. A brief meeting that nevertheless indicates that in the medium term, a diplomatic rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus cannot be ruled out either (al-Kanj, 2022). An scenario, however, that must come to terms with Turkish military activism in the Levantine country, as will be seen below. Overall, it should be highlighted that at this stage, the normalization process between Syria and Middle Eastern countries is further facilitated by a regional détente trend that has been taking place since late 2020 (Bakir, 2022).

Internationally, it is worth noting how the major powers are also moving on the Syrian dossier. Apart from Russia, which continues to be Assad's main ally, China is the actor which have been showing the most interest in deepening relations with Damascus. In July 2021, on his Middle East tour, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi stopped in Syria on the same day Assad was sworn in for his new presidential term (Anqi, Qingqing, 2021). In contrast, as Secretary of State Blinken has stated on several occasions, the United States are not currently ready to normalize relations with Syria. A scenario that Washington would consider only after a final political-constitutional settlement of the Syrian conflict, which is not imminent (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Developments on the military level

As anticipated, militarily there are no major territorial changes as of the end of 2019. Nevertheless, Syria continues to represent a battlefield of isolated military campaigns, targeted operations and violence. For instance, Israel has not changed its policy toward the Syrian regime, notwithstanding the normalization path of Assad's leadership. Since 2013 Israel has been conducting air raids on targets in Syria belonging alternately to Iran, its proxies or Hezbollah (Jerusalem Post, 2013). Only from 2017-18 did the IDF begin to publicly acknowledge its military activities in Syria (Gross, 2018). The Israeli campaign fits into the so-called campaign between wars (CBW), a pillar of Israeli national security doctrine. It consists of conducting peacetime military operations, kinetic or otherwise, aimed at preemptively weakening its enemies in preparation for the outbreak of a full-scale conflict. In the Syrian case, the Jewish State pursues three objectives: preventing the expansion of Hezbollah's arsenal, which receives know-how and components – especially missiles – through Syria from Iran; damaging the infrastructure of the Syrian Shiite militias in the Syrian south, so as to prevent the creation of an additional enemy outpost on its northern borders; driving a wedge between Syria and Iran in the long run, weakening Iranian influence in the Levantine country (Valensi, Kaduri, 2022). Recently, a deterioration of the tacit agreement between Israel and Russia should be highlighted (Moscow thanks to its military presence and missile defense systems installed controls Syrian airspace), which until now has allowed the Jewish State to act almost undisturbed in Syrian skies. The cause is Israel's policy of supporting Ukraine in the ongoing conflict. Back in January, in a first of its kind, at least in the terms publicized at the time, Moscow and Damascus conducted a joint air exercise near the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights (Tass, 2022). This was a clear warning to the Jewish State, with the Russian desire to dissuade the Israeli government from taking a more clearly supportive stance toward Kiev in the days when preparations were being made to begin the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Also in July, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz confirmed that the Russians had activated S-300 anti-aircraft systems deployed in Syria. Maintaining a veil of secrecy over Israeli Air Force operations, Gantz did not explicitly acknowledge that Russian systems attempted to engage Israeli fighters (Fabian, 2022). The Israeli Minister called it a sporadic incident that would date back to the previous May. It is unclear, therefore, whether it was another signal Moscow wanted to give Israel in relation to its activism on the Ukrainian dossier.

The other relevant trend to monitor is Turkey. Since May, President Erdogan has repeatedly declared his intention to launch a new military operation in Syria to take advantage of a window of

opportunity left by the involvement of Russian armed forces in the conflict in Ukraine² (Zaman, Szuba, 2022). On several occasions Ankara has operated incursions on Syrian soil in recent years, in a policy that should be read in relation to Turkish activism in northern Iraq. In the short term, Ankara's goal is to consolidate a buffer zone about thirty kilometers deep, reclaimed from the presence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party – a terrorist organization for Turkey – and of Kurdish-Syrian formations that are considered by Ankara as its allies (Daily Sabah, 2022). It should be mentioned how in the territorial division still in place in Syria, the Kurds of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) retain control over a large swath of territory in northern Syria. Confirming how Turkey is actively moving ahead of a likely new military campaign in Syria, pro-Turkish rebel forces have been organizing for weeks to set up forms of local governance in case Kurdish forces are expelled, particularly in the Manbij and Tall Rifaat areas (al-Khateb, 2022). At this stage, the Turkish President's intention to move militarily into Syria has been slowed down by the opposition expressed by Russia and Iran. It should be remembered that the three countries are part of the Astana format, a dialogue forum established in December 2016 with the aim of agreeing in advance on military campaigns and territorial divisions between the two allies of Damascus and Turkey. At the last meeting held in July in Tehran, Erdogan was urged not to engage in a new military campaign in Syria by Moscow and Tehran, which are interested in not weakening their presence in the country. In the joint statement, it was reiterated that diplomacy should continue to be the main tool for dispute resolution and unilateral actions aimed at changing the situation on the ground were condemned (ISNA, 2022). It should be noted, however, that the Turkish presidency later issued a far more enigmatic statement, stating that its fight against terrorism will not stop (Turkish Presidency of the Republic, 2022). A wording that suggests that Erdogan has not abandoned the idea of using this phase to strengthen his presence in Syria. In the subsequent Sochi meeting between Erdogan and Putin in early August, no further news leaked out (Al-Monitor, 2022).

Finally, mention should be made of an unusual air raid conducted by the United States on August 23 against pro-Iranian militias affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards (US Central Command, 2022). It has to be interpreted as a retaliation for repeated attacks suffered by the American troops deployed in the east of the country. What was new was both how they retaliated – in the past, minor attacks against American positions did not suffer such a large American kinetic reaction – and the wide publicity given to the event. It is likely, however, that the American action does not suggest a change of policy in the Syrian dossier but rather is part of a larger game Washington is playing with Tehran related to the Iranian nuclear negotiations.

Conclusion

The most relevant dynamic to monitor in the coming months will continue to be the path of internal and international rehabilitation of the Assad regime, which is perceived even by its opponents as the *de facto* winner of the Syrian war. Domestically, no acceleration in the work of the SCC is expected in the short term, and the SCC is currently unable to formulate concrete political solutions to finally end the conflict. Internationally, two dynamics need to be observed. First, the process of Syria's readmission to the Arab League. Although this is unlikely to happen at the upcoming Algiers summit in November, the rehabilitation of the Assad regime now remains a matter of time. Saudi Arabia also seems destined on the bilateral level to follow the example of countries such as the UAE and Bahrain. In the global level, the opposite dynamic is likely to be witnessed. The United States will not normalize relations with Syria in the short to medium term, as it has tied such an eventuality to real progress in the work of the SCC. Militarily, even in the absence of significant territorial changes, there are two actors that could increase their assertiveness in Syria. On the one hand, Israel, whose Syria policy will also depend on the progress of the Iranian nuclear negotiations

² Since 2016, the Turkish Armed Forces have been involved in several military operations in Syria. For an in-depth analysis see Cevik, 2022.

and thus on greater or lesser Iranian activism in the region. However, the Jewish State will have to continue to reckon with deteriorating relations with Russia. Any break with Moscow would make it more difficult for CBW to continue in the Syrian skies. A scenario that cannot be ruled out, depending on the course of the conflict in Ukraine. On the other hand, it is likely that in the short to medium term Turkey may launch a new military operation on Syrian territory. Whether or not such a scenario materializes will also depend on the situation in neighboring Iraq, which, as mentioned earlier, in Turkish calculations represents with Syria a single common front in its fight against PKK and its allies.

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Russian offensive in Africa runs through Mali and looks at the Congo

While all international eyes are on Eastern Europe, the West's competition with Russia has also flared up in Africa. The deteriorating relations between some local governments and European States, with the consequent downsizing of their military engagement, have created new room for maneuver in the Sahel. Moscow is trying to use the *vacuum* to its advantage. Nowadays, the epicenter of Russian-Western rivalry in the Sahelian region is Mali. The African country is experiencing a period of instability and political transition. Similarly to what had already happened in the Central African Republic, Russia has shown opportunism in exploiting the contingent situation. The cooling of Bamako's relations with European countries, particularly France¹, has allowed Moscow to increase its presence and influence. The Russian choice is motivated by global power competition and the desire to secure access to the African country's mineral resources, especially gold. In other words, although the conflict in Ukraine is draining resources of Moscow's African policy, last summer's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's trip showed how important the African continent remains in Russia's overall strategy. In the background of the July bilateral meetings, there are also some glimpses of Russia's next moves in Africa. In this regard, another former French colony African country seems destined to gain prominence on the Russian agenda in the coming months: Congo.

1. Wagner's deployment in Mali

Following the coup in May 2021, the second in Mali in less than a year, the military junta led by Colonel Assimi Goïta has had to cope with the gradual tightening of relations with traditional Western partners, France and the United States above all. The many complaints from the partners against the military junta have triggered tensions between Bamako and Western countries. The latter blame Bamako for stalling the political transition finalized to transfer authority to a civilian government. The Mali junta's choice to gradually move the country into the Russian sphere of influence has further exacerbated relations with Western States. Since the summer of 2021, Bamako has engaged in talks with Moscow to consolidate defense and security relations. On the Malian side, the architect of the new alliance has been one of the coup officers and current Minister of Defense, Sadio Camara; on the Russian side decisive has been the work of Ambassador Igor Gromyko, nephew of a prominent Soviet diplomat Andrei Gromyko. From the Kremlin's view, Mali has all the traits of the perfect African target. In recent years, Russian aims have been directed toward resource-rich countries with deep governance and security problems. These countries also face criticism from the West on issues such as human rights standards, the democratization path, and the implementation of institutional economic development programs. With Mali, Russia exploited two interrelated dynamics to establish tighter ties. On the one hand, the tensions between the military junta and its Western partners, most notably France. On the other hand, the growing perception of insecurity within the country drove by the increased activities of jihadist groups. Russia capitalized on this situation to propose to Mali's military junta the intervention of non-state actors linked to the Kremlin, above all, the private military company Wagner. Moscow provided the Bamako government with an escape from pressure from outside and inside the country. The first evidence of Wagner troops deploying to Mali dates back to December 2021. Several satellite images published by some media outlets showed the build-up of a Russian operating base not far from Bamako International

¹ See OS n.5/2022.

Airport and a military installation used by the Malian Air Force. The compound was instrumental in organizing the arrival and deployment of more than 1,000 Wagner fighters plus a hundred Russian army instructors and advisers. From January 2022, Russian forces occupied the Timbuktu military base until a few weeks earlier under the management of French troops. So far, Malian authorities have denied signing a formal agreement with the Wagner Group. However, multiple sources show that Bamako's government and the Russian private military company finalized a deal with Kremlin supervision. The agreement tasked Russia's private military group to train Malian special forces and a pro-government Tuareg militia known as Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GAITA). Furthermore, some Wagner units are in charge of protecting critical Malian officials, including the five instigators of the 2020 coup, including President Goïta. The Russian group, in return, would receive compensation of nearly 11 million U.S. dollars per month and, most importantly, access to the country's mineral resources.

2. Moscow as an alternative partner

During the first months after their deployment, Malian authorities presented the growing presence of Russian military personnel in the country as part of a broader plan to diversify international relations. The developments since the Russian invasion of Ukraine show how Mali has become a battleground between Moscow and the West. Besides the cooling of relations with France, Bamako has sided against the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) proposed sanctions against Russia. Moscow has rewarded Malian support by delivering several military aircraft, including fighter jets and helicopters, to the Malian Air Force. The replacement of military personnel from the French army and other European contingents with fighters from private Russian military companies is only one dimension of a broader trend reconfiguring international alliances. Using private but Kremlin-linked paramilitary forces such as the Wagner Group is part of Russia's military diplomacy toward Africa. For several years, Moscow has increased its efforts to establish cooperation and security agreements with many African states to increase its influence in Africa. For many African states characterized by weak institutions and strong leadership, Russia presents itself as an alternative to Western players and the liberal-democratic system they promote. Using non-state actors linked to the Moscow government or directly to President Vladimir Putin is part of a solid strategy toward Africa implemented by Moscow in other countries. A new aspect that has emerged in Mali concerns the media campaign launched by Russia in preparation for increasing its presence in the country. Between September and December (2021), Russia used some of its media channels to prepare Malian civil society for the deployment of Russian fighters belonging to private military companies in the country. Especially Alexandre Ivanov, Wagner's senior representative, already engaged in the Central African Republic, delivered several interviews in which he stressed the benefits of possible Russian-Malian cooperation. In the same months, Moscow launched a regional and international disinformation campaign to emphasize how the people of Mali positively perceived the increased Russian presence in the country. The Foundation for National Values Protection (FZNC), an agency linked to Wagner, disseminated some surveys presenting not only broad Malian support for the government's collaboration with Wagner but also widespread disapproval of the French-led counterterrorism mission.² Russia has also provided the military junta with several political consultants who specialize in managing political campaigns and manipulating social media. The latter is helpful for Russia to fuel the African population's feelings of anger toward Western countries.

Despite the disinformation effort promoted by Moscow, the Wagner Group faces many difficulties in countering jihadist groups. The attacks by terrorist groups have increased sharply since

² See URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220101095249/https://fznc.ru/o-fonde/nashi-issledovaniya/malijczy-privetstvuyut-obrashhenie-svoego-prezidenta-k-rossijskim-voennym-kompaniyam/> (accessed 29/8/2022).

last spring, as has intercommunal violence, especially in the country's northern regions. At the same time, there is growing discontent among the population over the many episodes of violence carried out by Russian troops, such as excessive use of force, crimes, and looting. Moreover, the actual efficiency of Russian operations is questioned. Similarly to what had already happened in Mozambique, Russian paramilitary troops have many shortcomings if not backed by air support. They show limited ability to conduct long-lasting counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations in unfamiliar contexts. Consequently, as was the case in the Central African Republic, the Kremlin mandated Wagner to focus efforts on protecting Russian interests regarding political ties to the Malian leadership and access to resources. In Mali, Russia has also expanded its presence beyond the security sector. Leveraging Wagner's presence, Moscow has developed a network of enterprises (including mining companies) that offer functional services to gold mining processes, mainly in so-called informal mines in the northeast of the country. Specifically, Wagner troops, accompanied by experts from the St. Petersburg-based mining group M-Invest and Malian army officials, allegedly struck deals with local rebel groups to gain access to a share of the revenue stream of gold extracted from the giant Intahaka mine. The interest in gold is one of the factors that has prompted Moscow to revive its projection toward Africa. Indeed, the Bank of Russia has been accumulating gold reserves for several years as part of a de-dollarization process similar to China's. This Russian strategy became a necessity following the Ukrainian invasion. In this sense, the gold-rich and still under-exploited mines in Mali constitute an essential resource in Moscow's eyes.

Analysis, evaluation and forecasts

Whether gold and opportunity prompted Russia to boost its footprint in Mali, different considerations drive Moscow toward its mid-term target: Congo. During his African tour last summer, Foreign Minister Lavrov met with Congolese President Denis Sassou N'Guesso. Sassou wished the meeting to be held away from the spotlight. For this reason, he chose to meet Lavrov, not in the representative offices of the Congolese capital but his hometown of Oyo. The main topic of Lavrov and Sassou's exchange was the Ukrainian crisis and the long-term fallout on African countries, primarily related to the supply of wheat and fertilizers. Moreover, the two discussed the Libyan crisis and its prospects extensively. The issue is particularly relevant to Sassou, who has held the position of chair of the African Union High-Level Committee on Libya since 2019. The Congolese President is aware that the diplomatic rift between Moscow and the European countries will further complicate the stabilization process in the North African country. In addition to these more comprehensive issues, Lavrov's trip had as its primary goal to put the Wagner issue on the table. The group closely linked to the Kremlin does not actively operate in Congo. However, Wagner has long sought a seaport to support its efforts on the African continent. Indeed, the lack of seaports to rely on complicates logistically and financially Wagner operations in different African theaters such as the Central African Republic and the Sahel. Over the past twenty-four months, the Russian group has brought to Africa its military equipment, men, supplies, and ammunition primarily in two ways, both of which are very costly and not without risk. During his recent meeting with Sassou, Lavrov asked with a positive response to allow the Wagner Group access to the harbor of Pointe-Noire. The Congolese authorization is a very relevant development for Wagner and for Russia, which will also be able to consolidate its presence on the Atlantic shore of Africa in the coming months. If, on the one hand, the meeting illustrates once again how difficult it is to detach official Russian policy from Wagner Group interests, on the other hand, it highlights the enormous appeal Moscow enjoys among African leadership, especially among non-democratic regimes. On this note, there is a strong pull within the Congolese regime toward strengthening ties with Russia. Especially the President's close circle, comprised of his nephew Omar Denis Bongo Jr. and Sassou's influential special adviser on foreign affairs, the Franco-Rwandan Françoise Joly, worked to ensure that Congo was among the legs of Lavrov's trip. The coming months could therefore witness an increased presence of officials

and fighters belonging to Russia's private military company in Congo, enhancing Moscow's influence over the Sassou regime. Nowadays, the Russian presence in the Central African country remains limited. However, Congo's geostrategic position does make it a concrete and attractive target for Moscow. The Russian plan is to leverage Wagner's presence as a forerunner to increase bilateral relations in the political and defense sectors. Russia in Congo can also rely on a favorable cultural and political ground. Besides experiencing, like all non-democratic regimes, the illiberal allure of the Russian model, a significant component of the Congolese ruling class, has ideological ties that date back to the Soviet period. President Sassou himself had, during the first period of his one-party presidency (1979-1992), insisted that his party, the Congolese Party of Labor (PCT), adhere to Marxist ideology. This stance changed with the end of the Cold War when the PCT took more moderate positions. If from the ideological political point of view, there was a post-Soviet cool-down, from the cultural point of view, the Russian presence remained almost untouched. Since the 1980s, the centerpiece of Russian influence has been the cultural center of Brazzaville. Unlike other Russian cultural institutions, the one in Brazzaville remained active even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The cultural center has offered Russian language courses, becoming a meeting point for many PCT members. The center's activities were revitalized in 2021 when the institute took the name Russian House. Besides the advisors mentioned above closest to Sassou, other influential members of the Congolese ruling class also have ties of various kinds to the center and Moscow. Among them stand out the current Speaker of the National Assembly, Isidore Mvoubi, who studied in Russia, and some high-ranking military figures such as Defense Minister Charles Richard Mondjo, who trained at the Malinovsky Academy in Moscow. They positively view the recent rapprochement with Russia, seeing it as a viable alternative to Western partners.

Congo's possible shift toward Moscow marks a break with the traditional balance policy pursued by Brazzaville. President Sassou has been committed to maintaining a general equilibrium between Moscow and the West for the past decade to preserve the regime and his power. A key trait of his pragmatic policy was the link established with France. For nearly three decades in power, Sassou cultivated close relations with various French political figures, becoming an essential interlocutor for Paris. However, the relationship with the West has deteriorated progressively in recent years. Relations with France have worsened due to the so-called ill-gotten gains case involving members of Sassou's family and that of Gabon's President Ali Bongo Ondimba. As in Mali, Russia could fuel the disaffection towards the former colonial power that the Sassou regime is spreading among the population. With the United States, however, relations showed some friction at the beginning of the Biden presidency, when criticism of the Sassou regime for its many human rights violations increased. Although Russia's real political intentions and ambitions in Congo are unknown, the report of Sassou's meeting with Lavrov immediately generated American concerns. The American fear that a new front of the competition with Moscow will open has prompted Secretary of State Antony Blinken to consider a historic trip to Brazzaville.

To conclude, the Malian case thus shows not only Moscow's intent to undermine traditional postcolonial partnership ties with European countries to reshuffle international alliances to its benefit but also Russia's quest for material gains in terms of access to Africa's rich natural resources. Furthermore, it illustrates how the opening and broadening of the Russian presence in Africa follow a recurring pattern in which a primary role belongs to private military companies such as the Wagner group. For this reason, the recent agreements between Lavrov and Congolese President Sassou alarm the United States and its European partners. If the current trend is confirmed in the coming months, Congo will become a new ground for Russian-Western rivalry and confrontation.

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Entering a new phase of the *spetsoperaciya*: Russia's partial mobilization and the referendum in Ukrainian territories

Introduction

Russia's special operation in Ukraine has now entered its eighth month, but it seems to know no respite, let alone the looming mirage of a peace negotiation. In fact, the month of September has seen events further precipitate, starting with the Ukrainian offensive on the Balaklija – Kup"jans'k – Izjum line. The success of this is mainly attributable to Western arms supplies and followed, predictably, by an equally sharp Russian response that was manifested not so much on the 'battlefield' as in the subsequent actions taken by the President. Indeed, on 21 September, Vladimir Putin addressed the nation¹, stating that "*Russia opposes the collective West*", which "*seeks to break the country into pieces*" and, in order to protect sovereignty and territorial integrity, announced partial mobilisation. The President also specified that this mobilisation will only affect those in the reserve, who have therefore previously served in the military and acquired the necessary experience. On this occasion, Putin also supported 'referendums' in the Donetsk People's Republics (DPR) and Luhans'k (LPR), as well as in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

In fact, the Ukrainian offensive last September changes the "special military operation" by taking it to another level. Putin could, in fact, do what he has long been asked to do, i.e. sign the decree of general (and no longer partial) mobilisation, officially declare war on Ukraine, and overthrow the entire firepower of the Russian armed forces at the gates of NATO. It seems clear, however, that the President's latest decisions are the result of pressure from the extremist wing, the one that would most likely come to power if Putin "ceases to hold office" and that considers the measures taken to date to be unsuitable and too 'soft' to resolve the ongoing conflict.

Since politics consists in balancing different pressure groups, it is necessary not to displease especially those that most reflect the popular mood at a given moment in history. Putin has based his political system on the balance, or rather the compromise, between two orientations: the "siloviki" (from the armed and security forces, in particular the Komitet Gosudarstvennoj Bezopasnosti - KGB) and the pseudo-moderate, tendentially liberalist, el'cinian wing (which includes oligarchs, economists, the new *inteligencja*, etc.). It caused the rise of a system that in both foreign and domestic policy has seen traditional and nationalist positions prevail, but with an economic front oriented towards the application of liberalist policies, albeit – but not always – controlled by the watchful eye of the state, he must continue to maintain this balance. The mobilisation and the referendum are therefore an expression of this, as well as the subsequent annexation of further territories. Although up to now, the Russian commanders have been ordered to fight with "*one arm tied*", what we should expect soon is an acceleration and an increase in the intensity of the *specoperacija*, which, perhaps will be reconfigured, as hoped by Ramzan Kadyrov (who has replenished the Russian troops with thousands of Chechen soldiers) or by the founder of the Wagner group, Evgeniy Prigozhin. Following this thread of logic, on 8 October last, Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu² appointed as commander of the units deployed in the special operation Gen. Sergey Vladimirovich Surovikin³, the former commander of the

¹ Full version of the speech delivered by Russian President on September 21, 2022 (*Обращение Президента Российской Федерации*) <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390>

² *Сергея Суровикина назначили командующим группировкой войск в зоне спецоперации*, ТАСС 08.10.2022 <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/15995621>

³ As reported on the Russian Ministry of Defence official page, Gen. Surovikin is, as of 2017, the Commander-in-Chief of the Aerospace Forces (VKS) (https://structure.mil.ru/management/combatant_arms/more.htm?id=11854308@SD_Employee), as well as the first commander of a multiarmed complex in the history of Russia and the USSR, heading the Vozdušno-Kosmicheskie Sily

Forces in Syria (2017). In the days that followed, also the result of the explosion on the Kerč bridge, a shower of missiles hit Ukrainian strategic assets⁴.

1. Partial mobilisation

In accordance with Presidential Decree No. 647 of 21 September 2022⁵, partial mobilisation came into effect on 21 September. Only those in the reserve pool and especially those who have served in the ranks of the armed forces, have certain military specialities and relevant experience are subject to it. Before being sent to the unit, those recalled to service must necessarily undergo additional training “taking into account the experience of a special military operation”. Russia has a huge pool of “human resources” and the partial mobilisation will affect 1% (about 300,000), the mobilised will first of all be sent to control the already occupied territories, (on a line of contact of over 1,000 km) and on territories that “must be protected and controlled”.

The announcement of the so-called “partial mobilisation” has caused, in any case, uproar among foreign commentators who speculated violent protests in Russia and even the fall of Putin. In truth, this was not the case: the participation in the street demonstrations, the alleged opposition or a drop in the President’s popularity index, report insignificant percentages. The participants in the protests held in Moscow, where the largest demonstrations took place (in other cities, rarely more than a hundred protesters showed up), did not exceed 1,000 people, which is not even comparable to the already small protests for the “Navalnyj case”, where the number of protesters throughout Russia was estimated at close to 100,000. The protests are in truth more media events than real expressions of public sentiment. The media also report fires in buildings used as recruitment centres, the responsibility for which is blamed on the Anarcho-Communist Combat Organisation, whose aim is to “bring about social revolution and build a libertarian society”⁶.

Another issue of no small importance are the approval ratings of the President and the institutions, which were released the day before the announcement of the mobilisation decree by the independent Levada Centre. The interviews were conducted on 25-31 August 2022 (on a representative sample of the urban and rural population - 1,612 people over the age of 18 in 137 cities). The data show a significant increase in trust in all state and public institutions compared to 2021, similar sharp changes occurred in 2014 (following the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Luhans’k and Donec’k). Confidence in the main political institutions increased⁷: in the President from 64% (Sep. 2021) to 77% (Sep. 2022, however, a negative inflection from 83% in August), in the government from 49% (2021) to 63%, in the State Duma and the Federation Council from 40% (2021) to over 54% (2022). The mobilisation data⁸, on the other hand, collected after the announcement, reflect a strong general concern, the prevailing feeling being “anxiety, fear, horror” (47%), followed by “shock” (23%), ‘pride in Russia’ (23%) and ‘anger, indignation’ (13%). Only 9% of respondents said they were indifferent.

(VKS). Surovkin served in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Chechnya. From 2013 to 2017, he was commander of the Eastern Military District and, since 2017, has been in charge of Russian troop regrouping in Syria. In August last year, Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded Surovkin the rank of army general.

⁴ Briefing of the Russian MoD, (October 10 and 11, 2022 https://z.mil.ru/spec_mil_oper/brief/briefings.htm)

⁵ Full document Указ Президента Российской Федерации “Об объявлении частичной мобилизации в Российской Федерации” <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/QdJ0ybmN7Kocwc8eyTGosdyuyIM6qXpj.pdf>

⁶ The group is inspired by the anarcho-communists of Černoe Znamja (“Black Banner”) founded in Białystok in 1903 (<https://libcom.org/article/history-anarchist-black-banner-movement-bialystok>), a Beznačalje, an anarchist group from St. Petersburg born at the beginning of the 20th century and to Južno-russkaja Gruppy Anarchistov-Sindikalistov (<http://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/13903-programma-yuzhno-russkoy-gruppy-anarhistov-sindikalistov>). Is directly linked to the anarchic group Fighter, well known, among other things, for setting fire to police facilities and a station of a mobile phone operator belonging to the Turkish company Turkcell in the Ukrainian region of Kiev.

⁷ Конфликт с Украиной: Сентябрь 2022 Года, data at september 29, 2022 <https://www.levada.ru/2022/09/29/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-sentyabr-2022-goda/>

⁸ Одобрение Органов Власти, September 2022 <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/>

The mobilisation mainly involved the provinces, or rather the so-called "Fourth Russia". In 2011, Natal'ja Zubarevič, professor of geography-economics at Moscow State University, published an interesting study on the so-called "Four Russias"⁹, which, elaborating on the centre-periphery development model of economic geography since the 1970s, explains Russia as internally heterogeneous, divided into relatively developed cities and a backward province. Thus, "First Russia" sees the large metropolises, where 21% of the population lives, the 12 major cities representing a predominantly post-industrial society (with the exception of Omsk, Perm, Čeljabinsk, Volgograd and Ufa), in which the Russian middle class is concentrated. The main internal migration is directed towards these cities, where capital attracts workers and investments. Cities with a population of over 500,000 or more than 250,000 (representing about 36% of the country's population) can be included in this category. The "Second Russia" combines industrial cities, mono-industrial centres with a population of between 20 and 250 thousand inhabitants (as well as larger industrial cities – Togliatti, Čerepovec and others). The inhabitants of these cities, which make up 25 per cent of the country's population, are mainly employed in industry, have a low level of education and lead, according to the author, a "Soviet lifestyle". The "Third Russia" combines the hinterland: small towns and villages, where 38% of the country's total population lives. There is a significant decrease and ageing of the population in these settlements. Finally, the aforementioned 'Fourth Russia' includes the Republics of the Northern Caucasus and Southern Siberia, which account for less than 6% of the country's population. The economy of these regions depends mainly on central government support. These are regions with particularly high levels of structural poverty, corruption, and ethnic and religious conflicts. This mainly includes ethnic Republics such as Tuva, Burjatija, Kalmykija, Dagestan, North Ossetia and Ingushetia, among others. Taking into account the *ratio* of income, the cost of a basket of goods and services and the percentage of the population below the poverty line, Tuva ranks first, with Kalmykija and Ingushetia very close behind. Tuva is the only region where the average income level is not sufficient to provide a *minimum* set of goods and services (1/3 of the population lives below the poverty line). The largest number of soldiers killed in the ongoing war with Ukraine come from these regions: hence the violent protests in Dagestan, among others.

According to various estimates, in terms of percentage per capita among all the peoples of Russia, the Buriati Mongols¹⁰ fighting in Ukraine, who make up only 0.3% of the Russian population, account for 2.8% of the people officially killed in Ukraine. In terms of deaths in this war, only Dagestan is ahead of Burjatia, (with three times the population). The ethnic minorities that suffer the greatest losses in the ongoing war are the Buryatian Mongols, the Tuvinian Turks, and the Calmyki (Kalmyki) Mongols, a fact that has greatly outraged former Mongolian President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj¹¹, who in a video message on YouTube even called on the Tuvinians, Buryatians, and Calmyki who do not want to participate in the war with Ukraine to flee Russia.

Within days of the publication of the decree, thousands of potentially recallable men left the country, either by land or by purchasing expensive airline tickets to Istanbul, Yerevan, Tashkent and Baku, the capitals of countries allowing visa-free entry to Russians. In view of the price of these tickets (the cheapest one-way flight from Moscow to Dubai cost about 370,000 roubles), people left from rather wealthy regions and not from the province, which is supposed to be the main hinterland of the recruitment. This confirms the thesis of the 'Fourth Russia' also because almost 70% of Russian citizens (especially in the provinces) have never been abroad and do not have a passport.

⁹ Natal'ja Zubarevič, *Наталья Зубаревич: Четыре России* (Natalya Zubarevich: Four Russias), Vedomosti 30.12.2011 https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2011/12/30/chetyre_rossii

¹⁰ Pavlova A., «Боевые буряты» не хотят воевать. Отказаться от участия во вторжении в Украину стало почти невозможно-пример солдат из одного региона, 05.08.2022 <https://zona.media/article/2022/08/05/otkaz/>

¹¹ Full Video on: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=q2qDzicmvxM>

Referendum and Enlargement of the Russian Federation

Referendums¹² on the annexation of four regions to Russia were held in the occupied territories in Ukraine on 23-27 September. Referendums were held in the Donetsk People's Republic, Luhans'k and the Zaporizhzhia and Cherson oblasts, as well as in the Russian Federation. According to the results, announced on 28 September, an overwhelming majority of eligible voters participated and voted for annexation. On the same day, the leaders of the annexed regions, Denis Pushkin (DRP) and Leonid Pasičnyk (LPR), went to Moscow to conclude 'agreements' on their annexation to Russia. The agreements were signed on 30 September, together with draft laws, and were presented by the President to the State Duma immediately after receiving the conclusion of the Constitutional Court (CC)¹³. It took two days to prepare the resolution, which contains much data on the historical and political background of the current decision¹⁴. On 2 October, the Russian President presented four treaties and four constitutional laws on the admission of the People's Republic DPR, LPR, Zaporizhzhia and Cherson regions into Russia, as well as on the formation of *eponymous* subjects within the Federation¹⁵ to the lower house of parliament for ratification.

After "the establishment of *de facto* external control by the collective West", Kiev, according to the Constitutional Court ruling, began to prevent citizens who identify themselves "as belonging to the Russian people" from maintaining their national, religious and cultural identity. "The state bodies adopted discriminatory regulations" and encouraged "the activities of structures that propagated the ideology and practice of aggressive nationalism and anti-Russian neo-Nazism", therefore, these territories were granted the right to follow the principle of self-determination of peoples, enshrined in the UN Charter and other international acts.

The population of the DPR and LPR has armed resistance to the "Kiev regime" and the Republics have been subjected to constant bombardment, as a result of which thousands of civilians have been killed, the Constitutional Court noted, which is why Russia "was forced to launch a special preventive military operation". The authorities of these territories decided to hold *referenda* (23-27 September) on accession to Russia, the results of which formed the basis for the signing of agreements on the annexation of the territories to the Russian Federation. The Constitutional Court also ruled that the treaty did not conflict "*with the constitutional benchmark for the Russian Federation to take measures to maintain and strengthen international peace and security, ensure the peaceful coexistence of states and peoples, and prevent interference in the internal affairs of the State*". Failure to act in determining the legal fate of these territories or delaying this situation, according to the decree, "contains an extreme threat to the life, health and security of the inhabitants" of these territories.

¹² *Occupied regions of Ukraine vote to join Russia in staged referendums*, REUTERS, 27 settembre, 2022 <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/27/1125322026/russia-ukraine-referendums>

¹³ Chudjakova P., Конституционный суд одобрил договоры о присоединении к РФ новых территорий Госдума рассмотрит вопрос об их ратификации 3 октября. 2.10.2022 <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2022/10/02/943455-sud-odobril-dogovori>

¹⁴ For example, the Constitutional Court refers to the fact that 'due to the arbitrary decisions of the Soviet authorities, the territory of the Ukrainian SSR (i.e. modern Ukraine) was largely made up of land with a predominantly Russian population without the will of the citizens themselves'. The people's situation has changed for the worse, and the situation became particularly aggravated after the 'unconstitutional armed coup' in Kiev in 2014.

¹⁵ During 2022, Moscow recognised all these territories as independent States (on 21 February, before the start of the military operation in Ukraine, the republics and on 29 September the regions).



The new map of the Russian Federation including the annexed territories. Source *Argumenty i Fakty*
https://aif.ru/politics/russia/novaya_karta_rossii_infografika

The submitted documents put an end to the issue of Russia's new borders, now considered along the administrative boundaries of the former Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhya and Kherson regions of the former Ukrainian SSR (although the authorities exercise control over a number of territories in the Nikolaev region). In the Zaporizhzhya region, for example, part of the territory is not controlled by Russia, but has become part of the country entirely, within the borders of the region.

The accession of the DPR, LPR, Cherson and Zaporizhzhya regions to Russia reduces the area of Ukraine by 19%, while increasing the area of Russia by 0.6%. In addition, the documents state that residents of the new territories will be recognised as citizens of Russia: "With the exception of persons who, within one month, declare that they wish to retain their other citizenship and (or) their minor children". Russian will also be the state language in the republics of the DPR and LPR¹⁶, but there is no such indication for the regions of Zaporizhzhya and Cherson (during past referendums in the DPR and LPR only ballot papers in Russian were used, and in the regions they were duplicated in Ukrainian). On the monetary aspect, the currency will be the rouble, but until 31 December 2022 payments can also be made in hryvnias. The Bank of Russia will receive authority to determine the specifics of the activities of credit and noncredit financial institutions.

The regions are to be integrated into the economic and legal system of Russia by 1 January 2026. Citizens of the Russian Federation residing in these territories will be provided with guarantees in the implementation of work activities, education documents confirming marital *status*, work experience,

¹⁶ In the DPR and LPR they have already decided on the state language, in other regions the leaders stated that some acts would be adopted later (for example, the state language could be mentioned in the charter of the region): "Accordingly, in the Kherson and Zaporozhye regions, the provisions of the Law on the State Language of the Russian Federation shall apply"

the right to receive pensions, social and medical assistance, etc., issued in the DPR, LPR, as well as in Ukraine. Guarantees on property relations are also provided.

The solemn signing of the treaties took place on 30 September in the Kremlin¹⁷. Government members, Kremlin officials, public figures, heads of Russian regions, deputies and senators came to the signing ceremony of the agreements, which was held in St. George's Hall in the Kremlin. The signing of the documents was preceded by a 40-minute speech in which Putin criticised the communists and those responsible for the collapse of the USSR.

Moscow declared itself ready to negotiate but, on the same day, the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky rejected the possibility of negotiations by ratifying the decision of the National Security and Defence Council (30 September 2022) stating that it was impossible to negotiate with the President of the Russian Federation and that Ukraine's defence capability¹⁸ needed to be strengthened.

Final remarks

The killing of Dar'ja Dugina, the attack on Nord Stream and against the Kerč Bridge have a highly symbolic value. Rebuilt after the annexation of Crimea in just two years and inaugurated on 15 May 2018, the bridge represents a massive reconstruction and its, albeit partial, destruction is a direct affront to Putin but the decisions following this episode are undoubtedly the result of internal, longstanding pressures that risk taking over from moderate ones. Russia blames most of the responsibility for the conflict on the West and in particular on the USA, which continues to supply the country with weapons, thus not only prolonging the torment of needless deaths but also distancing the mirage of a negotiation that could put an end to the special operation. The upsurge seen at the beginning of October will continue if no agreement is reached between the parties, worsening moreover since Russia now also considers the annexed parts to be national territory and any attack on them will be considered an attack on the nation itself.

¹⁷ Подписание договоров о принятии ДНР, ЛНР, Запорожской и Херсонской областей в состав России 30 сентября 2022 года <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>

¹⁸ Zelensky firma decreto, impossibile negoziare con Russia, ANSA 4 ottobre 2022 https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2022/10/04/zelensky-firma-decreto-impossibile-negoziare-con-russia_4a24da3b-e6f6-4782-9da4-ae186690a8a4.html

Iran: the protest that troubles the regime

The Iran wave of protests triggered by the death on September 16th of Mahsa Amini, a Sunni Kurd, has some peculiar characteristics¹ that shake the regime to its foundations², distinguishing these manifestations from previous ones and leading some observers to define them as a revolution³.

Feminism, a missing element in the so-called Arab Spring of 2011 - and Arab Iran is not - has taken the leadership in the streets, but men are equally present. Amini was Kurdish, thus bringing out a protest that goes beyond the ethnic lines that in the past had remained an important break line. The reason for her arrest, the hijab - incorrectly worn according to the religious police - has become a symbol of the protest against the establishment which in the past carried out economically demanding campaigns to impose it on the female population. The government tried to justify Amini's death by citing previous pathologies and on October 3rd Ayatollah Ali Khamenei blamed foreign enemies for the riots - the United States, Israel and Iranians from the diaspora; eventually, the protests are extended to small towns too, while in the past they remained concentrated in large urban centers. Popular protests, with strikes and demonstrations, had already begun in the summer due to the lack of water and worsening of living conditions.

The movement is essentially made up of young people between 18 and 25 years who often gather around universities. The mobilization concerns the systematic discrimination against minorities, the lack of women's rights, the extremist religious doctrine imposed for decades⁴ and the serious economic situation.

Not wearing the hijab - a hallmark of government support for women since 1979 - or not wearing it correctly means indecency and corruption. Women face discrimination with regards to inheritance, marriage, divorce and child custody; the country does not provide a legislation on domestic abuse and (the soaring increase in) honour crimes.

In Iran, death sentences are often handed down on *moharebeh* charges - hostility against God - *afsad-i-fil arz* - sowing corruption on the earth - and *baghi* - people indicted for leading an armed uprising. According to Human Rights Watch⁵ Courts often use torture to extort confessions and minorities face systematic discrimination: Kurdish provinces, for example, have the highest unemployment rates in the country and funds for basic services are largely insufficient.

The demand for change from the Iranians is very strong: among the many protests of the last decades⁶ those of 1999 and 2009 called for reforms, those from 2018 onwards are instead against the regime. The government would like to continue to impose its line but it relies almost exclusively on force; the population is probably not yet able to undermine the system to which it no longer grants mitigating circumstances and the change will not happen in the short term, but these protests are a serious wound for the regime.

¹ Iranwire, "Iran's Unprecedented 2022 Protests: 15 Key Differences from Past Unrest", October 9, 2022; <https://iranwire.com/en/politics/108420-irans-2022-protests-15-key-differences-from-past-unrest/>.

² Courrier International, "Iran : le régime au pied du mur", 20 Octobre 2022; <https://reveil.courrierinternational.com/#/edition/590/article/197579>.

³ S. Malooney, D. Dollar, "Will protests in Iran end the Islamic Republic?", Brookings Institution, podcast, October 3, 2022; <https://www.brookings.edu/podcast-episode/will-protests-in-iran-end-the-islamic-republic/>.

⁴ R. Mustafah, "Iran protests are not just about mandatory hijab, but the entire system", Rudaw, 29 September 2022; <https://www.rudaw.net/english/opinion/27092022>.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Torture, Detention, and the Crushing of Dissent in Iran"; <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/campaigns/torture/iran/>.

⁶ M Young, "Can the Iranian System Survive?", Carnegie Middle East Center, September 29, 2022; <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/88044>.

In 2009, millions of people took to the streets for Ahmadinejad's disputed presidential election⁷, but the riots were confined to the big cities and led by the middle class. Economic hardships sparked nationwide protests in 2017⁸ and in 2019⁹ predominantly among the working class and the poorest sectors of the population; this time the protests involve people from all sectors of the society and of different age groups, spread across dozens of cities and towns¹⁰.

Students from various universities, including Sharif and the Esfahan Polytechnic, joined the protests as well only to be attacked with tear gas and gunshots¹¹.

On September 30th, nine foreign nationals were arrested on suspicion of having links with the protests and demonstrations of solidarity took place in the United States, France, Turkey and Afghanistan. The repression is particularly severe in the Kurdistan region, where Amini was originally from¹².

A fire broke out in Evin prison on October 15th – known for the detention of political opponents and the brutality¹³ – where foreigners are also being held, causing the death of eight inmates¹⁴ and the wounding of 61¹⁵ people.

Human rights associations and activist groups claim that at least 240 protesters have been killed so far, including 32 minors¹⁶ and more than 8,000 people were arrested in 111 cities according to the Iranian activist news agency HRANA¹⁷, but the authorities did not publish an official death toll. Various public figures – artists, actors, sports men¹⁸ and women and singers – who boast a massive following among Iranians – were arrested¹⁹ and then released.

⁷ R. F. Worth, N. Fahti, "Protests Flare in Tehran as Opposition Disputes Vote", The New York Times, June 13, 2009; <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/world/middleeast/14iran.html>

⁸ P. Gast, D. And one, K. Fox "Here's why the Iran protests are significant", CNN, January 3, 2018; <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/30/world/iran-protests-issues/index.html>.

⁹ AlJazeera, "Iran's protests: All you need to know in 600 words", 20 November 2019; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/20/irans-protests-all-you-need-to-know-in-600-words>.

¹⁰ BBC News, "Iran: A really simple guide to the protests", 14 October 2022; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63240911>.

¹¹ Radio Farda, "Protests In Iran Continue Despite Violent Government Crackdown", October 1, 2022; <https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2022/iran-221001-rferl04.htm>.

¹² W. Strzyńska, H. Janjua, "Iranian security forces intensify crackdown in Kurdistan", The Guardian, 11 October 2022; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/11/iran-alarm-raised-over-bloody-crackdown-on-protesters-in-kurdistan>.

¹³ Courrier International, "En Iran, incendie et coups de feu signalés à la prison d'Evin", 16 Octobre 2022; <https://reveil.courrierinternational.com/#/edition/577/article/197472>.

¹⁴ Reuters, "Iran prison fire death toll rises as protests continue", 17 October 2022 ; https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-prison-fire-death-toll-rises-as-protests-continue-2022-10-17/?utm_campaign=MECGA%20Soft%20Launch&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=230000259&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--mm3EMn-mPAW4tFj0wAqUt15YcplPwvXtffyfnqflsxbanXYvC4Fq--XkX-y6hl0EQVC8V1m6_UiokEslEpft6365UPQ&utm_content=230000259&utm_source=hs_email

¹⁵ P. Hafezi, "Iran prison fire kills four, injures 61 as protests persist", Reuters, October 16, 2022; <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-rejects-bidens-support-anti-government-protests-interference-tehrans-state-2022-10-16/>.

¹⁶ The Guardian, "Iranian schoolgirl 'beaten to death for refusing to sing' pro-regime anthem", 18 October 2022; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/oct/18/iranian-schoolgirl-beaten-to-death-for-refusing-to-sing-pro-regime-anthem>.

¹⁷ <https://www.en-hrana.org/?s=iran>

¹⁸ BBC News, "Elnaz Rekabi: Crowd greet Iranian climber who broke hijab rule on return", 19 October 2022; [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63309101?xtor=AL-72-%5Bpartner%5D-%5Bgnl.newsletters%5D-%5Bheadline%5D-%5Bnews%5D-%5Bbizdev%5D-%5Bisapi%5D&xtor=ES-213-\[BBC%20News%20Newsletter\]-2022October18-\[top+news+stories](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63309101?xtor=AL-72-%5Bpartner%5D-%5Bgnl.newsletters%5D-%5Bheadline%5D-%5Bnews%5D-%5Bbizdev%5D-%5Bisapi%5D&xtor=ES-213-[BBC%20News%20Newsletter]-2022October18-[top+news+stories).

¹⁹ S. Kullab, "Iran's celebrities face reprisals for supporting protests", APNews, 16 October 2022; https://apnews.com/article/iran-entertainment-sports-soccer-middle-east-f0f37394fa5d15dc412ae4227457d7f4?utm_campaign=MECGA%20Soft%20Launch&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=229879937&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--uTg93rQrCDavQi7Se2hNWpw-3yGX5WZ1eotkWaFQ2BEQBucYCT86xX2kQH3XYPwvaguTtVWcvpXsl5JPzSA7SMLy4g&utm_content=229879937&utm_source=hs_email

The regime's strategy is repression, thus increasing the distance with civil society²⁰, employing several security forces²¹.

The NOPO²², special forces of the provincial guard, dubbed *siah jameghan*, the black-robed by protesters, are a unit created by the government for counter-terrorism operations and kidnappings. Another group is the spontaneous forces of Islamic lands, Naksa, loyal to supreme leader Ali Khamenei: involved in the civil war in Syria, they are not officially registered and it is unclear which chain of command they respond to.

Most of the agents of the repression are the Basiji - some of them in civilian clothes blend into the crowd to identify the leaders – a body created in 1979 that has been under the control of the Guardians of the Revolution since 2007. There are also several police corps, those of the neighbourhoods and those who ride motorcycles, an infantry and special forces unit, the secret services, *etelaati*, and the *gardan kolof*, enlisted by the Basiji, militiamen from the poorest neighbourhoods. The regime uses ambulances to transport reinforcements and, by luring injured protesters, to arrest them.

Eventually, IRGC, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, organized into 36 army corps with about 190,000 personnel, that enjoy wide autonomy of command and resources: they are separate and parallel to the national army – in charge of protecting Iran's borders, the supreme leader and other senior officials. In the previous riots of 2017 and 2019 their contribution was decisive in repressing the demonstrations. The *pasdaran* have always had considerable political, economic and social weight but currently their dominion and autonomy seem unchallenged. They are also very close to President Raisi – former deputy prosecutor, then attorney general and head of the judicial system from 2019 to his election in 2021 - who has always chosen the path of harsh punishment for dissent – in 1988 he approved the death sentences of about 5,000 political prisoners. With his successor, Mohseni Ejei, the judiciary appears in total symbiosis with the Guardians of the Revolution. The *pasdaran* are so deeply intertwined in Iran's economy and power structure that they have everything to lose if the system falls²³.

The intensity of the protests that engulfed the country, with appeals to overthrow the Islamic Republic, has shaken the State, but the country's authoritarian clerical rulers have been preparing for this moment since the 1979 Islamic revolution: the conservative theocracy has managed to resist to various external and internal attacks²⁴.

The revolution founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, ordered the creation of the Revolutionary Guards precisely for defence against coups or defections by the regular army²⁵, Artesh. According to some analysts, Iran is no longer a theocracy ruled by Shiite clerics, but a state essentially ruled by the Revolutionary Guards²⁶.

²⁰ A. Divsallar, "As Iran's protests spread, the regime pursues "maximum suppression", October 3, 2022; <https://www.mei.edu/blog/monday-briefing-irans-protests-spread-regime-pursues-maximum-suppression>

²¹ J. P. Perrin, "Face à la colère du peuple, le régime iranien choisit la fuite en avant répressive", Mediapart, 29 Septembre 2022 ; <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/290922/face-la-colere-du-peuple-le-regime-iranien-choisit-la-fuite-en-avant-repressive>.

²² Iran International Newsroom, "US Issues New Sanctions On Iranian Security Entities, Officials", 12/07/2021; <https://www.iranintl.com/en/20211207396732>.

²³ B. Hubbard, F. Fassihi, "Iran's Loyal Security Forces Protect Ruling System That Protesters Want to Topple", The New York Times, October 17, 2022; <https://www.nytimes.com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.nytimes.com/2022/10/17/world/middleeast/iran-protests-revolutionary-guards.amp.html>.

²⁴ A. Ostovar, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards Will Never Stand Down", Foreign Policy, October 18, 2022; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/18/irans-revolutionary-guards-will-never-stand-down/>.

²⁵ BBC News, "Profile: Iran's Revolutionary Guards", 3 January 2020; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47852262>.

²⁶ A. Alfoneh, "The Revolutionary Guards' Role in Iranian Politics", Middle East Quarterly, September 01, 2008; <https://www.aei.org/articles/the-revolutionary-guards-role-in-iranian-politics/>.

The Basiji have been on the front lines for weeks, using brutal tactics trying to suppress the protests, as they have done in the past, but they failed and some witnesses have identified members of an élite Revolutionary Guards commando, known as Saberín, that would replace them.

The fate of this protest movement - the biggest challenge to the Iranian system of government since 2009 – rests largely on the cohesion and loyalty of the Revolutionary Guards and the rest of the country's multi-layered security forces. So far there have been no reports of desertions, but those who confront the protesters are suffering from weeks of urban warfare with heavy equipment and, above all, are uncomfortable with the level of violence, especially against young women.

In order to prevent defections, military and police commanders warned the troops that if the government system were to collapse, the opposition would eliminate them, so the Guards and the Basiji would most likely continue the struggle to preserve themselves even before the ruling system.

The Revolutionary Guards boast a formidable arsenal that includes ballistic missile and drone programs, and their commanders hold key political positions, including the Speaker of the Parliament, Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf. Their feared intelligence branch arrests and intimidates dissidents and opposition political activists; their overseas arm, the Quds Force, has recruited, trained and armed a network of proxy militias in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen that could come to help.

The Guards own factories, companies and branches in the banking, infrastructure, housing, airline, tourism and other sectors; they support the country in avoiding sanctions through a network of smuggling operations. They are not accountable to the government, even when corruption reports go public. Although the supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is the commander-in-chief of all the armed forces in the country, the Guards operate much like a regular army with its own hierarchy of command.

The power and wealth of the Guards depend on the survival of the system, which is why they see protests as an existential threat.

The protests consist of small crowds scattered across the country but widespread, making it difficult for the government to organize a broad and definitive response. This kept the movement going, but to keeping it up it would need to develop a clear leadership and unified goals.

The Iranian security services could also resort to even greater force if they fear their existence is threatened, but this prospect makes some within the ruling system uncomfortable: the only way the Islamic Republic can remain in power is killing several hundred people for several months, but it is becoming very difficult and even impossible to defend internal policies of repression against any dissent. In the last major wave of nationwide protests in November 2019, security forces killed more than 400 people, according to human rights groups, which say the real numbers are likely much higher.

This time around, Iranian women and young people lead the protests and scenes of violence – sometimes lethal - could undermine the will of the security and police forces to pursue cold-blooded killings.

As a polycentric regime, in the Islamic Republic the competences and chain of command are unclear: the Ministry of Justice, Interior, Defence, Secret Services and *pasdaran* often overlap, creating communication and logistics problems in a period of intensifying internal struggles for the succession to the supreme guide²⁷. Moreover, the repression is causing cracks in the political élite which is not united in the reaction²⁸.

The extreme militarization of the Islamic Republic began with the war against Iraq (1980-1988) with the revolutionary forces making up for the shortcomings of the weakened and purged army by

²⁷ S. Vakil, "Iran's Crisis of Legitimacy", Foreign Affairs, September 28, 2022; <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/iran-crisis-legitimacy-mass-protests-ailing-leader>.

²⁸ Critical Threats, Iran Crisis Updates, 18 October 2022; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-updates>.

the fall of the shah and the flight of many officers, but since then Iranian society has changed profoundly.

These protests seem to be the breaking point between the establishment made up of a gerontocracy of over 80s anchored to the 1979 Revolution and other forces hitherto marginalized: the younger generation - 73% of Iranians are under the age of 45 - women²⁹ and ethnic minorities.

²⁹ Middle East Eye, "Iran protests: Schoolgirls chant 'get out' and wave headscarves during IRGC official visit", 16 October 2022; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-protests-schoolgirls-chant-get-out-government-leader-visit>.

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Greek-Turkish tensions and the Aegean hot front: a new challenge for the Atlantic Alliance?

Introduction

In the summer of 2022, the tension between Greece and Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean basin revived. The situation had been tense for some time, due also to the discovery, in recent years, of significant hydrocarbon deposits. Still, the impact of the Ukrainian crisis and the centrality that the energy issue has assumed over the months aggravated it. The growing militarization of the confrontation and the cross-accusations of aggressive behaviour have been further reasons for concern. Greece and Turkey are both members of NATO, and the deterioration of their relations reverberates in the alliance's cohesion. Repercussions are made more severe by a context that has already been straining its compactness for some time. In early September, tones turned unusually harsh, with Athens openly evoking the opening of a new war scenario in Europe (Stamouli, 2022) and Ankara responding by foreshadowing a possible armed intervention in the Aegean theatre (Pitel and Varvitsioti, 2022). These tensions have led to new divisions in the Atlantic Alliance and forced the State Department to take a stand, calling on the two countries to find a diplomatic solution to the many issues that divide them (Ersoz, 2022). However, it is difficult for the current quarrel to find a quick settlement. Many reasons divide Greece and Turkey, and not even seventy years of shared membership in the Atlantic Alliance have been able to mitigate them. On the contrary, Ankara's growing ambitions under the AKP government have contributed to reviving them, fuelling Athens' fears. These ambitions are another source of tension since, after the debt crisis of the late 2000s and the following economic difficulties, Greece sees the acquisition of greater regional prominence as an instrument to return to playing a "weighty" international role.

A long and bitter enmity

The roots of the problematic relationship between Greece and Turkey can be traced back to the years that led to Athens' independence, between 1821 and 1830. During this period, four centuries of Ottoman rule, strongly resented by the people of Orthodox Greece, resulted in a bloody war in which the geopolitical interests of some of the main European powers of that time were immediately intertwined (Dakin, 1973; Mazower, 2021). After Greece's independence, the persistence of the Ottoman presence in the Balkans and the Aegean region, though weakened and constantly eroded, left ample room for nationalism, which grew all over the century. In parallel, the strengthening Turkish identity in the Ottoman Empire eroded its multi-communal nature (Çağaptay, 2006). In turn, this led to a gradual deterioration of the position of its several national minorities, not least the Greek one, which was an essential element of cities like Istanbul, Izmir, and Thessaloniki. If the Second Balkan War (June-August 1913) witnessed an unexpected convergence between Athens and Istanbul against Bulgaria's territorial ambitions, World War I brought the two countries back to opposite sides. Greece's entry into the conflict alongside the Entente forces (October 1916) directly involved Athens in the question of the future of the Ottoman Empire. At the Paris peace conference, Greece was allowed to occupy Izmir and the surrounding area under the "spheres of influence" policy outlined in the Treaty of Sèvres. The occupation lasted from May 1919 to September 1922. The consequence was the evacuation of most of the Greek and Armenian population from the city after the fire that broke out on 13 September (four days after the entry of the Turkish troops) had led to the deaths of 10,000 to 100,000 members of the two communities (Niamark, 2002).

Even today, the occupation of Izmir is an integral part of the memory of Greek-Turkish hostility. Significantly, the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, evoked the experience of the city's recapture in ominous tones as part of the recent "war of words" between Ankara and Athens¹. The population exchange negotiated between the newly formed Republic of Turkey and the government of Eleftherios Venizelos in 1923 resulted in the displacement of some 1.5 million people (mostly of Greek descent, who were forced to leave the Anatolian peninsula) and opened a long series of legal disputes. Acrimony declined in the 1930s when political relations somewhat normalized. Between 1934 and 1936, the signing of the Balkan Pact and the Montreux Convention on the Straits regime marked the moment of greatest convergence between the two countries. However, while Athens gravitated into the British orbit, Ankara remained on the margins of "grand diplomacy" both in the pre-war period and after the outbreak of World War II, preserving what has been called a «cautious balance» between the belligerents (VanderLippe, 2001; see also Di Casola, 1984). The immediate post-war period saw both countries subject to destabilizing Soviet pressures, which led to their approach to the US, "ratified" in the early 1950s by their entry into the Atlantic Alliance during its first round of enlargement. In 1953, Athens and Ankara signed a second Balkan Pact with Yugoslavia, now with explicit anti-Soviet aims. However, the changing geopolitical balance also revives the reasons for their rivalry. Among else, the end of the Italian occupation re-proposed the issue of the Dodecanese (assigned to Athens by the 1919 Venizelos-Tittoni agreements), while the end of British control over Cyprus relaunched that of its union with Greece (*enosis*).

The militarization of the Cyprus issue, with the 1974 coup that led to the fall of the government of Archbishop Makarios III and the subsequent Turkish invasion of the northern part of the island, marked the lowest point in Greek-Turkish relations. In turn, the division of the country along the Green Line and the proclamation of the Turkish Federated State of Cyprus (since 1983: Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus) further worsened the problem. The admission of the (Greek) Republic of Cyprus to the EU (2004) was strongly resented by Turkey and affected the negotiations for its entry into the Union before they stalled for a complex set of technical and political reasons. The Cyprus issue leveraged an already deteriorated situation, setting the picture of Greek-Turkish relations within the framework of substantial hostility, occasionally punctuated by more serious incidents, as in January 1996, when the two countries came to the brink of armed confrontation for control of the island of Imia/Kardak. The end of the Cold War strengthened these dynamics, offering space for both countries to expand their respective influence. In this phase, too, there have been some signs of rapprochement, such as between the late 1990s and the late 2000s. However, these signs never evolved into a lasting strategy. Relations between the two countries remained formally cordial throughout the following decade. Since Kostas Karamanlis's visit in 2008 (the first visit since his uncle's, Konstantinos Karamanlis, forty-nine years earlier), all Greek Prime Ministers have visited Ankara during their tenure. On the other hand, bilateral relations gradually deteriorated due also to the new assertiveness of the AKP governments and the new Turkish centrality after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The hydrocarbons dispute

The discovery of rich hydrocarbon deposits in the eastern Mediterranean and Cyprus waters has given Greece and Turkey additional grounds for confrontation. The issue (prominent since 2019) connects to old and intricate disputes between the two countries regarding several topics. Such topics include the limits of territorial waters and continental shelf; the militarisation of some islands in the eastern part of the Aegean basin; airspace management; the sovereignty over various islands, islets, and reefs; and the limits of the two countries' search and rescue areas at sea. Turkey has not

¹ Erdogan warns Greece of 'heavy price', tells it not to forget history. *TRT World - Turkish Radio and Television Corporation*, 3 September 2022. Online: <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/erdogan-warns-greece-of-heavy-price-tells-it-not-to-forget-history-60437> (accessed: 6 October 2022).

signed the Convention on the Continental Shelf (29 April 1958) nor the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, or Montego Bay Convention, 10 December 1982), to which Greece has acceded. This fact makes the problems more complex since Ankara does not recognize a legal continental shelf nor the existence of an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around the Greek islands. Another troublesome aspect is that Greece and Turkey are not the only countries interested in this issue. The discovery of the eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon reserves has raised the attention of several riparian states, such as Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Libya. This fact has led to the formation and dissolution of several “axes”, whose actions have contributed to further shuffling the cards. The European Union, in its turn, is interested in settling the dispute and seems willing to start exploiting the Levant’s deposits. From this perspective, Brussels has repeatedly tried to promote a dialogue between the different parties (Poli and Pau, 2020). However, results have been poor due to the constant mistrust separating Ankara from the European authorities.

For Turkey, the issue of hydrocarbons is of particular importance. Since the end of the Cold War, Ankara has sought to make the most of its geographic location by trying to evolve into a possible European energy hub (Yilmaz-Bozkus, 2019) and a privileged transit route for resources from the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Over the years, the country has developed an extensive infrastructure network, and several projects are still underway, although results have been limited. Bringing the Levant’s resources to value and defining possible alternative routes to the European market is likely to impact (partially, at least) the return on Ankara’s investments. In recent years, Turkey has sought to carve out a role in exploiting the region’s resources to limit this risk. However, in May 2019, the beginning of the state-owned Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) exploration in the Cyprus continental shelf (and, to a lesser extent, in the Greek continental shelf) increased «exponentially» the region’s political volatility. Some observers questioned the economic rationality of Turkey’s acquisition of increased exploration capacities at a time of low energy prices and considered it proof that TPAO’s activities were just a tool of the AKP government’s revisionist foreign policy (Tsakiris, 2020). Turkish revisionism was also heavily criticized at the European level. The same happened to Turkey’s supposedly “geopolitical” use of its energy activism to alter the existing Eastern Mediterranean balance (see, e.g., Stanicek, 2020). However, in more recent times, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its effects on European energy supplies have challenged these assumptions and prompted reflection about the role that – in the coming years – Turkey might assume in the Old Continent’s evolving oil and gas markets (Tastan, 2022).

The issue has many facets. If Turkey could evolve into a credible transit route for Azerbaijani and – potentially – Turkmen and Iranian resources, the strategic value of the Levant would be significantly diminished. Such an outcome would benefit the Anatolian republic in economic and political terms, heavily impacting Greece’s and Cyprus’ position. For the EU, too, the availability of a “ready-made” Turkish solution might be more appealing than building new infrastructures, an issue that has already raised some criticism (Pastori, 2020). Evolving into a commercial hub for their resources would also strengthen Ankara’s position vis-à-vis the Caspian Basin countries, an area Turkey has long looked towards, partly in the name of the Turkic roots that Ankara shares with these countries. Moreover, in recent times, Turkey seems to have drawn closer to Iran, a country whose rivalry with Ankara predates even that of Greece and with which relations have not always been easy. Relations between Tehran and Ankara are complex for many reasons, such as Turkish-Iranian strategic competition in Syria, Iraq, and the Southern Caucasus. However, in August 2022, during President Erdogan’s state visit to Tehran, the two governments announced their willingness to increase their mutual exchanges and find a settlement to the disputes that divide them. Some observers expressed their scepticism about these possible developments, recalling several other occasions when the two countries trumpeted a rapprochement that failed to materialize (Vatanka, 2022; Gurbuz, 2022). On the opposite side, other sources highlighted how things could change under

President Raisi's new "Neighbors First" policy and how, despite their different strategic interests, Iran and Turkey could revive the political convergence of the 2001-2010 period (Joobani, 2022).

The US dilemmas

Turkey's relocation in the global energy markets would have relevant impacts on the strategic balance of the Eastern Mediterranean. Equally important would be its implications for Ankara's international positioning. Beyond its relations with Brussels, a possible Turkish new role in the sector of European energy supply would also affect its relations with the US. The past few years have not been easy for the US-Turkey dialogue. Especially during the Trump presidency, there have been peaks of tension rarely seen before, particularly over Turkey's decision to acquire the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system. Such a decision led to the country's ousting from the F-35 program, Washington's rapprochement with Greece, and the offering to Athens of military supplies from the US *surplus* (Saballa, 2022). According to Ankara, it was precisely US military supplies that – among else – allowed Athens' remilitarisation of some Aegean islands violating their neutrality *status*. US-Greece stronger military cooperation is one of the causes of the recent Turkish irritation and led, among other things, to Ankara's formal diplomatic protests against Athens and Washington². In the past months, the Anatolian republic has also reportedly acquired a new supply of Russian S-400s. It is unclear whether this shipment refers to a new contract or is a part of the one signed in 2017. However, it is a move that – in the current international situation and due to Ankara's membership in the Atlantic Alliance – further emphasized the rift existing with the Western allies. The US response to this new, apparent "breakthrough" by the AKP government has been restrained (Harris, Gould and Bekdil, 2022): a choice that would be consistent with what some observers consider the White House's will to play a mediating role in the confrontation between its allies.

In some US circles, there is a severe fear that tensions between Greece and Turkey could escalate into an armed confrontation (Rubin, 2022). Even without going to these extremes, it is clear that the periodic resurfacing of the ongoing tug-of-war in the Aegean poses a significant problem to the US. Even before the invasion of Ukraine, Russia's increased assertiveness in the Mediterranean and the Middle East enhanced the strategic importance of the two countries. This development triggered an underground competition between them to emerge as Washington's preferred regional partner. Within this framework, Athens has chosen the path of presenting itself as a reliable and predictable ally, contrasting its position with that of Turkey. Ankara, on the contrary, seems to have opted for a flexible alliance system in which the departure from the traditional Western alignment is instrumental in negotiating the price of its allegiance. Over the years, Ankara has also provided the Western alliance with its quantitative contribution, fielding armed forces second only – in quantitative terms – to the US and supplying a vast and ramified network of contacts that projects its influence far beyond the limits of the Mediterranean basin. February 2022 did not end this state of things. Instead, Greece and Turkey tried to affirm their role in the changed strategic context. The former actively supported the Ukrainian war effort, while the latter provided Kyiv with valuable assets, such as the Bayraktar TB2 drones, which played a central role in the conflict. At the same time, Ankara revived its role as "guardian of the Black Sea" and tried (apparently with little success, except for the July grain agreement) to strengthen its role as a possible mediator between the conflicting parties. However, although the two countries are currently on the same side in supporting the Ukraine government, this did not lead to a lasting rapprochement. Instead, after some positive signs, tensions resumed after Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis visited the US in May 2022.

For Washington, the challenge is getting the situation back on track. The Greek authorities have expressed the possibility of resuming dialogue, but – according to Athens – Turkish

² Turkey protests US, Greece over 'violating non-military status' of Aegean Greek islands. *Al-Monitor*, 26 September 2022. Online: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/turkey-protests-us-greece-over-violating-non-military-status-aegean-greek-islands> (accessed: 6 October 2022). See also Sofuoglu, 2022.

«provocations» must end first³. However, it seems improbable that Ankara could accept a proposal that de facto implies admitting the soundness of the Greek demands. Against this backdrop, Washington has few levers at its disposal. Moreover, US officials have repeatedly expressed their favour towards Athens, as did Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin last May. This kind of statement has cast doubt on Turkish authorities about the US' willingness to act as an "honest matchmaker". As it has been noted: «[r]obust US diplomacy in the form of maritime dispute mediation would help bring order and cohesion to NATO allies and would have the downstream effect of cordoning off areas of opportunity for Russia – and China, to boot. Additionally, successfully brokered US-sponsored talks would strengthen American ties to the [Eastern Mediterranean] region and help to restrain a recalcitrant Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan» (Saidel, 2022). The question is what form this «robust US diplomacy» should – and can – take, given the almost constant ups and downs of Washington-Ankara relations. NATO faces similar problems. Even NATO's Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, has repeatedly tried to promote Greece-Turkey rapprochement, again with little success due to resistance on both sides and the conditions that Athens and Ankara posed to engage in dialogue⁴. To make things more complex, within NATO, there is a strong sense of unease toward Turkey, which emerged, for instance, in the tensions that, in the fall of 2019, accompanied the launch of Operation Peace Spring in Kurdish-controlled territories of northern Syria (Pastori, 2019).

Conclusions

Although reaching a peaceful settlement of the Greek-Turkish dispute is an interest that many actors share, achieving this result in a short time seems complicated. Despite heated statements, the risk of an armed confrontation between the two countries is remote. However, the instability that this situation fuels weakens NATO and challenges the US' role in the Mediterranean. From the political even more than from the military perspective, NATO's ability to ensure the coexistence of the two great rivals for seventy years has been a critical success and a precise measure of the Atlantic Alliance's effectiveness in acting as a clearinghouse for the interests of its members. In this sense, its problems in containing the recent tensions highlight the Alliance's growing weakness in playing this role. The rise of these tensions is a product of the redefinition of the regional balance, the emergence of new players, and the repositioning of the old ones. The ongoing clash between Athens and Ankara relates to the same dynamics. For both players, the stakes are high. Beyond the contingent issues, from territorial to maritime disputes, in the long run, Greece's and Turkey's future political weight largely depends on the outcome of the ongoing tug-of-war. One of the most central topics regards the position the two countries will be able to assume vis-à-vis their major counterparts, first and foremost the US and Europe. For this reason, any attempt to reach a diplomatic solution to their claims can lead – at best – only to temporary benefits. Such a conclusion is even more true in a phase like the current one when the presence of different crises – in which local, regional, and global dimensions interwind – makes the Mediterranean region especially volatile and opens to the most ambitious players much larger windows of opportunity than normal times.

³ Greece Says It's Open to Talks with Turkey Once Provocations End. *Voice of America*, 2 October 2022. Online: <https://www.voanews.com/a/greece-says-it-s-open-to-talks-with-turkey-once-provocations-end/6772597.html> (accessed: 6 October 2022). Greece would say 'yes' to a Mitsotakis-Erdogan meeting if Turkey asked. *Reuters*, 3 October 2022. Online: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/greece-would-say-yes-mitsotakis-erdogan-meeting-if-turkey-asked-2022-10-03> (accessed: 6 October 2022).

⁴ Greece, Turkey spar again after NATO mediation move. *ANSA*, 4 September 2022. Online: https://www.ansa.it/nuova_europa/en/news/sections/politics/2020/09/04/greece-turkey-spar-again-after-nato-mediation-move_ab66fece-3712-4954-b14c-d0e5fa6c2c8f.html (accessed: 6 October 2022). Biden applauds NATO efforts to defuse tensions between Turkey, Greece. *Reuters*, 6 October 2022. Online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-greece-turkey-biden-idUSKBN26R2J3> (accessed: 6 October 2022).

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Energy security in the EU member countries: the winter season's challenges between risks of rationing and diversification's strategies

European Union and energy diversification

The energy crisis triggered by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has prompted the EU member States to immediately undertake initiatives of energy diversification also aimed to reduce consumption, actions that cannot be postponed due to a dramatic scenario in which Russia has shown itself ready to exploit Europe's excessive dependence on its gas. As a matter of fact, Moscow is using energy supply as a geopolitical weapon, a tool of pressure to influence states by threatening – and often implementing – the disruption of gas flows or the closure of gas pipelines. During these eight months since the outbreak of the conflict, European imports of Russian gas have substantially dropped from 40-43% in 2021 to 15% in September 2022 (ISPI DataLab, 2022). A goal that has been achieved through the diversification of imports but mainly because of the halt of some gas pipelines, both for Russian initiative and as a consequence of the Nord Stream-1 sabotage, even if gas flows from this route were frequently reduced and stopped even before the September events.

EU member States have offset the reduction of Russian gas imports - which is one of the key purpose in the EU REPower plan aimed to stop purchases of Russian gas by 2027 – increasing imports of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and imports via pipeline guaranteed by traditional suppliers such as Norway, Algeria, Qatar. These additional volumes of gas has allowed to increase natural gas storages by up to 90% (which is a European Commission's specific goal) to meet the domestic needs and expected high consumption for the winter season.

After planning policies and measures to contain consumption in the last 8 months - looking for additional supplies in international markets to replace Russian gas in the short term and triggering a kind of international competition to buy LNG carriers to be converted into Floating Storage Regasification Unit (FSRU) - the imminent arrival of the winter season represents the testing ground for evaluating the effectiveness of the energy strategies adopted by the EU member States. In the coming months it will be possible to assess whether European nations will be able to meet domestic demand or whether they will be forced to ration supplies, with economic and social implications in the industrial sector, as well as in terms of rising prices.

It appears particularly interesting to focus the analysis on the strategies of energy diversification adopted by Italy and Germany – which are heavily dependent on Russian gas imports – to understand whether alternative gas supply will be sufficient to avoid consumption rationing. Moreover, in the European landscape, Poland and Bulgaria - two other countries dependent on Russian supplies – have recently inaugurated alternative energy corridors, allowing them to overcome the reliance on Russian gas imports.

Italy, between alternative energy routes and reliability of suppliers

In the past eight months, Italy has undertaken a series of initiatives aimed at partially replacing Russian gas imports, ensuring sufficient supply to meet domestic demand. Similarly to the EU, we can observe that also in Italy there has been a significant decrease of Russian gas imports, from 38-40% in 2021 to 10% in the period February-September 2022. If we compare gas volumes purchased in the January-August 2021 and 2022 there is a decrease – from 19.3 billion cubic meters (bcm) to 11.6 bcm – while the comparison between August 2021 and August 2022 shows that Russian gas imports have halved from 2.3 bcm to 1.1 bcm (MITE, 2022b). Since longtime Russia has been the main supplier of natural gas for our country, covering almost 40% of the national demand, which

amounted to 76 bcm: in 2021, Italy imported 29 bcm of natural gas from Russia through the TAG pipeline, from the Tarvisio entry point (ISPI DataLab, 2022).

In order to face the winter season - with the aim to guarantee national energy security through a sufficient availability of gas so avoiding the risk of rationing - the Italian government has adopted a strategy that aims at a dual purpose: to increase storage of natural gas and to ensure regular gas volumes from alternative and non-Russian suppliers. According to the government's plan, these initiatives will make it possible to completely replace Russian gas imports by 2025, thanks to the availability of 25 bcm of natural gas from imports (via pipeline and LNG) and a potential increase of the national production (the government has put in place measures to double national production in order to reach 6 bcm), closing the existing gap (imports from Russia amounted to 29 bcm) with an increasing use of clean energy from renewable sources and with policies of energy efficiency (MITE, 2022a).

Since March 2022, Draghi government (with a specific decree law) has set a national target to fill gas storage at least 90%, a result successfully achieved at the end of September and which will be further implemented in the weeks before the winter arrival, hoping to reach 92-93% (MITE, 2022a). Italy has one of the largest storage capacities in the EU, which corresponds to 17.8% of the total European storage capacity. The storage facilities are located mainly in northern Italy (near the industrial centres of greatest consumption) and have a maximum capacity of 18 bcm, but 4 bcm constitute the strategic reserves that cannot be used, therefore only 14 bcm can be fed into the national grid to cope with winter consumption (MITE, 2022c; Raimondi, 2022).

Furthermore, since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the Italian government has focused its efforts on the implementation of a strategy based on the geographic diversification of gas imports, in order to offset and gradually replace Russian supply, developing partnerships with new suppliers and strengthening cooperation with traditional providers. This kind of energy diplomacy has produced significant results destined to have an immediate impact on gas availability for the winter 2022-2023. Agreements with Algeria and Azerbaijan will lead to an increase of imports through the existing Transmed and TAP gas pipelines. In these cases, the availability of additional gas volumes can be achieved without new investments, but exploiting the existing spare capacity, namely the difference between the nominal capacity of the pipeline and the volumes actually transported.

As regards LNG, Italy has signed agreements with Egypt (committed to supply 3.5 bcm of natural gas in the next few months) and Qatar (1.4 bcm of additional supply compared to the 6.8 bcm annually delivered and processed in the Adriatic offshore LNG terminal). These will therefore contribute to boost energy security by replacing a part of the missing imports from Russia. For the next years (not available for the next winter), agreements have been negotiated with Congo (4.6 bcm) and with other producing countries (approximately 3-3.5 bcm) such as Angola, Nigeria, Mozambique (MITE 2022a; Indeo 2022). However, it will be necessary to build new regasification terminals to process these additional LNG volumes as the 3 existing terminals (Panigaglia, Adriatic LNG and OLT Livorno) are working at their maximum capacity (15.3 bcm). SNAM's initiative to purchase two FSRU terminals – each of them with a regasification capacity of 5 bcm per year – is functional to the government's strategic goal, but these facilities would only partially contribute to provide additional supply for the winter 2022-2023. As a matter of fact, the Golar Tundra terminal could become operational in the first months of 2023 (late winter-early spring) and therefore be used to re-fill storage facilities for the next winter season 2023-2024. Italian government has decided to locate FSRU in Piombino (in Tuscany) even if, at the moment, there is strong opposition from the local communities. The second FSRU terminal – BW Singapore – should be located in the Adriatic Sea near Ravenna, and become operational between the autumn and winter of 2024 (Raimondi, 2022).

With the purpose of saving gas and avoiding an excessive depletion of national storage facilities (also starting to consider future energy needs for 2023-2024 winter season), the government has also adopted a National Plan for the containment of gas consumption, implementing the EU Regulation 2022/1369 aimed to guarantee European energy security through a reduction of natural gas consumption in the period 1 August 2022 - 31 March 2023. The plan is based on the adoption of voluntary and mandatory measures to reduce demand, the latter to be prepared in advance and to be put into operation upon activation of the so-called 'EU Alert'. According to the Italian government, the voluntary measures to reduce demand amount to 8.2 bcm of natural gas, while in the case of an EU alert, the positive results obtained in terms of storage and level of consumption allow our country to benefit of a derogation in relation to 15% demand reduction target, consequently determined at 7% and which implies a 3.6 bcm consumption reduction (MITE 2022a).

Despite gas storage abundantly exceeding 90% of capacity, the adoption of measures to contain consumption, the availability of additional supplies, Italy still remains dangerously exposed to a condition of vulnerability – at least as regards next winter – in the hypothesis that Russia completely cut gas supply, as occurred in early October. In fact, due to a dispute between Gazprom and the Austrian operator, from 1 to 5 October Russian exports to Italy from Tarvisio were halted, from 15-20 million cubic meters per day to zero (Ansa, 2022; Il Sole 24 Ore, 2022). Even if Italy's dependence on Russian gas has dropped from 40% to 10%, it is clear that a sudden interruption of Moscow's supply determines a condition of crisis and energy shortage that must be addressed and resolved, especially in a high demand period such as in the winter.

At the same time, it is interesting to observe that, according to some high-level sources interviewed by Bloomberg (Brambilla, Albanese, 2022), Italy's energy diplomacy would guarantee safety and energy security for the coming winter months, as sufficient and alternative supply (especially from Algeria and Egypt) will be available in the short term, allowing to offset potential interruptions of Russian gas. In reality, the main and key condition to avoid rationing in the event that Russia decides to stop exports is linked to the reliability of Algeria (and to a lesser extent Egypt) to meet the commitments. Compared to the initial agreements, Algeria has committed itself to send additional 4 bcm of natural gas to Italy. Algerian (additional) gas exports to Italy could double in 2024, reaching 18 bcm (Liga, 2022). However, in September there were rumors – denied by both ENI and the Algerian energy company Sonatrach – which questioned the Algerian ability to increase production and export in the short term, although there are some fields that are destined to become operational in the next months (AlgériePart, 2022; Martinelli and Pagni, 2022).

Germany: a future without Nord Stream and the delayed LNG strategy

Germany's energy scenario is similar to the Italian situation, characterized by a high demand for natural gas (85 bcm per year), a limited domestic production, a marked dependence on imports (80 bcm). In 2021, 47% of German gas demand was met by imports from Russia, 31% from Norway, 17% from Belgium and the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2022). One of the main problems for the Berlin government is the urgent need to find alternative supply to Russian imports for the coming winter months. This necessity derives not only for the common position expressed at European level to reduce imports from Moscow, but also because of its objective condition of extreme vulnerability, as the closure of Russian gas pipelines has deprived Germany of over 50 bcm of natural gas. In May 2022, Russia decided to interrupt supply through the Yamal-Europe pipeline, which crossed Poland delivering gas to Germany, while the sabotage of the Nord Stream-1 underwater pipeline at the end of September has stopped one of the main energy supply corridors for Berlin, and serious doubts remain about the possibility of restoring the infrastructure's operation in the short-medium term.

The Nord Stream gas pipeline represented a strategic option for Germany, as it directly connected Russian production with the German and Central European markets, bypassing Poland and Baltic republics. With a nominal capacity of 55 bcm per year, in pre-war normal conditions Nord

Stream transported 165 million cubic meters (Mmc) per day. Since June these volumes began to be reduced to 140 Mmc, then a long maintenance period and problems to replace turbines offered Moscow the pretext to further reduce the flow up to 30 Mmc, before the explosions at the end of September which have compromised its future use. In addition to meet German demand, Nord Stream was becoming a kind of European gas “backbone”, a distribution hub to compensate any reductions from the Ukrainian route. In fact, once the Russian gas arrived in Greifswald (on the northern coast of Germany) this was distributed through two pipelines, the NEL (toward Western European states) and OPAL, southwards to the border with the Czech Republic. The EUGAL gas pipeline - parallel to OPAL - was built to transport gas that would arrive in Germany through Nord Stream-2, but pending its operation EUGAL transports gas to central-southern Europe (Czech-Slovak border, Austria - in the strategically important Baumgarten distribution hub – and then Italy) (Sharples, 2022).

Following the Nord Stream’s closure, the vulnerability of German energy security for the winter season appears dramatically evident. As a matter of fact, the Berlin government will only be able to rely on imports from Norway, on the volumes of gas processed in the two new LNG terminals under construction, and on the supplies provided by the interconnections with the other States of central-western Europe (France, Belgium, the Netherlands) which can redistribute natural gas imported by them through the LNG terminals located on the Atlantic and the North Sea¹. The Netherlands and Belgium have a combined export capacity to Germany of 50 bcm, although this availability will be probably reduced due to the need to meet domestic demand and the gradual decrease of Dutch natural gas production in Groningen, which guarantees 17 bcm on a national demand of 40 bcm (Fulwood, 2022).

Gas from Norway represents the only reliable supply for Germany (and partially also for Western European nations such as Belgium and the Netherlands), as the existing sub-regional pipeline system – fuelled with Norwegian gas – holds a considerable transport capacity of 74 bcm per year, which corresponds to 200 Mmc per day. The combination between Norway’s energy potential with the import capacity of the Belgium and the Netherlands’ LNG terminals (as Germany has not yet LNG terminals, which are under construction) makes potentially available about 100 bcm of natural gas, although these three nations need to import 120 bcm (80 bcm for Germany, 18 bcm for Belgium, 22 bcm for the Netherlands) (Ibidem). Following the energy crisis triggered by Russia, Norway has significantly legitimized its key role as a reliable oil&gas supplier: in 2021 Norway produced 114 bcm, the third largest gas exporter in the world (112 bcm), after Russia and the United States, but evidently destined to become soon the second largest global supplier (BP, 2022). Since March 2022, the Norwegian government has authorized an increase in production of 1.4 bcm, while the reopening of a LNG terminal that processes natural gas extracted in the Barents Sea will increase the production capacity by almost 7 bcm in 2022 (US EIA, 2022). In the German point of view, the increase of Norway’s gas production represents a further guarantee to obtain more supply. In fact, Berlin fears that the launch of the Baltic gas pipeline since September 2022 – aimed to deliver Norwegian gas to Poland through Denmark – would deprive 4 bcm out of 74 bcm of natural gas usually transported through the Europipe pipeline system to Germany and Central Europe, as the Baltic pipeline is an Europipe’s branch (Fulwood, 2022).

In order to increase gas supply from alternative routes, Germany has decided to invest in the construction of LNG terminals, which will be located on the northern coast, in the Baltic Sea. The country has not regasification capacity but the government has planned to build 6 new terminals in the next few years, with a total capacity estimated at 28 bcm. However, only two FSRU terminals

¹ For instance, during this year France has started to export natural gas to Belgium that arrived in liquefied form in its Dunkerque terminal on Atlantic Ocean, although the flow of gas historically run in the opposite direction, namely from Belgium to France. Concerning the UK, this nation exports natural gas to the EU in the summer but imports volumes of gas from the continent in the winter, with flows, which offset each other.

will become operational in the current winter (Wilhelmshaven and Elbehafen LNG, under construction in the port city of Brunsbüttel, near Hamburg), potentially ensuring 16 bcm of gas to be used for consumption or alternatively to fill storage in spring 2023 to cover expected energy demand in winter 2024.

Nevertheless, Germany is facing some difficulties to obtain LNG supply in the international markets. Following a visit to the United Arab Emirates, German Chancellor Scholz signed a deal with ADNOC (Abu Dhabi National Oil Company) to purchase liquefied gas, with the first cargo that should arrive by the end of this year and another 5 cargoes in the first months of 2023. Although this is an important step, in reality the contracted quantity (only 137 thousand cubic meters) is modest compared to German energy needs. At the same time, Germany also signed a preliminary agreement with Qatar (the third largest LNG exporter in the world) but negotiations have stalled due to difficulties relating to prices and the length of contracts (Deutsche Welle, 2022a).

Although Germany achieved its target to fill its national reserves to 90% in September and has adopted measures to reduce gas consumption by 20%, the situation appears very complicated: in order to cope with the shortage of supply, the German government has decided to keep the three nuclear power plants still in operation on standby at least until April 2023, postponing their phase out which was scheduled for December 2022, while three others were closed in 2021 (Deutsche Welle, 2022b; S&P Global, 2022).

Poland and Bulgaria, the strategic impact of the Baltic gas pipeline and the Interconnector Greece Bulgaria

Among the EU member States, Poland and Bulgaria have been able to achieve significant results in terms of reducing dependence on Russian gas and diversifying imports, also because they were the first European countries to be affected by Gazprom's decision to completely suspend natural gas supply to these markets starting from 27 April. In reality, Warsaw government had already decided in 2020 to not renew the agreement with Gazprom regarding the Yamal gas pipeline (which would expire at the end of 2022). The invasion of Ukraine seems to have confirmed the Polish orientation, which in the meantime had launched a diversification strategy that has been fully implemented in the last months (Ministry of Climate and Environment, Website of the Republic of Poland, 2022). Until the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, half of Polish natural gas demand (9-10 bcm) was covered by Russian imports, while the remaining 50% was satisfied by limited domestic production (4 bcm) and imports of LNG from Qatar, United States, Norway via the LNG terminal in Świnoujście (Kubiak 2022).²

In the past eight months, Warsaw government has implemented and launched some strategic infrastructure projects that will free Poland from Russian gas imports.

The Baltic gas pipeline - with a nominal capacity of 10 bcm of natural gas from Norway to Poland via Denmark - appears to have a significant impact. At the inauguration ceremony, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki declared: *"the era of Russian domination in the field of gas is coming to an end, the era that was marked by blackmail, threats and extortion"* (Krzysztosek, 2022). According to Gaz-System (Polish state operator of the gas network transmission), the gas pipeline can be immediately filled to 75% of its capacity - volumes which are in any case sufficient to completely substitute Russian imports - and reach 100% in January 2023 when natural gas demand will be at the highest levels (Deutsche Welle, 2022c). A month earlier, at the end of August, the gas interconnector between Poland and Slovakia became operational, which further strengthen both Bratislava's energy security (Slovakia's dependence on Russian supply accounts for 87%) and EU energy security, allowing to implement the north-south gas corridor that connects the Polish terminal

² In February 2022, works were completed on the first phase of expansion of the regasification capacity, from 5 bcm to 6.2 bcm while by 2023 the capacity will be extended by another 2 bcm (Gas Transmission Operator GAZ-SYSTEM 2022).

of Świnoujście with the Croatian LNG terminal of Krk (European Commission, 2022b). In May, the gas pipeline between Poland and Lithuania (GIPL) was inaugurated, an important energy interconnection with a capacity of 1.9 bcm operating in both directions, recognized as a Project of Community Interest of the EU (co-financed under the Trans-European Networks for Energy policy) as it is intended to strengthen energy security in the Baltic region (European Commission 2022a).

In addition to the Baltic Pipeline, another new energy infrastructure destined to decisively boost South Eastern Europe's energy security is the Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria (IGB), inaugurated at the end of September. For Bulgaria, this pipeline assumes a strategic importance as it will allow the nation to free itself from the high dependence on Russian gas (80% of the national demand), a condition that caused serious repercussions on the Bulgarian economy. During the 2009 energy crisis, the interruption of Russian supply due to a dispute with Ukraine literally left the Bulgarian population without heating (during the winter) for two weeks, and also national factories were stopped.

This pipeline carries Azerbaijani gas, which reaches Greece through the Transanatolian pipeline and then branches into two pipelines: the eastern one (IGB) and the TAP through Greece and then sinks into the Adriatic Sea to the coast of Puglia. IGB has a capacity of 3 bcm, which can be increased to 5 bcm in the next few years, even if it currently carries 1 bcm (which accounts for 30% of the Bulgarian gas needs). There is also the possibility to potentially integrate Azerbaijani supply with the gas processed in the Greek LNG terminal of Revithoussa, which has allowed Greece to reduce its imports from Russia by 50%. The participation of the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen at the inauguration ceremony in Sofia clearly shows the strategic relevance of this pipeline (Euractiv, 2022). IGB opens a new supply route for the South-East Europe countries, which is strategic in terms of security and diversification providing access to alternative sources to Russian ones.

Conclusions

Despite the efforts of EU member States to diversify supply of natural gas, the complete waiver of Russian imports will have a deep impact on the European energy security situation, due to the concrete difficulty of finding alternative gas imports in the short term (only eight months have passed since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict) and the lack of energy infrastructures (LNG terminals and gas pipelines, but also energy interconnections between states to meet any shortages and peak demand).

The possibility to forcibly impose a rationing in individual states will depend on a series of factors that are currently difficult to evaluate. Namely the level of cold in the ongoing winter season (cold months will imply greater consumption for heating and consequent reduction of stored reserves), population's support to measures aimed at containing consumption and energy saving, the reliability of suppliers to provide regular supply.

As regards the analyzed countries, Germany currently presents the most complicated situation as it will be very difficult to compensate for the sudden lack of Russian gas with alternative supplies. The closure of Nord Stream took place just at the arrival of the cold season, leaving few possibility for the Berlin government to find alternative solutions, even if the upcoming realization of the regasification terminals is a good option, especially if the United States decides to deliver part of their LNG exports to Germany.

Italy has been able to promptly take actions addressing some distortions of the national energy system, signing numerous deals to obtain alternative supply. Undoubtedly, a greater availability of more operative LNG terminals could better satisfied domestic energy demand. The level of stored reserves and additional supply should guarantee national energy security, even if the concrete reliability of suppliers (Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Qatar) have to be tested.

Poland's diversification strategy (actually a process started a few years ago but fully materialized in 2022) represents a reference model, whose strength is represented by the agreements signed with reliable suppliers (Norway and the United States) and by regional cooperation – both with the Baltic republics and with the States of Central and Eastern Europe – aimed at achieving the energy security's common goal through the complete waiver of Russian imports.

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The challenges of urban warfare and the Ukrainian case

The growing relevance of urban areas

Overall, the conflicts of our age are increasingly fought in urban areas and increasingly involve the civilian population directly (among others, Striuli 2012; King 2021).

In general, cities have increasingly become an environment in which to operate – usually a difficult environment, especially in the case of large metropolitan agglomerations, that are extremely complex contexts from every point of view, from the topographical and logistical standpoint to the cultural one.

As several scholars have pointed out, urban areas are likely to play an important role in defining the balance of power and in armed conflicts. Hence the importance of urban warfare (among others, Konaev 2019).

Globally, the strong push for urbanization does not seem to be about to run out: cities and mega-cities seem destined to grow further, at the expense of rural areas. Moreover, the areas of greatest urbanization are often marked by conditions of serious social degradation: in the coming decades billions of people will live in “slums” of mega-cities in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Some metropolitan areas may be particularly problematic environments, in different respects, from a physical point of view (for example, due to the lack of urban planning in the spontaneous expansion of peripheral areas) to the cultural dimension (for example, with risks of tensions and conflicts between different ethnic and/or religious communities) (Marone 2019).

Urban areas as a peculiar environment in armed conflicts

From the point of view of military activities, urban areas have always been a salient place. Not infrequently placed in important locations, cities are evidently crucial hubs for primary political, economic, social and cultural activities. In addition, they may contain a concentration of human and material resources useful for the conduct of an armed conflict.

Nonetheless, as US specialist John Spencer recently emphasized (2020, emphasis in the original), “militaries have a long history of fighting *for* cities, but not *in* them.” In his view, it was not until the Second World War that Western armed forces experienced heavy and frequent fighting in urban areas.

Overall, according to numerous scholars and experts, the urban environment tends to have peculiar properties from a military point of view. First, it would be more advantageous to the defending actor, by making the most of its local knowledge of placing and by facing less logistical obstacles. In addition, the urban environment would tend to benefit insurgent-type irregular forces, which, among other things, could better hide among the population.

According to this line of reasoning, another advantage for defenders is that, due to the layout of buildings and roads and the potential presence of road blockages, the lines of movement for the attacker may tend to be few and predictable.

Moreover, defenders may be able to make greater use of the vertical dimension of the urban environment, both upward (for example, upper floors of buildings) and downward (underground structures, from the sewer systems to the tunnels of a metro line).

In general, in urban areas, the presence of buildings and their arrangement in space have significant effects on combat operations. For example, they may hinder the process of information gathering, as they limit the line of sight of many sensors, as well as human vision.

With respect to the use of weapons, in overall terms, the urban environment can have the effect of reducing the difference between the technological equipment available to the parties of the

conflict; armaments that in other conditions would even be obsolete, in urban environments, with close combat, can prove to be effective (Marone 2019).

The role of the civilian population

The presence of a large number of civilians evidently plays an important role in urban warfare. In general, the defender tends to involve civilians in the defense activity, both by enlisting them and by using them as labor. Instead, it is generally the actor that tries to take control of the city that desires – and, if necessary, organizes – the possible displacement and relocation of the population.

If defenders have the support of the population, their activity of collecting information can be less demanding and expensive, thanks to the active contribution of civilians, even equipped with common tools (such as a simple smartphone).

It is also worth adding that, as some scholars have recently emphasized (Brathwaite and Konaev 2022), the ethnocultural composition of a city can have an impact on the evolution and effectiveness of military operations. In particular, operating in a hostile environment that is homogeneous from an ethnocultural point of view could mean having complications in intelligence tasks, due to potential difficulties in accessing the population and in finding reliable sources and collecting information.

Urban areas as a “neutral” environment in armed conflicts

Recently, some experts and scholars, such as Betz and Stanford-Tuck (2019), have questioned the most widespread theses in the field, coming to the conclusion that the urban environment, from a tactical point of view, would not present substantial differences compared to other types of environment: according to these two experts, it is certainly associated with peculiar characters, like any other environment, but these do not configure it, in fact, as unique and *sui generis*.

The urban environment is clearly a complex environment. On the tactical level, it has the effect of complicating communication flows and overloading sensory receptions and of encouraging the transfer of decision-making responsibilities to lower hierarchical levels. However, according to Betz and Stanford-Tuck (2019), the environment *per se* is “neutral”, and so is the urban environment: in this view, for example, the effects mentioned earlier would be equal for all actors on the ground (in particular, not primarily for defenders and for insurgents) (*contra* Spencer 2020).

Urban warfare and underground warfare

A general trend of significant growth also applies to the domain of the subsoil, with an increase in the use of tunnels and other underground structures in densely populated areas. In fact, there is an improving convergence between urban warfare and “underground warfare”: the latter, in particular, can be a non-marginal component of the former.

Despite the fact that the subsoil has been widely exploited by the armed forces throughout history (among others, Reece 2017), it constitutes a domain that has not yet generated accurate and systematic reflection (Richemond-Barak 2017; Marone 2019).

Nevertheless, as scholar Daphné Richemond-Barak (2017) has emphasized, in the contemporary era, the construction of tunnels and other underground structures can be interpreted, in the first place, as a response to advanced technologies used by regular armed forces, especially to perform intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) functions.

In fact, in the face of an exponential increase in the ability to collect and process information and data, even in real time, thanks to new technologies and increasingly sophisticated means, some actors, states or non-state actors, can choose the path of underground warfare in order to deprive their adversary of this type of technological advantage. In this way, some actors can largely evade

ISR instrumentation, especially those used by states, can shelter their personnel and equipment, and can force the enemy forces to enter disadvantageous battlefields or unfamiliar territories.

Urban warfare in Ukraine

In many ways, the current war in Ukraine, which began with the Russian invasion of 24 February 2022, has confirmed the salience of the urban environment in contemporary armed conflicts (among others, Ljungkvist 2022).

The armed forces of the Russian Federation first tried, without success, to take control of the Ukrainian capital, a metropolis of about three million inhabitants and with a total land area of over 800 Km².

As has been pointed out recently (DiMarco 2022; see also DiMarco 2012), the history of fighting in urban areas suggests that the conquest of such large and populous cities requires very large military forces. In this context, it is common to argue that at the tactical level the attacking forces should exceed the defending forces at least three times to have a reasonable chance of success; this assumption is usually known as the “3:1 rule” (among others, Mearsheimer 1989). In the Ukrainian case, if one looks at the ground forces initially deployed (reportedly, about 200,000 troops for the Russian Federation, about 90,000 for Ukraine), the *ratio* drops to about 2:1. Moreover, if one adds the deployment of reservists and volunteers on the Ukrainian side, the force *ratio* between Russian and Ukrainian ground forces upon mobilization approaches *equilibrium* (DiMarco 2022).

Beyond the simple number of troops on the ground, it should be noted that, according to numerous experts, Ukrainians have taken advantage of the general benefits that the defender can have in conflicts in urban areas and have organized an adequate response, also resorting to motivated and well-trained small units. For their part, Russian forces failed in their initial large-scale offensive, due to various factors including the partial lack of the surprise factor and an insufficient number of attacking forces.

The Russian Federation has reoriented its commitment to the eastern and south-eastern areas of Ukraine (e.g. Steckelberg et al. 2022). At this stage, the Russian effort has resulted in a combination of siege activities and indiscriminate bombing of urban areas. One can mention, in particular, the case of the siege of Mariupol, in the Donetsk *Oblast* (region), which ended, after the destruction of a large part of the city, with the victory of Russian and pro-Russian forces, in May 2022.

The difficulties of the Russian offensive

At least since 2008-2009, the Russian Federation has committed to modernizing its armed forces, updating systems of Soviet origin, purchasing or developing military technologies, and reorganizing and professionalizing its personnel (among others, Thornton 2011).

Nevertheless, in the current war in Ukraine, Russia has so far encountered evident difficulties, especially since September 2022. These problems can be attributed to various general factors, including errors of assessment, logistical problems, and limitations of the levels of skill and motivation of the troops deployed.

In this contribution, following some indications put forward by scholars and experts (in particular, Konaev and Brathwaite 2022), it is worth noting that the difficulties encountered by the Russian armed forces in Ukraine can be interpreted, at least in part, as a reflection the complications that any attacker may face in an urban environment, all the more so in the face of a motivated and cohesive, well trained army, that is also in a position to have access to sophisticated weapons.

Conclusions

Overall, the conflicts of our age are increasingly fought in urban areas and directly involve the civilian population (e.g. King 2021). Cities are a complex environment for military operations, and, according to many experts, they tend to benefit defenders and insurgent-type irregular forces.

The current war in Ukraine seems to confirm the relevance of urban warfare. In that context, the errors and complications manifested so far in the conduct of the conflict by the Russian armed forces in Ukraine can also be interpreted in the light of general difficulties in dealing with the demanding challenges posed by urban warfare.

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Osservatorio Strategico

Part Two

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The Egyptian national dialogue

National dialogue forum: what is it?

On April 26, at the annual *Iftar* organized by the Egyptian presidency, President al-Sisi announced the launch of a national political dialogue forum with the political, trade union and intellectual forces (Egyptian Presidency, 2022). This is an unusual announcement for the Egyptian president, who in his years in power has put in place a repressive regime against any form of opposition. Therefore, it is necessary to understand whether this is a real opening that can rebuild, albeit gradually, a space for democratic dialectics in Egypt. Concretely, he entrusted the task of organizing this new format of dialogue to the National Youth Conference, a body under the control of the Egyptian National Training Academy, a government institution. The president announced his presence at the latest session of the nascent national dialogue. Confirming al-Sisi's intention to inaugurate a new dialogue with the oppositions, two prominent Egyptian political opposition figures who have been subjected to detention for their political views had been invited to attend the *Iftar*: Hamdeen Sabahi and Khaled Dawoud (Al-Monitor, 2022). On the sidelines of this announcement, the Egyptian president also declared the reactivation of the Presidential Pardon Committee, tasked with vetting the possibility of granting pardons to detainees. This is an institution that has been virtually inactive since 2016.

However, the launch of the National Dialogue excludes at the outset Egypt's main political opposition force, namely the Muslim Brotherhood, which is considered a terrorist organization in Egypt (Ahram, 2022). The leadership of the Islamist movement reacted promptly to the announcement of its exclusion. In a statement posted on its official website, the response was given by the former commissioner for international relations, Youssef Nada (Ikhwan, 2022). In his message, he stated that any national dialogue, in order to achieve tangible results, will still have to go through a prior «redress of injustice» through the activation of the provisions of Article 241 of the constitution (Constitute Project, 2022). At the same time, the Islamist movement has declared that it will not resort to violence to fight the regime, hinting that it will only oppose in political terms the presidential initiative in which it is excluded (Reuters, 2022a). It should also be noted that the government's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood is an issue that is also involving important foreign policy dossiers, such as the recent rapprochement with Turkey – a country that for years has harbored leaders of the Islamist movement – with which a negotiation to normalize diplomatic relations is underway as of March 2021. Among the clauses demanded by Cairo from Ankara is precisely a clampdown on the activities on Turkish soil of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership (Agenzia Nova, 2022).

While the Muslim Brotherhood has opposed the president's initiative, the launch of the National Dialogue has been greeted with cautious optimism by the opposition forces involved. Dawoud himself, a journalist and former chairman of the Egyptian Constitutional Party, imprisoned for 19 months between 2019 and 2021, has on several occasions expressed hope for this attempt, albeit an initial one, at openness on the part of the Egyptian president (Dawoud, 2022a; Dawn, 2021). On the human rights front, some tentative steps forward were taken in the months following President al-Sisi's April announcement. For instance, there has been the release of political prisoners (Middle East Eye, 2022). Official numbers speak of seven hundred people released from prison, although it is likely that the number is lower in reality (El Watan, 2022; Yee, 2022). In addition to that, Presidential pardons were granted to people who had already received a final conviction (Egypt Today, 2022a). Overall, there have been positive steps that nevertheless do not indicate a definitive reversal of the repressive policies of the Egyptian regime. A reality that leads several human rights

organizations to be less than fully satisfied with the new course taken by the Egyptian president (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Right, 2022).

Causes and goals of the national dialogue

There is no agreement as to what reasons prompted President al-Sisi to open a national dialogue with the oppositions after eight years of violent repression. Various could be the hypotheses, which are not mutually exclusive. A first explanation looks at the Egyptian president's desire, and need, to "clean up" his image in the face of a series of crucial international appointments for the North African country (BBC, 2022). The first of these was the President Biden's trip to the Middle East that took place last July. On that occasion, al-Sisi attended the expanded meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council held in Jeddah and a bilateral meeting with the American president (White House, 2022). Cairo has an interest in mending ties with the Democratic administration, after the deterioration caused by divergences on the issue of human rights. Another important step will be the organization of COP27, which will be held in Sharm el-Sheikh next November. In view of this event, American and European diplomats have demanded more insistently concrete steps on the level of reform in a democratic direction to the Egyptian regime. Moreover, between last July 17 and July 22, al-Sisi made a trip to Europe, which saw him visit France and Germany (Dawoud, 2022b). At this stage, Egypt is increasing its importance to European countries, especially in terms of energy. In the face of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the European Union's desire to reduce its energy dependence on Moscow, Cairo, as well as other Mediterranean countries, may indeed increase its role as an energy exporter. In this regard, the Memorandum of Understanding signed in June by the European Commission with Egypt and Israel should be noted. The final goal of the understanding is to import into Europe Israeli gas transported by pipeline to Egypt and there converted into LNG through Egyptian liquefaction plants (European Commission, 2022a; European Commission, 2022b).

A second motivation may have to do with the worsening economic conditions in the country, and al-Sisi's consequent dual need to ward off possible internal social tensions and to keep open a dialogue with international bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The negative effects of the pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine are straining Cairo's economic resilience, with the negative effects beginning to be felt in conjunction with the month of Ramadan in the spring (Reuters, 2022a; Dawoud, 2022c). IMF Operations Director Kristalina Georgieva in April highlighted the worsening economic conditions in the North African country (IMF, 2022). A final reason could be related to upcoming elections in Egypt. Presidential elections will be held in 2024 while legislative elections are scheduled for the following year. Two appointments to which al-Sisi wants to arrive with the certainty of keeping his power intact but at the same time without risking a repetition of what occurred in 2018, when only one challenger was admitted to the presidential elections. In fact, a situation that both domestically and internationally only weakens the image of a president lacking real democratic legitimacy. Under this perspective, the opening of the National Dialogue could be interpreted as a "para-democratic attempt of legitimization of the regime that, however, remains authoritarian at its core.

The first session of the national dialogue was held between July 5 and 7 (State Information Service, 2022). During the five-hour meeting, only the first of which was publicly televised, the 19 members of the Board of Trustees were appointed, charged with coordinating the work of the dialogue format (Egypt Today, 2022b). In the following weeks the body met on several occasions, at a still interlocutory stage when the various committees and sub-committees charged with making proposals on individual issues were being formed (Ahram, 2022b)¹.

¹ For a list of committees and subcommittees see: Mada Masr, 2022; Ahram, 2022c. Three types of commissions are formed: political, economic and social. Respectively, each has three, seven and five sub-commissions within it.

Conclusion

It is still early to give an informed assessment with respect to the results of the Egyptian National Dialogue. As announced by Rashwan, the general coordinator of the *forum* appointed by al-Sisi, it should be mentioned at the outset that the results of the discussions held in the national dialogue will still be vetted by the parliament and the President, who may decide when and how to implement the recommendations (El-Watan, 2022b). Hypothesis that foreshadows a kind of “right of veto” that al-Sisi may have with respect to the policies advanced by the various thematic commissions. The real role of the dialogue launched by the Egyptian president – and the goodness of his real intentions – can therefore only be tested in the coming weeks and months, when the discussions on political, economic and social issues get into full swing, and it will become clear whether the recommendations coming out of the national dialogue will really be taken into consideration by the President. In the long run, it is clear that the main test of the political path inaugurated in these weeks can only be the presidential elections in 2024 and the legislative elections of the following year. It is currently unlikely, however, that there will be any concrete revolution of the Egyptian regime. The issue of the Muslim Brotherhood’s exclusion from Egyptian public life remains now and will remain unresolved in the future, as it is a red line that the Egyptian president has no intention to cross. As Khaled Dawoud points out, however, some initial changes that have been taking place since the launch of the national dialogue should be supported: the release of the first political prisoners, the return of some Egyptians exiled abroad, and the return to a more dynamic political life that sees the different parties organizing meetings and initiatives to be brought to the national dialogue table (Dawoud, 2022a).

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Ma'awiisley's role in Somali offensive against al-Shabaab

Over the past few weeks, Somali National Army (SNA) troops have been recapturing several areas of the country that have long been under al-Shabaab control. Somali security forces have launched a violent offensive against some strongholds of the al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group in the country's central regions. A growing number of settlements and small cities in the Hiran region have been freed from terrorist presence. The action is part of the new policy agenda to counter al-Shabaab launched by the administration led by newly elected President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. In one of his first speeches after his inauguration at Villa Somalia, Hassan Sheikh said he intended to conduct a full-scale war on the terrorist group considered the main obstacle to stabilizing the country. The multiple attacks of the past weeks prove the pressure that Somali security forces supported by African multinational contingents operating in Somalia under the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), formerly AMISOM, and U.S. drones have been exerting since last May on al-Shabaab. During the summer, a long series of attacks in the capital Mogadishu and other federal states such as Hirshabelle, Galmudug, and South West resulted in dozens of casualties. The current Somali government's approach to the terrorist threat marks a break from the recent past. Indeed, the years of the presidency of Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, known as Farmaajo, were characterized by limited and largely inefficient counteraction that allowed al-Shabaab to recapture several areas of the country. The new season of the struggle between Somali security forces and the terrorist group has been fostered by the emergence of an almost unprecedented trend for Somalia: the revolt of some clan militias against al-Shabaab's predominance. While there is little room for doubt that Hassan Sheikh wanted to revitalize the fight against the terrorist group, the main drivers of the ongoing offensive in the heart of Somalia have been the clan-based armed groups known as Ma'awiisley (Macawisley in Somali). Similarly to the better-known Sufi group Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a (ASWJ), active around Dhusamareb, the Ma'awiisley constitute an outstanding example of a self-defense militia. As everywhere else, the self-defense militias in Somalia are anti-insurgency armed groups established by the community, composed entirely of civilians to protect the local population from insurgent and criminal groups. Ma'awiisley emerged in 2014 in a context marked by general anarchy in which much of Somalia's lands were under al-Shabaab control. Over the years following the Ethiopian-led military intervention against the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a state of chaos reigned in Somalia. In addition to the emergence of the Qaedist terrorist group, inter-clan rivalries fed by ancient grievances erupted throughout the country. Communal resentments in Somalia, as in other Horn of Africa countries, are widespread due to the high number of unsettled territorial disputes, competition for resources such as land and water, forced displacement, and exclusion from political power. Many clans already marginalized during Siad Barré's previous regime were still living a condition of exclusion and subordination to the more powerful rival clans in their region. In this environment, al-Shabaab was able to proliferate by feeding on inter-clan rivalries and the feelings of injustice and marginality of some groups. The terrorist organization provided a valuable partner for many clans and, in some cases, a means of survival. Indeed, grievances prompted many clans to form tactical alliances with the Qaedist formation. The decision to tie up with al-Shabaab was not driven by sympathy for the jihadist messages but by the desire to gain material benefits or, more simply, to counter a local rival clan. However, al-Shabaab's ruling methods soon alienated local communities, prompting them to self-organize to defend themselves and counter the terrorist group's power. Besides the humiliation and unjust treatment imposed by the Qaedist movement on the local people, the over-taxation and

forced recruitment were the factors that led to the formation of communal militias. Most of those who took up arms were peasants without training. Many of them were soon neutralized and executed. However, early-localized successes fueled the spirit of emulation among neighboring clan communities, leading to the emergence of a multiplicity of militias. The actions of single Ma'awiisley have always been confined to well-defined geographical areas within commonly recognized and accepted clan zones. Over the years, there have been several instances where militias have stopped actions against al-Shabaab because these would have required crossing clan boundaries, thereby risking originating an inter-clan war. As a result, there has been the establishment and consolidation of self-defense militias that perfectly reflect clan affiliation. Among them, the most active are those of the Hawadle and Gaalje'el, which operate in the Hiran region, and the Abgal, which limit their activities to the Middle Shabelle area in the federal state of Hirshabelle. The relationship between the Ma'awiisley and state authorities has always been ambiguous. Despite the militias being nominally pro-government and actively helping to tackle a national security threat, Mogadishu has maintained an attitude of tolerance by providing very little support. The lack of support for Ma'awiisley initiatives has prevented the fight against al-Shabaab from being effective and lasting. In many cases, areas previously liberated by the clan militias were quickly recaptured by the terrorist group showing how the Ma'awiisley, without the support of Somali security forces, cannot guarantee control of the territory.

However, the new feature of recent weeks is the Somali government's unconditional support for clan militia operations. Behind the Hassan Sheikh cabinet's decision lies a desire to exploit all possible resources to eradicate al-Shabaab's presence on Somali soil and a different view of the militias. In the past, Mogadishu's choice not to openly and strongly support the Ma'awiisleys was determined by the country's historical experience. Since the collapse of Siad Barré's regime, the militias have contributed to Somalia's chronic insecurity environment by acting as an obstacle to the complete stabilization of the country. A position shared by the previous administration led by President Farmaajo, who had repeatedly expressed his distrust of clan militias and his desire to keep control of the operations against al-Shabaab. Even today, despite the Hassan Sheikh government's decision, many doubts remain about the move to provide logistical and military support to the Ma'awiisley. Several opposition figures argue that unconditional support for clan militias could encourage other local communities to take up arms, seek legitimacy from state authorities, and gain influence *vis-à-vis* Mogadishu. In other words, the most significant risk is fostering opportunistic recruitment by giving rise to armed militia groups that could turn against the government in the future and threaten Somalia's already complicated path to normalization. Another issue that needs to be considered is the nature of current clan-led initiatives. The Ma'awiisley have tried for years to counter the activities and abuses perpetrated by al-Shabaab by adopting mainly defensive strategies. However, never before last summer their reaction took on the shape of shared insurgency by prompting different militias to take offensive action in some cases jointly. This trend is uncommon in the Somali clan context but could be the outcome of a temporary and contextual condition. For the Somali offensive to have a long-lasting impact in countering al-Shabaab, there needs to be action by state authorities to establish an administration in the liberated areas. Otherwise, if a clan militia can rule freely in a recaptured territory, it would delegitimize the federal government and fuel inter-clan rivalries. It is, therefore, up to Mogadishu to promote a comprehensive and highly complex harmonization and inclusion of the various clans in the political-administrative governance of the areas liberated from al-Shabaab, and for international stakeholders, including Italy, to support the Somali government's efforts.

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Possible Belarusian involvement in the special operation. Doubts and possibilities

'We will not let Europe freeze. Let's help our brothers, maybe one day they will help us', said the President of Belarus, Alyaxandr Ryhoravich Lukashenka, in an on-line video¹ on October 12 in which he and businessman Siarhiej Ciaceryn split wooden logs 'for the Europeans' so that they would not freeze during the coming winter. "First we have to help 'peasants and workers', he adds, "but the most important thing is that Andrzej Duda and Mateusz Morawiecki do not freeze. They are our neighbours, maybe they will come to their senses". On a closer view, the seemingly hilarious few-minute video is not funny at all. In fact it captures a situation that, with winter approaching, will certainly not be easy for the whole of Europe grappling with the crisis due to speculation on the price of energy supplies, at the same time it expresses an ostentation of security by those who, with the Russian Federation, are increasingly tightening old alliances. Indeed, the video comes after a governmental and presidential agenda full of significant meetings.

On September 27 and 28², representatives of the Defence Ministries of Belarus and Russia held talks in Moscow on the prospects of the already intensive military cooperation³. On the same days (26-29 September), Alyaxandr Lukashenka stayed in Sochi where he met with Vladimir Putin. The visit was not previously announced by either side, so one can guess that there were urgent consultations to agree on a common course of action, in the context of the mobilisation and annexation of the occupied territories. Moreover, the long-duration nature of the visit, which exceeded the usual standards, and, the lack of any official announcement by either press office, gave rise to speculation about increasing Kremlin pressure on Lukashenka for direct involvement in hostilities in Ukraine. In this sense, the official message from Minsk masks reality, as there is no basis for confirming the intention to carry out a mobilisation in Belarus: should it happen, it would lead to panic in a society that does not want, given also the precarious domestic situation, a participation in the special operation. Lukashenka will presumably continue to avoid direct involvement, while also demonstrating his loyalty to Moscow by hosting a Russian attack group, a demonstration that, in fact, came on 10 October. Lukashenka announced that he had agreed with Vladimir Putin⁴ on the involvement of a regional joint group of forces (RGV)⁵ in connection with the

¹ Rodinov M., *Лукашенко накопил дров и поделился планом спасения Европы. Полная расшифровка. Лукашенко заготовил дрова для Дуды, Моравецкого, рабочих и крестьян в Европе*. Gazeta.ru 14.09.2022 <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2022/09/14/15451453.shtml>

² Earlier, on 21 September, a meeting of the Secretaries of the Security Councils was held, dedicated to the topics of 'joint anti-terrorism undertakings'.

³ In the meantime, Belarus is preparing for the reception of Russian troops: with the announcement of a combat readiness test and the mobilisation of the 50th airbase, stationed at the Machulishchy airport (Minsk region) used by the Russians. On the Belarusian railways, an inspection of the communication hubs and the state of the exhaust systems was also initiated.

⁴ *Лукашенко договорился с Путиным о совместной группировке войск. Лукашенко сообщил, что договорился с Путиным о совместной региональной группировке войск*, RBC 10.10.2022 <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/10/10/2022/6343ddba9a79472878e90442>

⁵ As reported by the TASS news agency (*В состав региональной группировки войск в Белоруссии от РФ войдут менее 9 тыс. человек*, 16.10.2022 <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/16069511>), the total number of Russian military personnel in the Joint Regional Group of Forces (RGV) in Belarus will amount to just under 9,000, Valery Revenko, head of the Belarusian Defence Ministry's Department for International Military Cooperation, said on Sunday. "The first Russian servicemen who are part of the Regional Group of Forces (RGV-exclusively defensive project) have already started to arrive in Belarus. The redeployment will take several days. The total number will be just **under 9,000**". The aircraft component of the RGV has also started to flow from the Russian Federation to the Republic (Telegram channel of the Belarusian Ministry of Defence <https://t.me/modmilby/18952>)

escalating situation on the western borders of the Union State⁶, also warning Ukraine⁷ that in the event of aggression by the Ukrainian armed forces against the Republic, *'the Crimean bridge will look like flowers to them'*.

At the meeting on military security, Lukashenka admitted that Belarus is taking part in the *spetsoperatsiya*. On the other hand, it is no secret that the country helps the Russian Federation in the war against Ukraine, the possibility of basing Russian troops, joint training or delivering ammunition are just a few examples of close cooperation within the Union State. It was from the territory of Belarus that the first attack on Kiev was carried out, which ended with a 'natural withdrawal' of troops from the Russian Federation.

Lukashenka, however, maintains that his role is significantly different from Russia's, as he stated during the NBC interview⁸: *'We, as I have said many times, are participating in a military operation, bearing in mind that we support Russia in every possible way. Our support is to ensure that our western borders, in this case with Poland and Lithuania, are not violated and that Russian troops are not shot in the back through Belarus [...]. Today, our participation consists of the fact that we treat Russians and Ukrainians, we feed Russians and Ukrainians, and above all, in the vast majority, we take in refugees from Ukraine. 400-500 people come to us every day. This is our participation but we have not killed anyone there and we will not kill anyone. First of all, nobody is asking us to participate in this operation, in this case Russia, and we have no intention of being involved in it. We have always talked about it and we are still talking about it. Well, apparently, they don't want (the West) to listen to us and you don't want (the United States) to listen to us. Well, that's your business'*. Lukashenka says that Poland is gathering its armed forces on the border with Belarus and Lithuania is trying to keep up with them. According to him, as early as 2020 the Western collective tried to launch a blitzkrieg against Belarus, starting with the coloured revolution and demonstrations following the vote, all moves that did not work. The second phase, the economic strangulation due to sanctions and information pressure on Belarus, has not been effective either. At this point, the only way to solve the problem is the use of force: through sabotage, provocations, which will lead to the destabilisation of the situation in the country, and then, if they succeed, to imposing military action⁹.

Lukashenka had already discussed the need to strengthen defence with the Russian President on Friday, 7 October in St. Petersburg, during the informal CIS¹⁰ summit, at which the leaders decided to deploy Russian troops on the western borders of the Union State, i.e. in Belarus, as provided for in the relevant treaty. While Lukashenka has no intention of entering into an open war with Ukraine, he cannot lose the advantage of bargaining with Putin. Belarus depends financially, energetically and also in the security sphere on Russia, the bargaining chip is to continue to be a 'provider' of areas and logistical services on the border with Ukraine, as well as to remain the only ally that publicly declares its loyalty to Moscow.

⁶ The Union State is a supranational entity officially formed by Russia and Belarus in 1996 with the aim of integrating the political, economic and social systems of the two countries.

⁷ *Лукашэнка перасцярог Украіну ад магчымага нанясенн яўдару па Беларусі*. Belta 10.10.2022 <https://blr.belta.by/president/view/Lukaŭŭnka-perastsjarog-ukrainu-ad-magchymaga-nanjasennja-udaru-pa-belarusi-120393-2022/>

⁸ Full interview is available on Youtube: *NBC News Exclusive Interview With Belarusian President Alexander Lukaŭŭnka*, 14.10.2022 <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=lrmdGBCZILY>

⁹ *Лукашэнка праў дзел Беларусі ў СВА: мы нікога там не забівалі і забіваць не збіраемся*. Belta 17.10.2022 <https://blr.belta.by/president/view/Lukaŭŭnka-pra-udzel-belarusi-u-sva-my-nikoga-tam-ne-zabivali-i-zabivats-ne-zbiraemsja-120673-2022/>

¹⁰ There was also an amusing *siparietto* on this occasion. Putin, who was turning 70 that day, received a tractor as a gift from the Belarusian President, the same tractor that Lukashenka uses on his land. *Лукашэнка падарил Путину трактор*. Anadolu Agency, 07.10.2022 <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/мир/лукашенко-подарил-путину-трактор-belarus/2705478#>

As the Belarusian analyst Artyom Shrajbman underlined in an interview with Kommersant¹¹, Lukashenka might hope that not being an active part of the *spetsoperatsya* would be enough to provide the Russians with equipment, training camps and logistical facilities, and to confirm loyalty in order to delay the real risk of going to war. However, playing on the time factor makes sense as long as it allows Putin to maintain the illusion of a strong leader who not only responds brutally to ‘terrorist acts’, as he called the Crimean bridge attack, but is also a loyal ally. However, the Belarusian leader successfully resists Putin’s pressure and avoids sending his own army to the front at all costs, a practice he has conducted for over two decades: while openly supporting Russian policies, he has never recognised the annexation of Crimea or, previously, that of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In the last resort, a direct involvement of Belarus in the special operation is implausible but not impossible. Lukashenka would have the majority of public opinion against him and perhaps lack the resources to quell further street demonstrations. The country would risk economic collapse and internal riots far more violent than those that followed the 2020 elections. The President’s moves therefore seem fairly obvious: to offer the Russian Federation a base from which it can eventually penetrate Ukraine and, above all, to continue to openly support Putin’s decisions.

¹¹ *Откуда на Беларусь готовилось пополнение. Александр Лукашенко примет тысячи российских военных ради мира*, Kommersant 10/10/2022 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5607117?query=Арте́м%20Шрайбман>

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The new Kuwait government

The Kuwait crown prince has reconfirmed Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf al-Sabah, son of the emir in power, as Prime Minister¹.

A decree issued by Crown Prince Sheikh Meshal al-Ahmad al-Sabah instructed Sheikh Ahmad to appoint a cabinet following the September 29th elections in which the opposition, after a 10-year boycott, took part and won 28 seats² out of 50. Several governments had faced two years³

of tensions with the parliament⁴: in August the crown prince dissolved it as over twenty parliamentarians protested to appoint a new executive.

The stalemate with the cabinet delayed the approval of the state budget for the fiscal year 2022/2023 and other economic reforms. The budget, which must be voted before November, had set spending at 23.65 billion dinars - 77.2 billion dollars - compared to 23.48 billion in the 2021/2022 budget.

Since 1962, 18 elections have been held in Kuwait; the parliament has a four-year term, but parliamentary elections have been held more often⁵.

Much of the power actually remains in the hands of the ruling family and the emir who appoints the government.

All the candidates at the elections presented themselves as independent since the country does not officially prohibit or foresee the existence of political parties, consequently voters do not vote on the basis of a program or a political manifesto: the effectiveness of the Kuwaiti parliament is conditioned by the vote that is expressed along family, tribal, sectarian and friendship lines without paying attention to the electoral agendas of the candidates.

Expatriate workers, that represent 70% of the population, do not have the right to vote. Women represent 51.2% of the 795,920 voters and acquired the right to vote in 2005. However, the only female parliamentarian, Safa al-Hashem, lost her seat in December 2020.

In addition to issues relating to women's rights, such as inheritance, property and honour killings⁶, other litigation matters include the specification of the limits of the mandate for the Prime Minister and corruption that originates the deterioration of infrastructures and public services to citizens⁷.

¹ Reuters, "Kuwait's new government sworn in after reshuffle aimed at defusing tensions", 17 October 2022; https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kuwaits-crown-prince-attend-parliament-opening-tuesday-2022-10-17/?utm_campaign=MECGA%20Soft%20Launch&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=230000259&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-99JLzK4wsWX8WTmIH9RHV8K6RJtj4Vuqfh_83O4_rHopuQLthihRwDRNbJMPW-YzO5peJetHqvTZM3diYTsFY5f_-ug&utm_content=230000259&utm_source=hs_email.

² Reuters, "Kuwait crown prince reappoints Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf al-Sabah as PM- KUNA", October 5, 2022; <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kuwaiti-emiri-decree-reappoints-sheikh-ahmad-nawaf-al-sabah-pm-kuna-2022-10-05/>

³ Asharq al Awsat, "Kuwait Elections Make Significant Changes", 30 September 2022; <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3904221/kuwait-elections-make-significant-changes>.

⁴ Foreign Brief, "Kuwait Holds 2022 National Elections", September 29, 2022; <https://foreignbrief.com/daily-news/kuwait-holds-2022-national-elections/>.

⁵ AlJazeera, "What to know about Kuwait's parliamentary elections", 29 September 2022; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/29/what-you-need-to-know-about-kuwaits-parliament-explainer>.

⁶ Washington Post, "Kuwait vote shakes up assembly amid political gridlock", September 30, 2022; https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kuwait-vote-shakes-up-assembly-amid-political-gridlock/2022/09/30/48d5c7b0-40d0-11ed-8c6e-9386bd7cd826_story.html.

⁷ The national News, "Kuwait elections hailed as 'democracy's wedding' and chance for change", September 29, 2022; <https://www.thenationalnews.com/gulf-news/2022/09/29/kuwait-elections-hailed-as-democracys-wedding-and-chance-for-change/>.

Local media reported that 305 candidates, including 22 women - two were elected⁸ - took part in the elections.

Opposition candidates, including Islamists, won 60% of the seats, increasing pressure on the government which hoped instead to ease tensions with the new legislature and to push ahead economic reforms⁹.

Official results showed that most pro-government lawmakers lost traditional districts while the Shia bloc increased its seats from six to nine. The Islamic Constitutional Movement, Hadas, the Kuwaiti branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, has reconfirmed its five seats in the assembly¹⁰.

The landslide victory of the Islamist movements in these elections will have a major impact on the next national assembly. The political stalemate will not stop with these results, but will continue within the legislative assembly, the ruling family as well as in the public debate.

The results cast doubt on the government's ability to pass sensitive economic reforms such as the introduction of a value-added tax, part of a regional agreement within the Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC: Kuwait and Qatar have so far resisted.

Political stability in Kuwait has traditionally depended on cooperation between the government and the parliament - the most vibrant in the Gulf region. While not officially allowing political parties, the country has given the legislator more influence than other monarchies in the area. Recurrent stalemates between Kuwait's government and parliament have often led to various government reshuffles and the dissolution of the parliament over the decades, hindering the country's necessary investments and reforms.

⁸ Al-Arabiya News, "Two women elected as Kuwait opposition wins majority in parliament", 30 September 2022; <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2022/09/30/Two-women-elected-as-Kuwait-opposition-wins-majority-in-parliament->

⁹ Reuters, "Kuwaiti opposition wins big in election, standoff with government to endure", September 30, 2022; <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kuwaiti-opposition-wins-big-election-standoff-with-government-endure-2022-09-30/>.

¹⁰ Middle East Monitor, "Opposition groups secure nearly 60% of Kuwait's National Assembly", September 30, 2022; <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220930-opposition-groups-secure-nearly-60-of-kuwaits-national-assembly/>.

***Nord Stream* and the problem of critical infrastructures' vulnerability: toward a new form of hybrid warfare?**

At the end of September 2022, the damage to the two *Nord Stream* pipelines that ensure the transport of Russian natural gas across the Baltic Sea from Vyborg to the terminals in northern Germany not only significantly reduced the plant's capacity and led to a new surge in energy prices on the European market (Mazneva and Shiryayevskaya, 2022). It also highlighted some essential – and hitherto partly underestimated – issues. At the first level, it stressed how Europe (and some of its countries are still sensitive to the dynamics of Russia's energy supplies and how the central role that a small number of critical infrastructures (such as the *Nord Stream*) plays exacerbates this sensitivity. At the second level, the possibility that the damage was due to sabotage (as claimed by NATO¹ and several European countries) (Kelly and Birnbaum, 2022; Yanes, Gonzalo, and Muñoz, 2022) regarding the security of these infrastructures, especially those on the high seas, where it is more challenging to implement adequate protection measures. Finally, the uncertainty surrounding the event and the speculation about its true nature (sabotage or accidental damage and, if sabotage, by whom and for what purposes?) have revived the theme of how manipulable information often is. The current context – in which information is disseminated through multiple and sometimes only partially reliable channels – makes the problem more relevant. In a confrontation that is often based more on perception than factual reality, such as the one pitting Russia against the West for several years now, the latter issue takes special relevance. In particular, it indirectly re-proposes the problem of developing adequate tools to counter disinformation and influence strategies.

In many ways, these “soft” dimensions seem more critical than the impact on supply. For months, European countries worked to reduce their dependence on Moscow's gas by replenishing stockpiles and differentiating supply channels. Thanks also to the current high price scenario, this goal has been reasonably achieved, although the scene is not yet entirely clear of risks. For instance, the US rising energy prices could push the Biden administration to cut some of the supplies so far directed to Europe to curb inflation's growth, which stood at 8.3 per cent year-on-year in August (Bredemeier, 2022). The fact that neither *Nord Stream 1* nor *Nord Stream 2* is currently operational (*Nord Stream 2* never entered into service due to the outbreak of the Ukraine war, while Gazprom halted *Nord Stream 1*'s in early September due to technical reasons) contributed to limiting the scope of what happened. However, what happened also gave a worrying signal about the European infrastructure network's vulnerability. After the first incidents, all countries in the region (first among them Sweden and Denmark, which openly spoke of them as the result of “deliberate actions”) raised the level of surveillance around pipelines (Carrel and Jacobsen, 2022). In this perspective, some observers raised the idea that the hybrid warfare accompanying the conflict in Ukraine has entered a new phase (Oltermann, 2022). There is still some caution in talking about responsibility. However, the fear is that *Nord Stream*'s problems may be a message sent to the European countries to show how vulnerable other and more critical infrastructures are, such as the communication and energy distribution networks and the pipelines linking southern Europe to North Africa.

Infrastructures vulnerability is not a new problem. Their weakness vis-à-vis cyberattacks has long been discussed (recently: Nelson and Romero, 2022), and many states have developed strategies against this kind of threat. As part of its 2006 Program for Critical Infrastructure Protection, the EU launched a directive on critical infrastructure in 2008, aimed, among others, at their

¹ NATO Calls Nord Stream Leaks 'Deliberate, Reckless' Sabotage. *RFE/RL - Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 29 September 2022. Online: <https://www.rferl.org/a/fourth-leak-discovered-nord-stream-gas-pipelines-sweden/32057233.html> (accessed: 1st October 2022).

designation and assessing the need to improve their protection². In the following years, in the face of increasing integration of the infrastructure network and the evolution of the threats to which it is exposed, the directive's content was revised through a process that fed into the European Commission's Adjusted Work Program 2020 and its annexes³. However, the *Nord Stream* affair gave the issue new urgency, reviving the fears raised by a string of similar attacks on energy infrastructures in 2021, which heavily impacted both the available volumes and the selling prices (Majkut et al., 2022). Europe's growing dependence on US LNG amplifies the problem, making its supply security dependent on the trans-Atlantic infrastructure. The need is for greater coordination between Washington and the European countries and better integration between the cyber and physical security of facilities, overcoming what has been labelled the «false dichotomy between 'virtual' and 'physical' infrastructure» (Fiott, 2020). The problem remains of protecting a network that, at the European level, extends across the continent and the surrounding waters. Significantly, NATO is paying more and more attention to the issue, enhancing antisubmarine capabilities, developing enhanced tools for protecting submarine infrastructures, and tasking the Atlantic Command in Norfolk with monitoring threats against such infrastructures and devising new solutions to counter them (Brzozowski, 2020).

Final remarks

Beyond its immediate impact, the *Nord Stream* affair has highlighted how protecting critical infrastructure remains a problem for Europe and NATO (Tidey and Zsiros, 2022). It has also highlighted how the ways of conducting conflict are becoming increasingly multifaceted and how confrontation on the ground is increasingly accompanied by aggressive indirect actions. In this sense, should Moscow's responsibility for the *Nord Stream* damage be confirmed, it would represent a major leap in the level of confrontation with the West. Although *Nord Stream*'s exit from service did not materially affect the volumes of gas available on the market, the fears it generated impacted prices and had an economic fallout, fuelling Europe's sense of insecurity and the already existing fears of a possible supply crisis. All of this, in turn, reverberated with national public opinions, fuelled fears of recession and prompted various governments to take steps that widened the cleavages of an already profoundly divided Europe (Stirling and Mazneva, 2022). Moscow has radically denied responsibility for what happened, remarking how the proximity of the damage's site to the territorial waters of NATO countries rather adumbrates a direct or indirect involvement of the alliance (see, e.g., Cordelle and Chestney, 2022). However, beyond the issue of the actual responsibility, the *Nord Stream* affair will probably fuel the quarrel that has already accompanied several moments of the ongoing war: what happened during the conflict's many critical junctures? It is a quarrel to which the European public debate has already proved sensitive and has raised more than one concern about the vulnerability of the European countries to possible disinformation strategies.

² Council Directive 2008/114/EC of 8 December 2008 on the identification and designation of European critical infrastructures and the assessment of the need to improve their protection. *Official Journal of the European Union*, 23 December 2008, L 345/75-L 345/82. Online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32008L0114&from=EN> (accessed: 1st October 2022).

³ The Adjusted Work Programme 2020 and its annexes are online: https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2020-commission-work-programme-key-documents_en (accessed: 1st October 2022).

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The energy deal between Libya and Turkey, towards new trends of instability along the Eastern Mediterranean

On 3 October Libya and Turkey signed an energy agreement in Tripoli, which risks seriously exacerbating tensions in the Mediterranean, opening up a new scenario of latent conflicts dangerously involving some NATO member states (Turkey against Greece and Cyprus) and delaying the development of several existing energy projects. As a matter of fact, Libya and Turkey signed a deal for the exploration of new natural gas and oil fields – both on land and offshore, for fifty years – in addition to provide support for the realization (and modernization) of oil refineries and export terminals (the text of the agreement has not, however, been made public).

In reality, these goals, contained in the Memorandum of Understanding, must be contextualized within the bilateral agreement signed in 2019 between Libya and Turkey for the definition of a common exclusive economic zone (which has never been recognized by the international community). It includes a very large maritime portion, from the north-eastern coast of Libya to the southern offshoots of the Crete island, a territory that falls within the Greece's exclusive economic zone, within the national maritime borders of Athens. While Libyan Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Naila Magnus defined these agreements as a way to further promote bilateral cooperation as these reflect the interests of both nations and the willingness to contribute in order to solve the global energy crisis, Greece, for its part, harshly reacted. In fact, these agreements interfere with the exercise of its sovereignty right over its territorial waters: Athens is ready to defend by legal means its rights, in full compliance with the International Law of the Sea (Euractiv, 2022). Also the Egyptian government expressed its dissent on this agreement, supporting claims expressed by the Tobruk's Parliament (chaired by Bashaga) according to which the Tripoli's government (the Government of National Unity chaired by Dbeibah, which expresses pro-Turkish positions) does not have authority to conclude international agreements (AI Monitor, 2022).

The European Union has also expressed its concern about the potentially destabilizing effects of this agreement. The spokesman of the European Commission for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Peter Stano, officially expressed a position that supports the requests of Greece, an EU member state. As a matter of fact, he reiterated how: *"The 2019 Turkey-Libya Memorandum of Understanding infringes upon the sovereign rights of third States, does not comply with the Law of the Sea and cannot produce any legal consequences for third States"* (EEAS, 2022). Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu replied defining the objections of Greece, Egypt and France as illegitimate interferences by third states, essentially defending the terms of the deal with Libya.

Undoubtedly, this bilateral energy agreement could seriously trigger a military escalation in the Mediterranean basin, in the case that – for instance – Turkey authorizes offshore drilling operations in the southern part of the Crete island (Mathews, 2022). It would create a scenario of instability and insecurity (in which NATO member countries would be involved in opposition to each other) in an area of growing strategic relevance for the EU in terms of energy security and diversification of supplies. In fact, a condition of latent conflict would slow down the implementation of key projects aimed at ensuring alternative supply to the EU, such as the Eastmed gas pipeline (intended to transport gas extracted from Israeli and Cypriot offshore fields to Greece and European markets), the upgrading of the Idku and Damietta liquefaction terminals in Egypt, the exploitation of the Eastern Mediterranean offshore gas potential.

To complicate the picture, we should consider that the expected route for the Eastmed submarine pipeline would cross that stretch of sea affected by the 2019 Turkey-Libya agreement - in which the economic zones of the two nations partially border – allowing Ankara to eventually

oppose to the infrastructure's implementation (Indeo, 2021). Nevertheless, in addition to the fact that this deal on the Turkish-Libyan maritime borders' delimitation has not been internationally recognized, in 2020 Greece and Egypt defined their exclusive economic zones. A deal that, according to the Athens government, effectively undermines and nullifies Ankara's ambitious claims on a huge maritime area, with the aim of hindering the construction of energy infrastructures conceived to strengthen regional cooperation and to commercialize hydrocarbons extracted from offshore fields.

In the Libyan perspective, the collaboration and investments from Turkish energy companies could contribute to the oil&gas sector's development and modernization, which is strongly affected by the persistent national conflict (namely a civil war) between the government of Tripoli and the parliament of Tobruk. A condition that discourages the involvement of international energy companies and negatively undermines production and export capacity. Libya has an enormous energy potential, with oil reserves estimated at 48.5 billion barrels (the largest reserves in Africa) which feed a production of 1.5 million barrels per day, thus returning to the 2010 levels (namely before the Arab spring's revolts which overthrow Gaddafi's authoritarian regime). In 2021, Libya exported 1.1 million barrels of oil per day but this capacity is heavily influenced by the instability of the so-called Oil Crescent, the eastern coastal area of the country where are located the main oil export terminals such as Sidra and Ras Lanuf, which deliver over 50% of the national oil export to the international markets. In the last decade, the conflict between the different factions has often led to the closure of terminals and the blocking of mining activities for long periods, provoking a collapse of the oil production and export capacity up to 70-75%, reaching around 300- 400 thousand barrels of oil per day and dramatically reducing revenues for the state budget (US EIA, 2022; ICG, 2018).

The country also holds natural gas reserves of 1,400 billion cubic meters (bcm) which - given Libya's geographical proximity to Italy and the EU - could contribute to the strategy of diversification of supplies. At present, Greenstream is the only active pipeline – it delivers natural gas to Sicily and has a capacity of 8 bcm - while the projects to create liquefaction terminals on the coast (following the Egyptian and Algerian model) are currently frozen due to internal instability and the lack of investments from the international energy companies. A scenario that substantially prevents exploration activities in search of new fields. Furthermore, the consolidated practice of burning large quantities of gas to maximize oil production (almost half of the national production estimated at 12 bcm in 2021) represents another factor that negatively affects the Libyan gas export potential.

In the future, the Turkish-Libyan agreement should push Turkish energy companies to strengthen their position in Libya, competing with Tripoli's traditional partners such as the French company Total and above all the Italian national company Eni, which has been active in the country since 1959. Eni holds exploration and development activities in 6 onshore and offshore contract area. Some months ago, Eni expressed its support and collaboration to the Libyan company NOC, which aims to increase daily oil production in order to reach 2 million barrels. Eni and NOC are also in partnership (Mellitah Oil&Gas) to exploit and commercialize the gas extracted from the Wafa and Bahr Essalam fields that feeds the Greenstream pipeline, connecting the Mellitah gas treatment plant on the Libyan coast with Gela in Sicily (Eni, 2022). This existing high level of cooperation and reliable partnership between Eni and NOC in the energy sector constitutes a strong prerequisite for enhancing the presence of the Italian company in Libya, aimed at fully exploiting the oil and especially natural gas potential of this African nation.

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The threat of attacks on critical infrastructure in the energy sector

The 2022 Nord Stream explosions

On 26 September 2022, within a few hours, a sequence of underwater explosions occurred at pipes of the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines, which transport natural gas from the Russian Federation to Germany running through the Baltic Sea. The explosions caused huge gas leaks into the sea.

As also suggested by statements released by some leaders of states and international organizations such as NATO itself (NATO 2022), the explosions appear as the result of intentional sabotage actions; presumably the actor involved is a state, given the high resources and skills required for the operation. Although, according to available information, several Western governments have suspected an intervention by the Russian Federation (see Collinson 2022), at the time of writing, there are no clear indications on responsibility for these actions, which, understandably, have not been claimed by any actor.

The ongoing investigations are complicated by the fact that the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines are controlled, respectively for the most part (51%) and totally, by the Russian Gazprom corporation and the explosions occurred in international waters, although in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of Denmark and of Sweden (Braw 2022).

In the short time, gas leaks caused an increase in the price of natural gas, despite the fact that Nord Stream 1 stopped transporting gas in the summer 2022 and that Nord Stream 2 has not yet entered service. In addition, methane leaks in the Baltic Sea have caused serious environmental damage.

More generally, these explosions could aggravate the energy crisis already manifested in Europe and could have the effect of making relations between Russia and Western states even more tense.

Critical infrastructure and hybrid warfare

If the intentional responsibility of a State were confirmed, the Nord Stream explosions would represent a relevant case of hybrid warfare, based on the attack on critical infrastructure.

It would be a hostile “gray zone” act, that, despite having coercive objectives, does not yet reach the threshold of a conventional military action.

Moreover, it cannot be completely ruled out that the attacks were secretly planned and carried out with the aim of attributing responsibility for the sabotage to other actors not involved in the operation, as part of a false flag operation (Jones and Bachmann 2022).

As has been pointed out, if the Nord Stream sabotage were the work of the Russian Federation, it would mark an escalation of hostile initiatives organized by Moscow against Western states, from subversive efforts such as disinformation activities to physical attacks on critical infrastructure (Majkut and Palti-Guzman 2022).

Risks and challenges for the future

Other cases of hybrid warfare could take place in the future. For example, recent developments in underwater technologies, such as underwater drones, could be used for this purpose. In addition to pipelines (including the Baltic Pipeline, which entered service the day after the alleged sabotage of Nord Stream 1 and 2), it has been noted that another potential type of targets of great importance could be undersea communication cables, which are also crucial for internet connections (Bueger and Liebetrau 2022; see also Bueger et al. 2022).

In the energy sector, attacks could also target infrastructure for the liquefaction, transportation or regasification of liquefied natural gas (LNG), which has become even more salient for Western countries, such as Italy, after the outbreak of the current war in Ukraine.

Additionally, attacks on energy critical infrastructure can be carried out by non-state actors, such as rebel groups or terrorist organizations (most recently, Lee 2022). One can think, for example, of the drone strikes carried out by the Yemeni group of the Houthis on oil plants and industrial targets in Saudi Arabia and in the United Arab Emirates since 2018. Another recent example is the offensive launched by jihadists associated with the so-called Islamic State / *Daesh* in the city of Palma, in the north-east of Mozambique, in the spring of 2021; the battle also caused the suspension of a large project for the production of liquefied natural gas in the nearby Afungi Peninsula.

In addition to kinetic actions, cyberattacks, too, should of course be considered. Some cyberattacks have already targeted energy infrastructure of Western states, both in Europe and in North America. Moreover, the energy transition process (e.g. see Hafner and Tagliapietra 2020), which requires the digitalisation of electricity grids, could lead to even more pronounced vulnerabilities in the energy sector (cf. Overland 2019). Already in December 2015, a cyberattack, not officially claimed by any actor, hit the electricity grid of Ukraine, in the middle of winter (see Van de Graaf and Colgan 2017; Sullivan and Kamensky 2017).

Conclusions

The recent sequence of explosions at pipes of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines under the Baltic Sea confirms the importance of critical infrastructure protection, in the face of potential threats posed by state actors as well as by non-state actors (such as terrorist organisations). In the current political and economic context, the role of critical infrastructure in the energy sector (including the electricity, oil, and gas subsectors) is becoming even more important (cf. Council of the European Union 2008).

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Acronyms list

AKP:	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)
ASWJ:	Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a
ATMIS:	African Union Transition Mission in Somalia
bcm:	billion cubic metres
EEZ:	Exclusive Economic Zone
EU:	European Union
FSRU:	Floating Storage and Regasification Unit
FZNC:	Foundation for National Values Protection
GAITA:	Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies
ICU:	Islamic Courts Union
IGB:	Interconnector Greece Bulgaria
ISR:	Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
LNG:	Liquefied Natural Gas
Mcm:	million cubic metres
MITE:	Ministry of Ecological Transition
NATO:	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PCT:	Congolese Party of Labour
SNA:	Somali National Army
TPAO:	Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı (Turkish Petroleum Corporation)
UNCLOS:	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNSC:	United Nations Security Council
US :	United States

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The “Osservatorio Strategico” is a survey that collects, analyses and reports developed by the Defense Research and Analysis Institute (IRAD), carried out by specialized researchers.

The areas of interest monitored in 2022 are:

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- Mashreq, Gran Maghreb, Egypt and Israel;
- Sahel, Gulf of Guinea, sub-Saharan Africa and Horn of Africa;
- China, Southern and Eastern Asia and Pacific;
- Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa;
- Persian Gulf;
- Euro/Atlantic (USA-NATO-Partners);
- Energy policies: interests, challenges and opportunities;
- Unconventional Challenges and threats.

The heart of the “Osservatorio Strategico” consists of the scripts regarding the individual areas, divided into critical analyses and forecasts.

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