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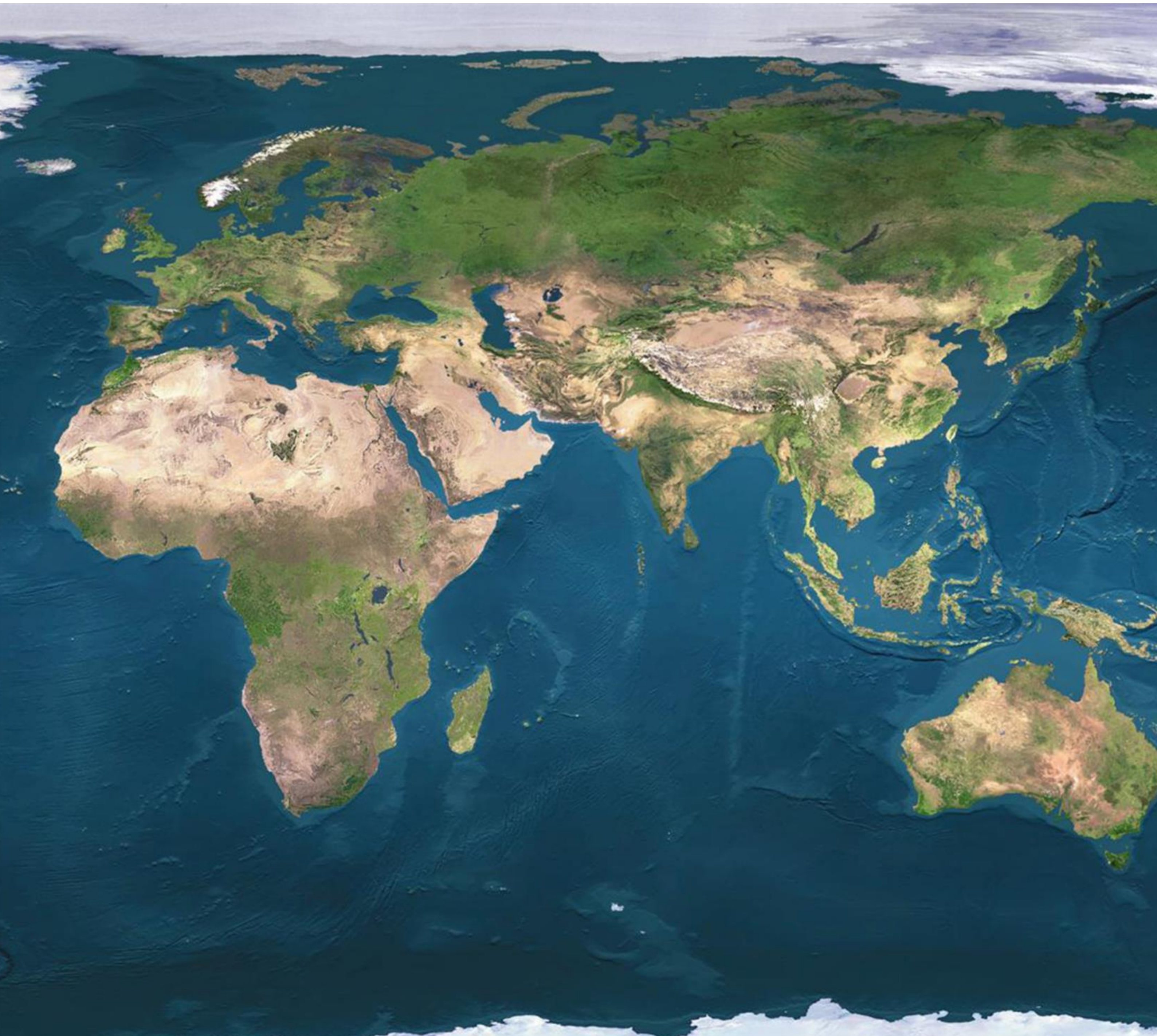

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Osservatorio Strategico 2022

Issue 1

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Osservatorio Strategico 2022

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Osservatorio Strategico - Part One
Index

Osservatorio Strategico - Part Two

Index

Osservatorio Strategico
Part One

Where is Serbia positioned

Hints of Serbian history

Around the 6th century, the Proto-Slavs, who were in present-day western Ukraine, took advantage of the Persian Roman Wars to settle, driven by the possibility of having more hospitable lands, in provinces only nominally belonging to the Byzantine Empire[1]. The most important of these was the area of present-day western Serbia, eastern Montenegro and southern Bosnia.

Another area from which the Slavs came was that of present-day Lusatia (area corresponding to the border between Poland, Germany and Bohemia)[2]. After having collaborated with the Byzantine emperor Heraclius I, around 630, to repel the Avars, the Slavs obtained permission to settle in the Balkan Peninsula, in order to form a diaphragm towards those barbarian populations.

At the end of the twelfth century began the Serbian expansion on the region of Zeta (present-day Montenegro), thanks to Stefan Nemanja, great Zupano (veliki župan) of Raška, who obtained independence for Serbia from Isaac II Angelos, Byzantine emperor, counting on Frederick Barbarossa, transit for the third crusade in the Balkan peninsula.

Serbian history is then followed by alliances with Venice, to create a contrast with the Eastern Roman Empire and the subsequent Latin Empire and with Rome from which we will try to have international recognition, which actually happened with the coronation as king of Serbia by the Church of Rome of Stephen II, who founded the dynasty of the Serbian monarchy of the Nemanjic family. Under this dynasty Serbia extended its power to Macedonia and Bulgaria, reaching its territorial and cultural apogee with Stefan Dušan (1331-1355), who extended his dominions to all the western Balkans including Greece. Under his reign there was also the liberation of the Serbian Church from that of Constantinople (1346), of which the Archbishop of Peć, who also had the power to appoint the kings of Serbia, became patriarch. The first to be named was Stephen Dušan with the title "Emperor of the Serbs and Greeks".

But the real threat came from the Ottomans and in fact in 1389 Sultan Murad I defeated the Serbs in the battle of the Merli Plain (Kosovo), starting four centuries of Turkish domination in the region, which transformed the region into hereditary military fiefs assigned to Ottoman nobles, effectively depriving all the Balkan countries of that fundamental period for the West that was the Renaissance. Later, with the Second Battle of Kosovo (1448), Murad II erased the remaining hopes of all the Christian-Balkan peoples, defeating a Serbian-Hungarian-Albanian coalition.

The Ottomans became landowners and the Serbs became tenants of their old land, and as was the case in other parts of the Balkan Peninsula, the Serbs also had to provide recruits for the prestigious Janissary corps.

Relations with the Turks were always strained, except in the mid-16th century, when the vizier of Serbian origin (Sokollu Mehmed Pasha) managed to relax relations, even managing to re-establish the Serbian patriarchate in Peć, who became the sole guardian of religion, of Serbian traditions, language and culture.

However, the tension led to revolts that were always eradicated by the Turks and forced many Serbs to take refuge in Hungary, where they were well received by the Hungarian monarchy, settling in the southern Hungarian provinces and precisely in the region of Voivodina. The patriarchate was thrown out by Peć and the Greek Orthodox Church gave him shelter[3].

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1 *John Van Antwerp Jr. Fine, The Early Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century, Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1991.*

2 *Edgar Hösch, Storia dei Balcani, Il Mulino, Bologna 2006*

3 *Jože Pirjevec, Serbi, Croati, Sloveni, Il Mulino, Bologna 2010*

Serbia increasingly sought to free itself from the Ottoman Empire and opted for the solution dictated by the blood bond with the older Slavic brothers residing in Moscow. The ties were stronger and stronger, especially the military and cultural ones, in the name of the common Slavic and Orthodox roots and allowed the semi-independent Principality of Serbia (1815) to have the support of the Russian Empire, despite the fierce infighting between the two most powerful dynasties in the country, the Obrenović and the Karađorđević.

The Congress of Berlin of 1878 recognized the independence of Serbia, albeit small in size and with a small population and especially without access to the sea. It was in fact a rural society with very few manufacturing industries always specializing in agriculture. Belgrade participated in the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) against Turkey and Bulgaria, coming out enlarged territorially, but not in such a way as to foresee the merger with Montenegro and then the outlet to the sea, as opposed by the Habsburgs of Austria, which sought to acquire the Western Balkans as far as Thessaloniki, on the remains of the devastated Turkish Empire. Serbia therefore became increasingly attached to the Tsars, turning its attention not only to Istanbul, but also to Vienna. In this regard, relations with the Dual Monarchy were deteriorating and a strongly anti-Austrian propaganda was born in Serbia, in order to infiltrate the faults caused by the many ethnic groups living in the Austro-Austrian Empire Hungarian and especially the Slavic ethnicity in Croatia and Slovenia. This assertive posture assumed by Belgrade threw the entire continent towards the "Great War", following the various alliances that had formed in Europe.

Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Habsburg throne, was a supporter of the transformation of the empire from a dual to a triple monarchy, thus comprising a third Slavic formation alongside the ethnic German and Magyar. This option would have severely limited the expansionist ideas of Belgrade and on 28 June 1914 the killing of the Archduke in Sarajevo by a young Bosnian Serb named Gavrilo Princip, suspected of belonging to the Crna ruka ("black hand"). The opportunity was considered propitious by Vienna to resolve once and for all the Serbian situation and to start the process of expansion of the Western Balkans, already begun a few years before with the acquisition of Bosnia - Herzegovina. An ultimatum was sent with humiliating conditions that Serbia accepted, except that the Austro-Hungarian military could circulate on national territory without being accountable to the Belgrade government. The clause went far beyond humiliation. If accepted, it would have irremediably limited the sovereignty of an independent country, making it a *de facto* vassal tax state. With this background, the First World War broke out with Russia, France and Great Britain taking sides in favor of Serbia. These allies, however, unlike the central empires, were geographically distant and with the hostile entry of the Sofia government into the war, the Serbian army had to flee with the help of the Italians from the Albanian ports.

The powers of the “Entente” and, with it, Belgrade managed to win the "Great War" and there were important territorial acquisitions in the Hungarian plain (Vojvodina) north of the Danube. Subsequently, the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 created a very large Kingdom that included all the South Slavs (Yugoslavia) who gathered Croats and Slovenes under the Karađorđević dynasty.

From a geopolitical point of view, the emergence of new states such as Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia was aimed, especially by the Anglo-Saxon thalassocratic powers, to contain the rising powers such as Germany and Italy, born in turn to contain the possible French domination on the European continent, after the Napoleonic epic.

In World War II, Serbia became a satellite state of the Third Reich until the arrival of Russian troops in late 1944. Marshal Tito, head of the Yugoslav communist resistance, rose to the top of the list, and at the same time and definitively exhausted the royal family. Serbia-led Yugoslavia became the meeting of six republics, which incorporated as "spoils of war" also the Italian territories of Istria (except Trieste) and Zadar in Dalmatia.

The social idea proposed was that of so-called self-management, where the workers collectively controlled the factories of production and where for a certain period of time there was also a generalized improvement in the standard of living, all under the aegis of the Yugoslav Communist Party, which in fact crystallized the real centralized power in Belgrade.

It was interesting to maintain an independent and non-aligned foreign policy. In fact, Belgrade, although belonging to the logic of division of Europe, left Yalta, to the Soviet communist bloc, never became part of the Warsaw Pact, but always maintained a similar-autonomous position on all issues of international politics.

Wars in the ex Yugoslavia

The glue of this group of republics, very different from each other (suffice it to say that the Croatian border is much more than a geographical border, but it is also under the socio-ethnic-cultural aspect, between the Austrian-Catholic mittleuropean area and the Orthodox Slav Christian area) was summed up in the figure of Marshal Tito, who managed to keep this Federation strong until his death in 1980. Later, nationalism and ethnic and religious particularism were awakened, exacerbated by the economic crisis that had struck the country, and plunged the Western Balkans into war and the dissolution of Yugoslavia immediately after the fall of the "Berlin Wall". Before the independence of the two northernmost republics, immediately recognized by the Vatican, then the crises in Bosnia and Herzegovina and especially in Kosovo, where the majority of Albanian origin pushed more and more on the path of independence, gave the final shoulder for the fall of Yugoslavia. Slobodan Milošević in Belgrade skilfully fed on these tensions, and using a marked nationalist rhetoric he intervened to eliminate any remaining autonomy in the above-mentioned regions, justifying this by the need to protect the Serbian minorities in these areas, but also in Croatia, leading to a rapid deterioration of relations with Zagreb. The rest is recent history, with the acclaimed recognition of crimes against humanity for the ethnic cleansing operations of the Yugoslav army resulting in the secessionist conflicts and civil wars that led to the dissolution of the Federation[4].

Serbia merged with Montenegro, establishing a new federal state that took the name of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, but in 2006 the Montenegrin government decided to hold a referendum for independence following which the federation was dissolved by consensus, definitively repressing any desire to merge with the remaining peoples of the Western Balkans.

With Resolution No 1244 of 1999, the UN placed Kosovo under the international protectorate NATO, in order to have elections for the creation of an autonomous legislative body, which on 17 April 2008 approved the declaration of independence of Kosovo[5].

The Serbian government has never recognized the autonomy and independence of Kosovo, as well as 93 UN member countries. The reasons are to be found not only in the strong Serbian minority of the area, but also in the historical and religious profiles. Kosovo is considered a central place in Serbian history, both for the famous battles fought against the Turks and for religious reasons by the Serbs - Orthodox Christians, despite the most widespread religion is Sunni Islam and this is the main anchor on which the hopes of Belgrade to be able to enter the Europe are grounded.

4 *https://www.repubblica.it/2006/05/sezioni/esteri/montenegro-referendum/risultati-ufficiali/risultati-ufficiali.html*
5 *This proclamation was not accepted and declared null and void by the Serbian Parliament the following day.*

Ties with Moscow and application for membership of the European Union

Moscow and Belgrade are linked by centuries-old fraternal relations. They share many things including the use of the Cyrillic alphabet, the common belonging to the Orthodox Christian religion and often even the positions of international politics[6].

The Kremlin's failure to recognise Kosovo is a case in point of the link between these two countries. Belgrade, although independent from the enclave of Kaliningrad, represents the eye of Moscow towards southern Europe and is strategically important, as the homeland of Kant to the north, for the control of the European and Atlantic defensive systems.

Serbia has decided not to close the airspace for aircraft from Russia, but above all has not imposed sanctions for the current Russian-Ukrainian war, limiting itself to a mere verbal condemnation and expressing its support for the UN resolution condemning it.

Memories are still alive in Belgrade of the NATO bombings in 1999, which keep the Balkan country far away from the Atlantic Alliance and much closer to the positions of the Kremlin, which in fact has always rejected sanctions against it for the Kosovo affair. It should also be borne in mind that the Russian Federation has a monopoly of the Serbian oil industry through Gazprom, and that also recently, following meetings between Aleksandar Vucic and Vladimir Putin, an agreement was reached that would allow a reduction in prices, including the possibility of building a civil nuclear power plant in Serbia by the Russian Rosatom.

The current Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic, in addition to maintaining excellent relations with Russia, is increasingly advocating ties with the European Union in order to complete the accession begun in 2009. However, the vulnus of the negotiations is Brussels' claim to find a definitive solution for Pristina with its recognition. In this respect, the Belgrade Government does not intend to give way and, since there is no clearly demarcated border with Kosovo, which can provide safe margins for the correct application of the Schengen Treaty, the European Union is in a position where it cannot move forward in the accession process. The fact that there is no clear timetable could create for Serbia what has been created for Turkey, namely a permanent candidate status. This, however, implies a disaffection of the citizens and a possible drift of these countries towards other polarizations, provided that the place where Belgrade must sit is and must be Europe, even if Serbia for its historical, cultural and religious vocation, maintains excellent relations with Russia and very performing with China.

Vučić's recent confirmation confirms for the next five years the lines of foreign, domestic and economic policy already laid out. Politician who received his first major post (Minister of Information - Radical Party) with Milosevic, in 2012 he founded the Progressive Party, becoming Prime Minister in 2014, abandoning the nationalist nuances that had characterized the arbors of his career, approaching moderate positions of pro-European brand.

However, the war in Ukraine is creating problems for Serbian foreign policy, as it is increasingly necessary to choose which part of the camp to be in. No more vague decisions will have to be taken soon and from these it will be understood which head of the twin-headed eagle, present on its flag, Serbia intends to orient itself. Vucic has so far been particularly adept at navigating between the two fires, condemning the Ukrainian events but not imposing sanctions against Moscow, trying to resist the strong pressure from both Brussels and Washington, to maintain a strong bond with the Kremlin.

The demonstration came from the German ambassador to Serbia Thomas Schieb, who reported that, in order to speed up Serbian accession to the European Union, it is expected to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation, stating that "Right now it is a question of condemning Russian

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6 *Walton Andrea: Serbia, il paese che vuole l'UE ma non sanziona la Russia: dal Kosovo ai legami economici, le ragioni dell'alleanza tra Belgrado e Mosca* su https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2022/03/14/serbia-il-paese-che-vuole-lue-ma-non-sanziona-la-russia-dal-kosovo-ai-legami-economici-le-ragioni-dellalleanza-tra-belgrado-e-mosca/6524756/

aggression; the humanitarian situation is dramatic, it is a question of showing solidarity with Ukraine and the signals are very important, in this sense Serbia has sent them and we welcome them"[7].

Belgrade, in addition to the blood link with Moscow, depends on Russian energy, but above all counts on the support of the Kremlin for its policies towards Kosovo, starting with the non-recognition of independence, but after the Serbian statements condemning the war in Ukraine, Russia has probably felt betrayed by those who consider it a country much more than a friend, but fraternal, as evidenced by the reverse support given in the 1990s to the Kosovo affair, but Moscow is well aware of the pressures that Belgrade is receiving at the moment and has as its medium-term strategic objective that Serbia does not join NATO, while the long-term one that can become a pro-Russian neo-Slavian on the face of Europe, The Russian Federation has become a point of commercial and economic contact for its goods, at a time when there is, also for Moscow, the desired entry of Serbia into the EU.

This position of distancing Serbia, although understood by Russia, however, has had consequences, so much so as to shake the Kremlin's twenty-year-old position on Kosovo. This is so evident from the recent statements by President Putin, who used the Kosovo affair to ride the UN International Court of Justice's decision on Kosovo, that, in exercising the right to self-determination, the territory of a State is not obliged to request permission to declare its sovereignty to the central authorities, making clear reference to the Ukrainian territories that could self-determin and then apply for membership of the Russian Federation, but in fact recognizing the Balkan country with an Albanian majority, detached from Serbia[8].

Already in 2014 there was a similar parallelism between Crimea and Kosovo, now with this declaration parallels are created with the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblast and other areas such as the city of Kherson.

These statements made by Vladimir Putin at the recent meeting with the Secretary-General of the United Nations have in fact marked a milestone in the interpretation of international law, but above all they will have angered the government in Belgrade.

Vucic immediately intervened, after the election that confirmed him at the second term, pointing out that the words of the President of the Russian Federation have significantly worsened relations between the two Slavic countries, disputing that Kosovo has been used for Russian interests in Ukraine and that such statements will only speed up the West's request to Belgrade for recognition of Pristina. The factor that emerges is that Belgrade is also imbued with the encirclement syndrome, which only the proximity of Moscow had soothed in recent years.

Serbia, besides considering Kosovo as its own province, fears above all that this region could merge with Albania and other neighboring areas with an Albanian majority, creating the "greater Albania"[9]. For this reason, the independence of 2008 was never accepted by Serbia, drawing on the support of the Kremlin and from which now, after these declarations of "de facto" recognition, it seems to distance itself.

Europe wants a normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, even if there have been situations in Kosovo itself that could undermine this process, like the case of the ban imposed by the government to call on its territory the Serbian parliamentary elections for the minority in the country, composed of almost 120 thousand people, creating new strong tensions and widening the parties. The new German chancellor Olaf Scholz is trying to mediate the situation and received in

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7 *Dotto Nicola su https://www.serbianmonitor.com/la-serbia-tra-due-fuochi-russia-o-ue/ del 18.04.2022*

8 *Palmisano Lucio su https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2022/05/12/guerra-in-ucraina-putin-sacrifica-il-kosovo-in-nome-del-donbass-schiaffo-allalleato-serbo-vucic-situazione-peggiorata-dopo-sue-parole/6588391/ del 12 maggio 2022*

9 *https://ilpiccolo.gelocal.it/trieste/cronaca/2021/01/21/news/kosovo-torna-lo-spettro-della-grande-albania-belgrado-lancia-l-allarme-1.39802070l di St. G. del 21 gennaio 2021*

early May the heads of state of the contending countries[10]. The event was fundamental as it affirmed the principle of mutual recognition. This crystallised situation would allow Belgrade to foster both its relationship with the European Union, which is Serbia's first trading partner, and to accelerate the completion of its accession, thereby ensuring a privileged relationship with Russia, which provides all the energy needs of the Balkan Republic. However, the path taken is creating tensions in the Serbian minority in Kosovo, which may feel abandoned by Belgrade, which is preparing for recognition of Kosovo, on the basis of Western international pressure, However, the Serbian minority must be guaranteed its social, cultural and political rights.

Conclusion

Serbia has always played a strategic role in the control of the Balkan Peninsula. Its cultural identity shows that it has all the historical requirements to be able to enter the European community in all respects. Europe, in accepting Belgrade, must not fall into the error of wanting to ask it to eradicate the secular ties it has with Russia, but rather must exploit this situation by trying to turn this link in its favour, finding a reliable interlocutor that can create a nuance of the criticalities and decompression of the issues that there are with the Eurasian giant.

[10] *Simonato Maria su https://berlinomagazine.com/2022-germania-scholz-incontra-i-leader-di-serbia-e-kosovo-sostegno-per-ladesione-allue/ del 5 maggio 2022*

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Positions and Implications of the War in Ukraine for the Mashreq and Maghreb Regions

The response of Maghreb and Mashreq regions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine

In order to understand the countries' response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is first pivotal to break down the question at hand into three different levels of analysis: politico-diplomatic, economic and sanctions, and military. Each of which can be divided into three different categories: supporters of Ukraine, supporters of Russia and neutral/ambiguous. Starting from the first level of analysis, politico-diplomatic, Israel, Lebanon, Libya and Kuwait can be included in the first category; among the latter, Syria should be included as well as non-state actors such as the Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemeni Houthi and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), namely the umbrella organization of the pro-Iranian militias[1]. The last category is the broadest one in which, with different nuances, should be included: Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, Iraq, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Tunisia and Yemen[2].

From the politico-diplomatic point of view, Israel has adopted a sort of "cautious" support towards Ukraine, due to the fact that they have strong ties with Moscow, yet nonetheless having taken on the role of being an international mediator[3] (Baldelli, 2022). The Jewish state voted in favor of both General Assembly resolutions. It also must be noted the multiple number of statements of the Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid, who has defined the Russian operation a serious violation of the international order (Israel MFA, 2022a). The anti-Semitic statements made by the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov on May 1 on the Italian television channel, Rete 4, have caused serious diplomatic problems between Israel and Russia – which in turn strengthened the ties between the Jewish State and Kiev[4]. Among the countries in the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait was the only one to have taken a hardline position condemning Moscow (Dene et al., 2022). Although Kuwait is not a member of the UNSC, it supported the draft resolution submitted by the United States and Albania on February 25. They then in turn voted in favor of both General Assembly resolutions publicly condemning Russian actions. The uncompromising position of the Gulf monarchy can be explained not only by its international position, but also by the history and memory of the Iraqi invasion of 1990 – which is similar to the Ukrainian situation today. Another country that has taken on a similar position is Lebanon. Lebanon had a similar experience in the past, with military occupation of southern Lebanon by Israel from 1982 to 2000. In addition to voting in favor of both General Assembly resolutions, on

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1 In the category of non-state actors, only those parties which were able to influence their own countries have been taken into account.

2 The assessment was made by taking into account the votes of the mentioned countries in the different United Nations (UN) bodies as well as the pronouncements of the relevant institutions of each country. In particular, with regard to the position of states at the UN, three different votes were considered. The first on February 25 on the Security Council's (CDS) draft resolution condemning the Russian invasion, which was rejected due to the veto of the Russian Federation (Security Council, 2022a); the second, on March 2, during the General Assembly's resolution condemning the Russian invasion, which was passed with 141 votes in favor (General Assembly, 2022a). Finally, there was a second General Assembly resolution, of April 6 decreeing Moscow's suspension from the UN Human Rights Council (General Assembly, 2022b).

3 Since early April, the mediation work carried out by the Israeli government has slowed down due to the internal problems in the Jewish state, such as a new wave of terrorist attacks and a political crisis within the majority supporting Naftali Bennett's government.

4 Interviewed by the "Zona Bianca" program, and echoing Russian war propaganda that Ukraine was ruled by a Nazi regime, Lavrov stated that Hitler also had Jewish origins. Hi attempt was to draw a parallel, void of any historical basis, with Ukrainian President Zelensky and asserting that there are anti-Semites among Jews too.

February 24, the Lebanese Foreign Ministry also issued a statement condemning Russia. In regard to Beirut's response, however, it should be noted the presence of an internal pro-Moscow, led by Hezbollah. On March 1, its leader, Nasrallah, blamed the escalation in Ukraine on the United States.

In the pro-Kiev front, Libya should also be mentioned. Prime Minister Dbeibeh, head of the internationally recognized government of national unity (GNU), on February 22 condemned the Russian decision to recognize the independence of the two separatist republics of Doneck and Lugansk. Even the unrecognized Libyan government led by Fathi Bashagha – the Government of National Stability (GNS) voted in by the House of Representatives in Tobruk last February – has condemned the Russian operation. Despite being formally supported by Moscow, Bashagha even wrote an op-ed in the British newspaper *The Time*, on May 3, making a comparison between Russian presence in Ukraine and Libya, and declaring a willingness to expel Russian mercenaries from Libyan soil (Bashagha, 2022). The following day, Bashagha declared on social media platform that he did not write the article. Given the legitimacy of the British newspaper, it is most likely that Bashagha was advised to take back what he said, given the fact that Russia supports the Cyrenaic militias militarily, who are behind the GNS. Finally, the internationally recognized government of Yemen also issued a statement condemning Moscow, voting in favor of the two General Assembly resolutions.

The only government to explicitly supported the Russian attack was the Syrian government. Syria is Moscow's main ally in the region, and among the five countries in the world to oppose the General Assembly resolution of March 2[5]. President Assad called the Russian military operation a "correction of history". In regard to Russia's supporters, besides the already mentioned Lebanese Hazbollah, also relevant non-state actors should be mentioned, such as the Yemeni Houthi – which on December 21 had already declared its support for the separatist republics – and the Iraqi PMF.

The neutral or ambiguous front is the most consistent. Starting from the Maghreb, Algeria is the country with the most ambiguous position, due to its historical ties with Moscow. On one hand, Algiers abstained and opposed, respectively, the already mentioned two condemnation resolutions of the General Assembly. On the other hand, Algerian authorities have received in recent weeks a visit from the US Secretary of State Blinken as well as the Italian Prime Minister, Draghi. Altogether, Algiers has refrained from condemning Russian actions, appealing to the principle of neutrality, a historical pillar of its foreign policy since its independence. Morocco has failed twice now to even participate in the UN votes in order to maintain a position of ambiguity. In official statements, Rabat has limited itself to declaring its concern. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Oman and Tunisia have also adopted a similar position. More intriguing, however, is the position of the UAE and Qatar. Abu Dhabi is the only non-permanent member that participated in the vote on the UNSC resolution, abstaining, while at the same time supporting the resolutions in the General Assembly[6]. The Emirati representative in the UNSC called for the parties to de-escalate and dialogue prior to the vote (Security Council, 2022b). Doha tried to present itself as a valid international mediator, as demonstrated by the visit of its foreign minister to Moscow on March 14, while also supporting the first General Assembly resolution condemning Russia.

Moving on to the economic level, none of the countries in the region have imposed economic sanctions towards Russia, unlike the Western countries. Israel is the only country that has declared its commitment to ensure that its territory is not to be used to bypass Western sanctions (Israel MFA, 2022b). If, from point of view of sanctions, there are no cases worthy of particular mention, it is on

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5 The other four are Belarus, North Korea, Eritrea and the Russian Federation.

6 The UAE's position is explained by several analysts as a move to put pressure on the United States; which had previously refused to support the designation of the Houthi as a terrorist organization rather than genuine support for Russia.

the energy sector that attention should be focused. First, there is the opposition of the members of the of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to accept the American request to increase their production quota in order to reduce the inflationary effects that the war is causing on energy prices – with oil reaching a record $130 per barrel on March 7[7]. OPEC+ decided to confirm the production quotas, initially decided in April 2020, on March 2 and 27, 2022 during the 26th and 27th ministerial meetings (OPEC, 2022a; OPEC 2022b). At this stage, countries such as Saudi Arabia, do not intend to call into question the agreement reached at the height of the pandemic with Moscow – through which an end was put to the "oil war" that had led to a collapse in prices and therefore to a loss for all producing countries in 2020. Only during the 28th meeting, on May 5, was it decided to increase slightly the production of 432,000 barrels per day (OPEC, 2022c).

In the beginning of March, President Biden had considered to go personally on a trip to the Gulf capitals; this course of action was subsequently discarded after Riyadh and Abu Dhabi refused to participate in a telephone conversation with him. The reluctant attitude of two historical partners of Washington, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, can be explained as an attempt to express their dissatisfaction with the Biden administration's Middle East policy, rather than as a clear strategic support towards Russia (Bianco, 2022). Among the open disputes it is worth mentioning the Houthi attacks against Saudi and Emirati territory when Washington, allegedly, did not respond adequately. The latest attack on the Saudi city of Jeddah in March 2022 prompted Riyadh to issue a harsh statement freeing itself from any responsibility with regard to future oil supply disruptions (Saudi MFA, 2022)[8]. Only in recent weeks Washington seems to have felt the need for greater openness towards these parties, as shown in the meeting between Blinken and Mohammed bin Salman in Rabat on March 29; in the US Treasury's decision to impose new sanctions on Iranian actors involved in the missile programme; in the mid-April launch of a new US-led multinational maritime task force in the Red Sea (U.S. Department of State, 2022; U. S. Treasury, 2022; US Naval Forces Central Command, 2022).

Nevertheless, with regard to the natural gas market, the response of the two other players should be highlighted: Qatar and Algeria. Doha is the world leading LNG exporter to which various countries, including Italy, have asked to increase supplies to the European market in order to replace Russian natural gas. It is uncertain whether Qatar is willing or able to respond positively, both for technical and political reasons: limited shares of LNG saved on the spot market and Russian political pressure. Putin has in fact sent a letter to the head of Qatar in February, inviting him not to adopt a defiant approach towards Moscow. A similar argument can be made for Algeria. Algiers is Russia's main partner in the Maghreb, with which it also has a fruitful military cooperation. On the other hand, however, the Algerian authorities seem to want to increase their commitment to the supply natural gas to Europe as demonstrated by the agreement signed on April 11 between Eni and Sonatrach during the Italian prime minister visit to the African country (Prime Minister's Office, 2022). Also for Algeria it is not clear to what extent Western countries will be able to rely on it. Confirming this ambiguous approach, Algeria hosted both the Russian Foreign Ministry and a NATO delegation in the time span of two days, May, 10 and 12.

In conclusion, on a military level no country in the region has openly supported Kiev by sending military aid and/or personnel. Israel was the only player in the region that Ukraine asked for military

[7] The states in question are: Algeria, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iraq, Kuwait and Libya. The only real *swing* producer, capable of rapidly increasing crude oil production, is Saudi Arabia.

[8] Other open dossiers between the US and its Gulf partners are the Vienna negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue and the issue of human rights abuses raised by Washington towards Arab capitals.

support[9]. Request that was declined by the Jewish state in order not to endanger its good relations with Moscow[10]. In recent weeks, Defense Minister Gantz has only authorized sending equipment for personal protection, such as helmets and bulletproof vests. On the opposite front, however, Syrian and Iraqi parties are supporting in various ways the Russian military campaign. In the beginning of March, for example, Putin announced the arrival of 16,000 Syrian fighters ready to join the Russian forces. In mid-April, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that 40,000 Syrian fighters were being deployed by Russia – although such figures should be taken with caution (SOHR, 2022)[11]. Finally, the Iraqi PMF reportedly provided military support to Moscow by sending RPGs, anti-tank missiles and two Brazilian-made Astros II rocket launcher systems (McKernan, 2022).

	Piano politico-diplomatico	**Piano economico e sanzionatorio**	**Piano militare**
ALGERIA			
ARABIA SAUDITA			
BAHRAIN			
EGITTO			
EAU			
GIORDANIA			
IRAQ			
ISRAELE			
KUWAIT			
LIBIA			
LIBANO			
MAROCCO			
OMAN			
QATAR			
SIRIA			
TUNISIA			
YEMEN			

Tab. 1 Positions of Mashreq and Maghreb countries on Ukraine war

9 In particular, on the occasion of President Herzog's visit to Kiev in October 2021, the Ukrainian authorities reportedly requested the delivery of the Iron Dome anti-missile system.

10 Thanks to a tacit agreement with Russia, which controls Syrian airspace, Israel can conduct air raids on targets in Syria.

11 Turkey's decision to close its airspace from the end of April to flights from Russia to Syria could reduce the influx of Syrian fighters into Ukraine.

Regional implications of the conflict

The negative implications of the conflict in Ukraine are impacting the Mashreq and Maghreb above all on an economic level. As far as this region is concerned, the main consequences are indicated in the food security field. On a global level, the FAO Food Price Index (FFPI), an index that measures the monthly price fluctuations in a basket of food commodities divided into five categories, rose by 17.9 percentage points in March 2022 compared to the previous month, reaching a record average figure of 159.2 points, the highest peak since 1990 – i.e. since this measurement has existed. In 2021, the FFPI stood at 125.7 points. Of the five categories of food commodities considered, particular attention should be paid to cereals, measured by the *FAO Cereal Price Index* (FCPI). This is driving an increase in prices that reached an average figure of 170.1 points, an increase of 24.9 points from the previous month (FAO, 2022). It should also be noted that due to the pandemic, 2020 was the first year in the past 15 years in which there was an increase in the number of undernourished people in the world: from 650.3 million to 768 million (FAO, 2021).

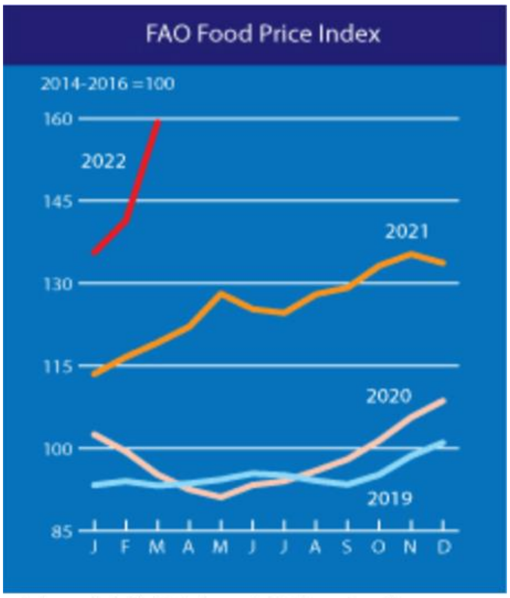

Fig. 1 FAO Food Price Index

Source: FAO

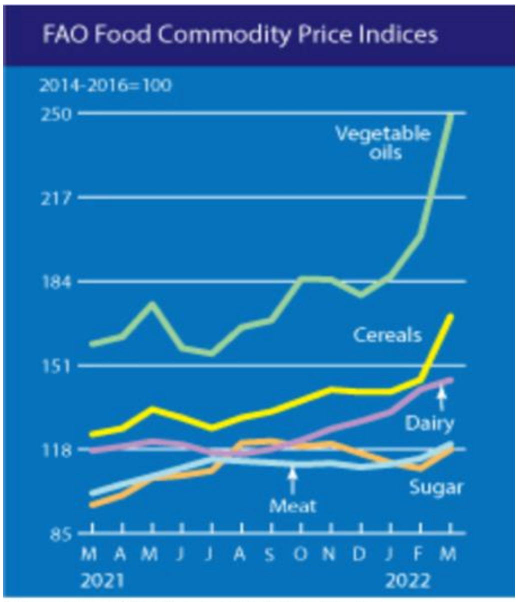

Fig. 2 FAO Cereal Price Index

Source: FAO

Moving down to a regional level, the most significant negative implications relate to the wheat trade. The Russian Federation and Ukraine alone account for 30% of global exports of this commodity (IMF, 2022). In particular, looking at the 2020 data, Moscow exported 19.5% of the world's wheat, ranking first worldwide. Kiev, with 8.97 %, represented the fifth largest exporter in the world. 32.1 % of Russian wheat was exported to Egypt, as well as 26.4 % of Ukrainian wheat. Among the top ten importers of Ukrainian wheat in 2020 were other countries in the region: Lebanon (fifth, 5.17 %), Morocco (seventh, 4.25 %) and Tunisia (eighth, 4.21 %) (OEC, 2022). Overall, the entire global market is exposed to supply disruptions caused by the conflict in Ukraine. More specifically, the Middle Eastern region is the most exposed on this front, both in quantitative terms – high dependence on Russian and Ukrainian wheat – and qualitative terms – the diet of the countries in the region is based, more than others, on wheat and its derivatives. Two types of problems may arise in this market, which are already becoming apparent. On one hand, there could be a technical interruption in supply resulting from the impossibility of production, harvesting and trade caused by the conflict. On the other hand, there could be a political disruption, which can be seen from the Russian side. Moscow has already shown evidence of how it intends to operate a "weaponization of food" as a coercive non-military tool to limit the possible accession of new actors in the international arena to the anti-Russian front. For example, it should be mentioned the statement uttered by Dimitrij Medvedev, vice-president of the Russian Security Council, in the beginning of April. Medvedev defined food as a “silent but threatening” weapon, while also declaring the Russian willingnes to export only to friendly countries (Gijs, 2022). Not to mention, since the beginning of May, Moscow has been taking possession of wheat shipments coming from the occupied Ukrainian territories, redirecting the flow towards Russian territory.

Diverting to the analysis of importing countries, Egypt is the country of greatest concern. Cairo is the world's largest wheat importer, accounting for 10 % of global imports in 2020, worth $ 5.2 billion. 62.1 % of its import come from Russia and 23.5 % from Ukraine (OEC, 2022). Not only does Egypt import for domestic reasons, but it is also a secondary exporter throughout the region. It is to be highlighted how the Ministry of Trade and Industry made the decision to halt the export of key food items for three months to deal with possible disruptions in supply chains (Al-Khady, 2022). Egyptian authorities have also imposed a state maximum on prices to limit inflation on food commodities (Dawoud, 2022) in addition to the desire to diversify their imports and to increase domestic wheat production. Another measure aimed at mitigating the economic crisis is the request for a new loan from the International Monetary Fund, outside of the $ 22 billion in deposits at its central bank from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar (Liga, 2022).

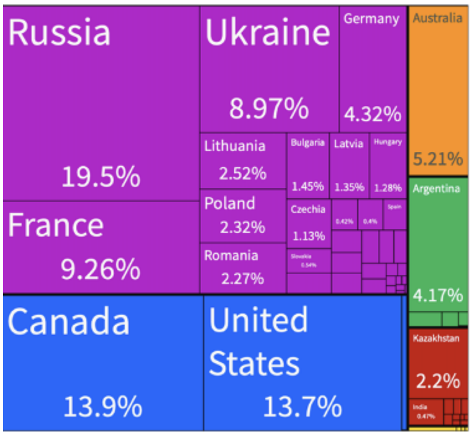

Fig. 3 Exporters of Wheat in the world % (2020)

Source: OEC

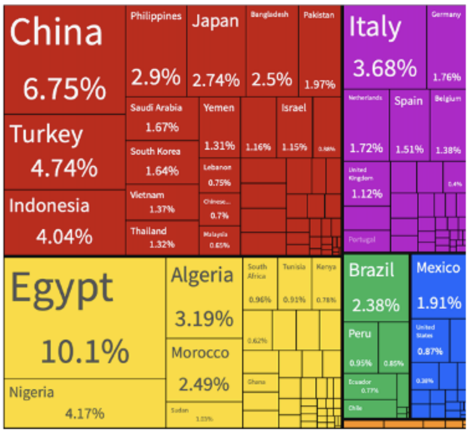

Fig. 4 Importers of Wheat in the world % (2020)

Source: OEC

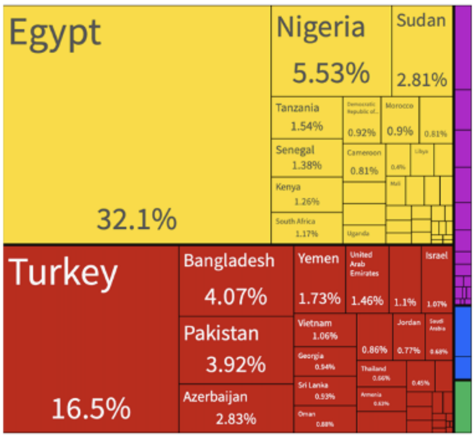

Fig. 5 Importers of Wheat from Russia % (2020)

Source: OEC

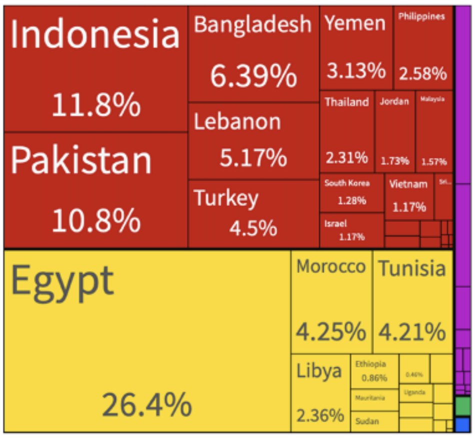

Fig. 6 Importers of Wheat from Ukraine % (2020)

Source: OEC

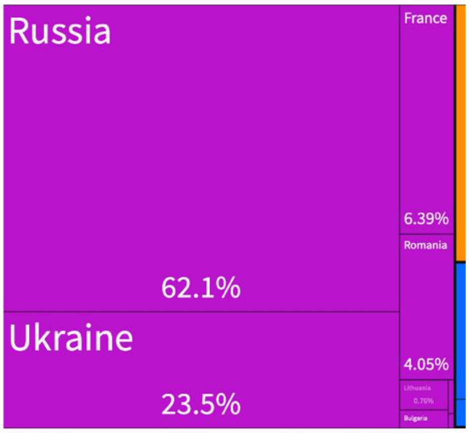

Fig.7 Exporters of Wheat to Egypt % (2020)
Source: OEC

Two other countries that should be carefully monitored are Tunisia and Lebanon. The situation in Ukraine is deteriorating the already existing structural political, social and economic problems. Tunisia imports 41% of its wheat from Ukraine and 5.14% from Russia. Unlike Egypt, it has a very limited quantity of stored wheat, estimated at three months autonomy. With the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, the Tunisian authorities have imposed a rationing in the purchase of flour to 3 kg per customer – a measure which comes from a long-standing policy of capping food prices (Poletti, 2022). Lebanon, for its part, is going through what the World Bank has called «one of the three biggest economic crises since the mid-19th century» (World Bank, 2021). Beirut imports 61.5 % of its wheat from Ukraine and 14 % from Russia. In addition to that, Beirut demonstrated itself unable to adequately respond to the negative consequences resulting from the explosion occurred in the port of Beirut on August 4 2020, which destroyed the silo storing the wheat, which the Lebanese government has decided to permanently demolish in April 2021.

On the political-security front, there are no direct consequences at the moment, although, in the medium term, we could see an increased instability in crisis scenarios where Russia, since 2015, has been militarily involved, like Syria and Libya. In Syria, the de facto victory of the Moscow-backed Assad regime limits Russia's ability to maneuver in order to destabilize its Western enemies. On the contrary, the Libyan situation is more delicate. Although the military ceasefire reached in August 2020 holds for the moment – after the failure of the military campaign of the Libyan National Army led by Moscow ally Khalifa Haftar towards Tripolitania – an increase in political polarization is being witnessed as of February 2022, with the birth of the GNS voted by the Tobruk parliament in opposition of the Tripoli-based GNU. Therefore, it is not to be excluded that, in the face of prolonged hostilities in Ukraine, Moscow may attempt to relieve pressure on that front by attempting to create an interconnection with secondary conflict, like Libya.

Assessments and future scenarios

On the regional level, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has confirmed, if not strengthened, a long-term trend, represented by the weakening of Western leverage and persuasive capacity vis-à-vis the Mashreq and Maghreb countries. This trend is directly linked to the hegemonic retreat from this region undertaken by Washington, i.e. the hegemonic power of the international liberal order, starting from the Arab Springs of 2011, to focus its attention on the hegemonic challenge of the People's Republic of China. This void has not been filled by European countries, but by a growing Russian and Chinese penetration. For their part, the main regional players, perceiving a decrease in the role of the United States as guarantor of their security, are reorienting their foreign and defense policies to adapt themselves to the rising multipolar regional order. This behavior can be traced back to the strategy of the so-called strategic hedging, which can be summarized as an international position that can be adopted by the medium/small powers. This behavior is both cooperative and competitive with every global power, in order to exploit, as much as possible, the renewed great power competition. The litmus test of this increasingly unstable relationship between regional players and the Euro-Atlantic bloc is firstly represented by the absence of real support for Ukraine in the ongoing conflict; And secondly, as mentioned previously, by the unwillingness to meet the demand of greater cooperation from Washington in the energetic field. In the long run, this trend is bound to increase if not properly addressed.

Internally, in the medium term the deteriorating economic consequences presented above could turn into an increase in social and political instability with local peculiarities in each country. Putting together the contingent crisis triggered by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the context of structural instability that characterizes the countries in the region, the internal situation of the following countries will have to be carefully monitored in the coming months: Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Tunisia. Overall, the predictable scenario is that of a new "hot autumn" along the lines of the protests that shook some of the countries mentioned in 2019. In Iraq, after the political elections of October 2021, a phase of political-institutional crisis was opened resulting in the inability of the parties sitting in parliament to form a new government and elect a new president of the Republic. In Tunisia, since July 25, 2021, president Saied dismissed the government, suspended and then dissolved the parliament. A new constitutional referendum should be held on July 25. With the legislative elections in mid-May, there could also be an increase in political tensions in Lebanon. Finally, although less likely at the moment, in the long term, Egypt could become the "new great fragile" should there be no cessation of hostilities in Europe; in a scenario of internal instability not seen since 2013, when President al-Sisi took power.

A final level of analysis to be observed is the transnational one. In this regard, the growing regional instability could cause a sudden increase in migration flows to Europe, as it has not happened since the pre-pandemic era. Since the 2015 migration crisis, migratory flows in the three main Mediterranean routes – Western Mediterranean, Central Mediterranean, Anatolian-Balkan route – have undergone a process of "weaponization". The intensity and seasonality of the movements depend not only on structural factors but also on the willingness of individual political actors to exploit them as a tool of non-military coercion against the European countries. The most recent example is that of the Spanish-Moroccan crisis of May 2021. At the news of the medical treatment received in Madrid by Brahim Ghali, leader of the Polisario Front, Rabat responded by facilitating a mass migration towards Spanish territories. An eventual increase in migratory pressure in the Mediterranean could affect especially the central Mediterranean route and therefore Italy as the country of arrival. In fact, at this stage, Turkey – a transit country that regulates the Anatolian-Balkan flow – has embarked on a path of dialogue with its neighbors after the tensions of the summer of 2020[12]. In mid-March 2022, on the other hand, Spanish Prime Minister Sanchez sent a letter to the Moroccan King, Mohammed VI, initiating a new season of bilateral cooperation to end last year's crisis. Therefore, in both cases, it is currently unlikely but not to be excluded, that there will be a coercive use of the migration instrument, as seen in the past.

[12] Since the Turkish intervention in Libya in January 2020, Ankara controls part of the coastline of Tripolitania. Thus, even in the central Mediterranean route, Turkey plays a crucial role.

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Federico Donelli

Ethiopia's unilateral approach to the Nile dispute, Metekel's risks, and the mounting fears of Egypt and Sudan

While most of the international spotlight has been on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, some disputes on the African continent are going through a delicate phase. The decades-long controversy over water management of the Nile River is among the outstanding issues that threaten to generate instability. This February, with several senior officials, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed started the first 375 MW turbine of the Great Blue Nile Dam (Abay river for Ethiopians), known as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The startup of the facility, albeit partial, was a further step toward finalizing the megastructure by increasing the fears of Sudan and Egypt. For the past two years, Addis Ababa has leveraged its geographical position as an upstream country to impose its agenda on the issue. Ethiopia has adopted a unilateral approach that ignores Sudanese Egyptian requests for preemptive agreement on the GERD basin-filling phases. Addis Ababa intends to complete the hydroelectric project as soon as possible. However, if completed too soon, Egypt and Sudan consider the Ethiopian plan an existential threat. An excessive reduction in the Nile River's flow will generate an economic and social emergency in the two downstream countries. Consequently, the stability of the entire Egyptian-Sudanese country system will be in jeopardy.

1. The dispute's root causes

The Nile issue has its roots in the British colonial period. However, during the Nasser era, it took on greater security significance with the construction of the Aswan Dam in 1970. Over time, the management of water resources of the Nile River Basin has generated a sharp polarization between upstream and downstream countries. The two downstream countries - Sudan and Egypt - treat the exploitation of the Nile's waters as a national security issue. The river plays a vital role in the economic and social life of the two countries. The heavy use of the Nile's waters enables Egypt and Sudan to meet their urban, demographic, and farming needs. For decades, Egypt, which depends on the Nile for more than 90 percent of its water needs, has defended the historic rights ratified by the 1929 agreement and confirmed by a subsequent bilateral treaty with Khartoum (1959). The '59 treaty considered only the needs of the two downstream countries while ignoring the needs and rights of those upstream. According to the Khartoum Treaty terms, the total annual flow of the Nile River - estimated at 84 billion cubic meters of water - has to be shared only between Egypt and Sudan. The former gets 55.5 billion cubic meters of water (66 percent) while the latter is due 18.5 billion cubic meters (22 percent). The remaining 10 billion cubic meters are the evaporation share (12 percent). Moreover, the agreement stated that the two downstream states would share any excess water equally. Egypt and Sudan believed that the Upper Nile states did not need the river water for irrigation because they could meet their water needs solely through annual rainfall (green water). Finally, the treaty gave Egypt and Sudan the veto power over any infrastructure project on the Nile or its tributaries that altered the river's course or flow.

The upstream riparian states have always considered themselves unbound by agreements they were not signatories. Around the turn of the new millennium, the status quo came into crisis due to the development processes undertaken by several of the seven upstream countries. Among them, Ethiopia had developed intense feelings of injustice. Its geographic location gave the country a greater centrality than all the other riparian states. The various tributaries rising from the Ethiopian highlands, including the Blue Nile, supply more than 80 percent of the Nile River's water. In the mid-1990s, thanks to post-Derg domestic political stability and economic growth, Ethiopia began to challenge Egyptian dominance over the waters of the Nile. Over the years, diplomatic initiatives promoted by several upstream riparian states attempted to establish a more cooperative and fair framework in Nile water exploitation. The efforts led to the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI). The ten riparian states agreed on the need to review water management policies in the Nile River Basin. Although Egypt and Sudan were initially reluctant to accept a cooperative path, they agreed to establish an interim organization (NBI). Their membership in the NBI de facto recognized the legitimate claims of upstream states for more equitable and shared use of the Nile. However, it was evident that Egypt and Sudan were going to condition any agreement upon recognition by the other riparian states of their "historical rights." That attitude halted any further development.

2. Ethiopian unilateral approach and Egyptian responses.

The dispute entered a new phase in 2009 with Ethiopia's decision to promote the construction of the GERD. The project includes a series of dams and reservoirs that can hold up to 74 billion cubic meters of water on the Blue Nile. The GERD, commissioned in 2011 by Italian company Salini-Impregilo (now Webuild), is part of a larger hydropower investment plan expected to become fully operative in 2025. The Ethiopian goal is to supply the industrial sector and provide essential services to the population through the widespread deployment of the electricity grid in the country. Despite economic growth rates, much of Ethiopia's population (more than 50 percent) currently lacks access to electricity. So, the GERD plays a crucial role in the modernization and development process of the country.

Four years after the work began, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt launched a series of negotiations that resulted in the so-called Khartoum Declaration. The agreement, also known as the Declaration of Principles, represented the relaunch of the negotiation process for a new comprehensive agreement that would include all the countries of the Nile Basin. In Khartoum, Sudan and Egypt recognized GERD and the value of the Nile River for all riparian states. Therefore, the declaration enshrined the acceptance by the two downstream countries of the basic principle of the fair and reasonable use of water. The main shortfall is that the Khartoum declaration does not reference historical rights, which Egypt and Sudan have repeatedly stated they will not give up. Since then, the quarrel shifted from the dam to the timing of its filling. In other words, nowadays, the contested issue is the timetable for the complete filling of the GERD basin. Egypt and Sudan demand that the dam basin filling take place over a longer time frame than Addis Ababa has planned. The two downstream countries need time to implement policies that can cope with the consequences caused by the decrease in Nile flowIn July 2020, the Ethiopian government started the first filling phase launching its unilateral approach. Ethiopia enjoys enough water to carry out the operation only during the rainy season between late June and early August. For this reason, in the following July (2021), Addis Ababa chose to proceed with the second phase of filling regardless of the worsening of Tigray's crisis and international pressure. Over the past two years, Egypt and Sudan have reacted to Ethiopia's unilateral policy by following a double track. On the one hand, they have further strengthened their bilateral ties, especially on security topics. On the other hand, both countries have promoted diplomatic efforts to internationalize the Nile dispute. The two aim to reopen the tripartite talks by involving many international actors. Egypt and Sudan appeal to one of the principles contained in the Khartoum Declaration, according to which mediation should be conducted not by a single actor but by the so-called quartet: the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), European Union (EU) and the United States. The domestic political instability has not allowed Sudan to focus many resources on the GERD issue during the last year. Instead, Egypt has launched a series of initiatives to shift the political balance of power along the Nile River Basin. Cairo's diplomatic activism has focused on upstream riparian countries through political persuasion and commercial pragmatism. Egypt has leveraged widespread disapproval of Abiy Ahmed's fait accompli policy to re-energize bilateral relations with several regional countries. Egyptian diplomatic visits involved investment and cooperation packages in various sectors, including energy and infrastructure. Egypt has started constructing significant projects, such as the Stiegler's Gorge dam and the Julius Nyerere hydroelectric station in Tanzania. The Egyptian purpose is twofold. First, Cairo wants to show riparian states that the two downstream countries recognize their concerns and rights regarding access to water resources. Second, Egypt's long-term intent is to develop a regional power generation network to create an alternative to GERD. Cairo aims to reduce the political benefits that Ethiopia will gain from selling cheap electricity. Egypt, therefore, looks beyond the revival of tripartite negotiations and aims to restore centrality to the regional water resources issue from a broader perspective. The Egyptian goal is to reopen the negotiations promoted within the NBI framework to find a fair and shared solution among all riparian states. Although some countries (Kenya, Eritrea, Uganda) are skeptical about Egypt's real intentions, President al-Sisi's diplomatic efforts have led other upstream countries to soften their positions toward the Egypt-Sudan duo. Burundi, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have recognized the arguments of the two downstream countries. These countries believe that future talks should be based on a fair balance between the right to development (of the upstream countries) and the right to security (of the downstream countries). However, many doubts remain about the willingness of Egypt and Sudan to reconsider their positions on so-called vested rights.

3. Analysis, evaluation and forecasts

As outlined, the crux of the dispute today is the rate at which Ethiopia intends to fill the dam basin. Ethiopian inflexibility makes the dispute complicated and dangerous for regional stability. After the last break (April 2021), Addis Ababa is unwilling to reopen negotiations with Sudan and Egypt. Officially, two reasons led Ethiopia to abort negotiations and, so far, determined Ethiopia's immovability. The first motivation concerns the mediator. According to Addis Ababa, the only actor considered truly neutral is the African Union. While not excluding the involvement of extra-regional actors considered reliable, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and China, Ethiopia considers it essential to give centrality to the continental organization over which it enjoys much influence. The second reason relates to the agreement to be signed among the three countries on managing the Nile waters. Egypt and Sudan would like to draw a single agreement addressing the basin's filling operations (timing, compensation) and the shared management of water resources and any future disputes. By contrast, the Ethiopian government does not want to conclude any comprehensive agreement because too constraining. According to Ethiopian delegates, Addis Ababa is willing to negotiate the issue of filling operations separately, postponing any discussion of shared management. However, the reasons given by Ethiopia appear to be pretexts used to justify the decision to stop negotiations and proceed unilaterally. There are several factors behind Ethiopia's decision to adopt a unilateral approach. Most of these stem from the numerous domestic political changes and the reconfiguration of regional balances. The first group of factors can be ascribed to how the Ethiopian public perceives and experiences the GERD project. According to Ethiopians, the implementation of the dam will break the chains that have prevented the country from fulfilling its potential for more than a century. The name "Renaissance" aims to symbolize the rebirth of the Ethiopian people, called to reclaim their place in history. The dam is a matter of national and African pride. For this reason, the project transcends all political, ethnic, and religious differences. The Prime Minister is well aware of the emotional weight of GERD on the Ethiopians. Since 2018, the mega-project has proved functional to the prime minister's rhetoric by fueling pan-Ethiopian national sentiment. Since 2018, the mega-project has proved functional to the prime minister's rhetoric by fueling pan-Ethiopian national sentiment. The dam plays a central role in the political agenda of the Prosperity Party (PP). The PP aims to restore supra-Ethiopian national pride and project Ethiopia into a future of development and prosperity. Thus, the issue has gained prominence in the Ethiopian executive's propaganda thanks to the involvement of intellectuals, academics, and artists. The second group of factors draws on Ethiopia's political-strategic dimension at the continental level. The changes affecting Africa's political balances are intertwined with the pan-African projection of Ethiopia and its current leader Abiy Ahmed. GERD has a symbolic projection that transcends national and regional boundaries. Media close to the Prime Minister emphasized the project's uniqueness, presenting it as a landmark of Pan-Africanism. The dam appears as the cornerstone for the rise of Ethiopia and the whole continent. The dam's benefits to African countries are being matched as a new post-colonial development phase. For this reason, too, the narrative promoted around the GERD issue evokes key episodes in Ethiopian history and African resistance to outside influence and conquest. Widespread rhetoric in Ethiopia compares GERD to a modern Adwa, one of the earliest symbols of Pan-Africanism. Then, behind Ethiopia's unilateral approach lies a component determined by African power relations. In Abiy Ahmed's vision, the dam is a pillar for the country's rise to the role of regional power. The project will transform Ethiopia into an exporter state of energy, allowing it to satisfy the growing demand from neighboring countries. As a result, the startup of all fourteen turbines will increase Ethiopia's leverage over many African countries. The regional energy policy and its political balance will change. The GERD realization will increase Addis Ababa's relative power, allowing it to challenge Egypt's leadership role. The Nile waters dispute has thus become the crux of regional power politics and particularly of the Ethiopian-Egyptian rivalry that goes far beyond the GERD issue. For this reason, too, Abiy Ahmed, compared to the old executive led by Meles Zenawi and the Tigrayan political elites of the TPLF, is much less willing to compromise. Accordingly, the Ethiopian government does not consider it viable to leave the unilateral approach and the policy of fait accompli.

The effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine will further exacerbate the uncertainty and concern in many countries. The dispute over the exploitation of Nile waters is part of an acute water emergency that affects all countries in the region. In some of these, such as Sudan and Egypt, the rising price of fuel and wheat risks feeding social discontent by generating further instability. Within this context, Addis Ababa's decision to start the third phase of filling the GERD basin next July may be the point of no return. Without the international community's intervention that persuades Abiy Ahmed to abandon the unilateral approach, Sudan and Egypt will be forced to reconsider all options on the table. The military option, occasionally threatened by several Egyptian officials, is not excluded. However, an armed intervention or raid on the dam site appears highly unlikely. Likewise, it cannot be ruled out that some low-intensity clashes between the Sudanese army and Ethiopian troops may occur in the disputed area of al-Fashaqa (Donelli 2022). Much more likely, Sudan and Egypt are likely to agree to intensify support for non-state armed actors active on the Ethiopian soil. Over the past two years, rumors of alleged support for Tigrayan forces provided by the two countries have increased. While these can be reduced as the product of Ethiopian propaganda, there are several evidences of the relations established by Sudan and Egypt with other groups operating in some of the country's regional states. Among them are also some groups operating in the regional state that hosts the GERD site: Benishangul-Gumuz. Since 2019, a little-known conflict has been ongoing in Metekel province, just a few kilometers from the dam site and the border with Sudan. Several ethnic Gumuz anti-government militias-including the Gumuz Liberation Front (GLF)-claim greater autonomy. The armed groups are countering with violence the political hegemony of the ruling party (PP) and its supporting ethnic groups (Amhara and Oromo). At the root of the conflict lies the historical dispute over some fertile land in the region. Indigenous groups (mostly ethnic Gumuz) accuse Oromo and Amhara farmers of forcibly taking over land that local communities have always cultivated. Further, Gumuz groups blame federal institutions for connivance. The first incidents of violence escalated into an armed insurgency in 2019 when Gumuz groups organized into several militias. Since then, insurgent groups have been conducting regular attacks against the Amhara and Oromo farming communities and representatives of public institutions. The federal government has been unable to restore full authority over the areas affected by the insurgency or reach a political solution to the dispute. The deployment of many battalions belonging to several regional Ethiopian states-Amhara, Gambela and Sidama-along with the federal ENDF army has exacerbated tensions. Furthermore, following the recent temporary truce in Tigray, some Fano militias- the Amhara paramilitary group- have begun violent raids in Metekel province. As a result, security in the region has rapidly declined, threatening the many workers involved in the construction of GERD. In March, Gumuz militias attacked a bus on its way to the dam causing at least 20 deaths. Along with the threat to dam construction operations, Ethiopian authorities fear an escalation of violence and the indirect involvement of Sudan and Egypt. Over the last three years, Gumuz militias have received financial support and military equipment from the two downstream countries. Therefore, the Metekel dispute can thus become the proxy battleground between Ethiopia and the two rivals in the GERD issue in the upcoming months.

The picture is thus constantly evolving. The outbreak of any conflict, even by proxy, and a sudden decrease in water resources will generate instability in a highly fragile and interconnected area where more than 250 million people live. The main concern for Italian and European security interests comes from the spread of armed groups and increased migration flows. At the same time, widespread violence in the area surrounding the dam site could pose a threat to the WeBuild company's work. Further, Russia's attack on Ukraine has obliged the United States and the European Union to divert their attention and resources away from Africa. However, a few extra-regional players interested in ensuring stability in the region are emerging. They have been working underground on the GERD dossier: China, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia.

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Southern Asia geopolitical turmoil after the first phase of war

India

In the early stages of the conflict, the New Delhi government had shown on the international scene that it was focusing exclusively on the repatriation of compatriots from Ukraine without any condemnation of the Russian action. On the other hand, the choice also had internal reasons (related to the elections of some legislative Assemblies). In all likelihood, the position of India will have to be defined more clearly, consequently to the bilateral meeting with the United States held at the beginning of April and in consideration of the economic seatback to which the country is subject. New Delhi in December 2021, during the 21st summit meeting of the two countries, had concluded a series of solid cooperation agreements with the government of Vladimir Putin. Among the 28 documents and memoranda were included a cooperation in the procurement of crude oil between Rosneft and Indian Oil Corp. Limited, an agreement for the implementation of security systems of banks and credit institutions, an agreement for cooperation aerospace and the protection of related technologies and of course a military agreement.

The persistence of the conflict over time has brought to light the economic repercussions that New Delhi is undergoing, especially commercial ones. First of all, some products essential to Indian agriculture, such as fertilizers, were sourced largely from the war zone. For a country like India, in which agriculture represents a very important part of the economy[1] the supply of this type of products is of seminal importance in the medium term.

In addition to the shortage of goods related to agricultural production and as a direct consequence in India, primary sector products have begun to become more and more scarce, bringing the country to the edge of a crisis. The government has begun to face the dilemma of rationing or not agricultural products for export abroad, causing, with a domino effect, a worsening of the regional crises already underway for endemic reasons such as that of Sri Lanka.

Unrest in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is facing one of the worst crises in its history from a political and social point of view. The riots that broke out on the island starting from March could lead to a level of internal conflict comparable to that of the civil war, which lasted from 1983 to 2009. The episodes of violence are not yet, fortunately, comparable to a real armed conflict, like that between the country's army and the Tamil Tigers, but during the month of April and May they reached a dangerous intensity, with some dead and several wounded (Ellis-Petersen, 2022). Due to the riots, which spread throughout the territory, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajpaksa was forced to resign on 9 May and his brother, President Gotabaya Rajpaksa appointed Ranil Wickremesinghe to try to put a stop to the protests mounted also against the Rajpaksa family and the elites connected and connected to it. The riots, which are becoming more and more violent, are in fact transversal and, according to the statements of many of the interested parties, aim to remove the Rajpaksa (accused of corruption and nepotism) from the decision-making level of the country.

The situation was triggered by the increase in inflation and the concomitant crisis in Ukraine, conditions which grafted on to a heavy endemic situation of economic weakness. By December, inflation had hit a whopping 12.1% rate and food prices have started to skyrocket. January and February were then decisive, as recognized by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka: in January the

[1] Just think that the primary sector employs about 60% of the active Indian population and consider the importance that agrarian reforms have had in the last phase of Indian domestic politics.

general price increase index jumped to 14.17% and in February to 15.10%. In March, albeit with rough estimates, given that the situation was now out of control, there was talk of over 20%. The political management of the Rajpaksa - a family of four brothers who shared important but gloomy moments in the country's history, such as the tragic repression at the end of the civil war - has been firmly in power in the country since 2019 and has not been able to give a correct direction to the economic policy set up by Colombo. Unfortunately, in addition to the endemic weakness of the economy, the crisis was caused by some rash choices, committed to support the electoral promises but also by the inability to exploit large-scale Foreign Direct Investments such as those of Beijing.

The ASEAN, still on the edge

At the same time, Southeast Asia, at least in the first days of April, seemed to be aligned against Russia, including through condemnation of the atrocities that the Moscow military seem to have committed. After a previous ceasefire request, with a statement dated April 8[2], the foreign ministers of the member states strongly condemned the events of Bucha and called for the re-establishment of peace in Ukraine. On the other hand, the clarifying position is important in the field of international law, since only two members of the association, the Philippines and Myanmar, had voted for the suspension of the Russian Federation from the United Nations Human Rights Council. The suspension from this body is also an act of weight of international law as this measure had previously been taken only against Gaddafi's Libya, in 2011, when the Libyan dictator had used unscrupulous violence in the suppression of revolts. The news of the general condemnation by ASEAN, at least of the violation of human rights by the Russian side, however, does not come in many ways unexpected, since already some countries individually, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, had more or less covertly condemned Russia. Furthermore, the multilateral general act has benefited countries like Vietnam and Myanmar, unwilling to condemn Russian aggression directly, for reasons of political (Myanmar) and economic (Vietnam) expediency.

With the prosecution of the conflict in Ukraine, the biggest economic difficulties are actually occurring in Laos, particularly affected by the shortage of petroleum derivatives (Strangio, 2022) and in Myanmar, which is struggling to engage a credible economic recovery also due to the effects of the war. The effect of economic imbalance, in this case too, concern already the countries in weaker economic contingencies.

Conclusion

The war, with its principal indirect effects, both economic and socio-economic, therefore began to severely hit the economies of the area, starting in particular from the weakest countries most linked to primary sector production. In this critical panorama, in addition to a further weakening of some countries, diplomatic attempts could occur to undermine some geopolitical balances already in place for reasons of mere opportunism and *Realpolitik*. An example is the interest shown by India in the internal crisis of Sri Lanka, probably to bring the country closer and away from the Chinese influence.

2 ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on The Reported Killing of Civilians in Ukraine, (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022)

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The role of Orthodox Churches in the Ukrainian crisis

Introduction

The close Russian-Ukrainian relations are reflected on not only a linguistic-cultural level, but they are also prominent in the variegated and complex religious mosaic shaped over the centuries and, constantly strongly penetrated by exogenous and endogenous political interference. In the last years and in particular since the country became independent, the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – embodied by the Kiev Patriarchate – has represented one of the points of arrival of the Ukrainian political and ecclesiastical authorities but has also deepened the contrast with Moscow that never recognized the newborn independent Church.

The crisis in ecclesiastical relations began in the early 90s and it worsen with the annexation of Crimea and the 2018 schism. It saw the involvement of the respective political authorities, if on the one hand the Moscow government supported - and supports - the Moscow patriarchate, this reciprocates this support through a sharing of values that embraces the Eastern Slavic world[1], part of the "*Russkiy Mir*"[2], citing strong moral reasons for government choices. At the same time, the Ukrainian authorities also supported the push of the Ukrainian church towards independence and the creation of an autocephalous patriarchate of Kiev, strongly desired by the then president Petro Poroshenko[3]. In promising the faithful of the Russian Church that it would not be applied no variation of an administrative nature, he did not mention the anti-ecclesiastical bills n. 4128 and n. 5309[4], whose implementation authorized the expropriation of places of worship from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

The role of the confessions is therefore instrumental in the current geopolitical framework. Meaningful, in this sense, is the long speech[5] given of 21 February by Russian President Vladimir Putin in the premise of the so-called *spetzoperaciya* (special operation) in Ukraine. In addition to the reference to a common denomination "Russian and Orthodox" of the inhabitants of the south-eastern lands of ancient Russia, Putin speaks of "*reprisals prepared by Kiev against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate [...] testified by decisions and documents*.", blaming the Ukrainian authorities of having transformed the tragedy of the ecclesiastical schism (2018) into an instrument of state policy, to not respond to the demands of Ukrainian citizens by repealing laws that violate the rights of believers, and to enact new bills directed against the clergy and against millions of faithful of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. The bill "*On the banning of the Moscow Patriarchate on the territory of Ukraine*"[6] presented to the Verhovna Rada by the deputy Oksana Savchuk (Svoboda) after the start of the conflict (March 26, 2022) also goes in such direction. In this context, it is therefore important to go back to the historical roots of the formation of Eastern Slavic (Russian) Christianity in order to subsequently understand the current situation and the reasons of a

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1 Following the established definition, Slavic culture and language nations can be divided in western, southern and eastern; part of this latter category are Russia, Belarus and Ukraine (Conte F., Gli Slavi pp. 81-83).

2 Literally, "the Russian world". The word "*mir*" has the double meaning of "world" and "peace". Briefly, the idea of *Russkij Mir* refers to an ethnic, religious, historical, cultural and linguistic community of Eastern slavia.

3 In his speech, the former Ukrainian president defined the independence of the Ukrainian church and the reception of Tomos as *"[...] a great victory of the God-loving Ukrainian people over the demons of Moscow, the victory of good over evil, of light over darkness." Poroshenko: Poluchenie avtokefalii - pobeda Ukrainy nad Moskovskimi demonami.* UKRINFORM, 14.10.2018 (last access 10.05.2022) https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-society/2558421-porosenko-polucenie-avtokefalii-pobeda-ukrainy-nad-moskovskimi-demonami.html

4 *Verchovnaja Rada objazala UPC MP izmenit' svoe nazvanie,* Golos Ukraïni, Gazeta Verchovnoï Radi Ukraïni, 21.12.2018 (last access 10.05.2022) http://www.golos.com.ua/rus/article/311647

5 *Obraščenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii*, official web page of the President of Russian Federation, February 21, 2022 (last access 10.05.2022) http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828

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conflict that extends far beyond the military and political sphere, acquiring an almost all-encompassing character.

1. The roots of orthodoxy

The lands that today are part of Ukraine are historically linked to the tradition of Eastern Christianity which is reflected by the current confessional distribution on the territory, albeit with strong Catholic influences (mainly in the regions bordering Poland - see Table 1), in fact , over the centuries the "*U-krayina*" region - literally "on the border / frontier / mark" - has played a bridging role between the Byzantine world and Western thought and religion.

Christianity was adopted in 988 AD, when Prince Vladimir I the Great of Kiev (called "the Saint") was baptized by the patriarch of Constantinople, thus marking the entry into the sphere of influence of Byzantine Christianity and becoming a new ecclesiastical province under the jurisdiction of the patriarchate of Constantinople where the Ruthenian church remained even after the Eastern Schism (1054). Following the Mongol invasions of the 13th century and the destruction of Kiev, Metropolitan Maxim moved the seat to Vladimir'(1299) and, subsequently, to Moscow where it was declared an autocephalous church (1448). In 1589 Patriarch Hiob proclaimed himself Patriarch of all Rus', appropriating, in a certain way, the idea of the "Third Rome" heir of the fallen Eastern Roman Empire, which for centuries would have marked the messianic role of Russia.

As mentions Riasanovsky (1990, p.185), Ukraine after 1569 found itself under Polish rather than Lithuanian control (within the Polish-Lithuanian Confederation), which resulted in a growing influence of the Polish social order, as well as pressure exerted by Catholicism on orthodox Ukrainians (then Western Russians). When the Union of Brest was signed in 1596, and the Uniate or Ruthenian church (linked to Rome but of Byzantine rite) was established, the religious question became more complicated. The Orthodox community split in two, although, in reality, most of the Orthodox bishops of the Polish state were in favor of the union, such was by no means the majority of the Orthodox population. Thus there were two competing churches: the Uniate one, supported by the government, and the Orthodox one, persecuted by the authorities but supported by the masses. With the end of the Polish-Lithuanian Confederation divided between Prussia, Austria and Russia (1772, 1793 and 1795), the Uniate Church found itself on the territory of the Russian empire, where it was banned and the parishes incorporated into the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire where it enjoyed of greater autonomy. Thus, at the time when national identities emerged (the nineteenth-century "Spring of Peoples") – it became the cradle of the Ukrainian national movement in eastern Galicia and benefited from the protection of the successive Uniate Metropolitans of Lviv. After the end of the Second World War and the incorporation of all Ukrainian lands into the USSR, in 1946 the Uniate Church was again liquidated and, like other denominations, persecuted. The emigrants gave birth to the diaspora, which developed mainly in the United States and Canada. During the final stages of the USSR, in 1989 the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church emerged from the clandestinely it had been forced to by Stalin in 1946 and, in 1990, after meeting with John Paul II, it was legalized by Gorbachev.

The tradition of the **autonomous Orthodox metropolis of Kiev**, which had developed since the baptism of Russia, was interrupted in 1686, when this metropolis, until then under the Patriarchate of Constantinople, was subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate. The Tsarist policy of the Orthodox Church served to the "Muscovization" of Ukrainian lands. The liturgical differences between the metropolis of Kiev and the other eparchies of the Russian Orthodox Church were gradually eliminated and the rite was unified according to the Moscow model, also losing both administrative autonomy and cultural specificity.

During Ukraine's struggle for independence after World War I, the Pan-Ukrainian Orthodox Council in October 1921 declared the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, initially supported by the Soviet authorities, but dissolved in January 1930. Two years later, the last independent parish was closed. The head of the Church, Metropolitan Basil, was arrested by the NKVD in 1937, sentenced to death and shot, the whole Church was incorporated into the Moscow Patriarchate.

The attainment of the independence of Ukraine in 1991 started the path towards independence from Moscow. In 1992, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate was formed but was not recognized by other Orthodox churches, a small Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church was also founded. The coexistence of the three Orthodox communities in the 1990s was characterized by tensions and episodes of violence, which reverberated on the same Catholic-Orthodox theological dialogue, with a long setback until 2006. However, the Ukrainian Church's autocephaly knot around which the problems of contemporary orthodoxy tightened. Thus in 2016 the pan-Orthodox council of Crete was unable to address the problem of which Church had the right to grant autocephaly to another. Four of the major Orthodox Churches (Moscow, Antioch, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Church of Georgia) deserted the assembly of Crete, leaving the canonical problem of granting autocephaly unsolved and the schism of the Ukrainian Church open. On December 15, 2018, in the historic council of the Wisdom of God (Sophia), a council of reunification was held in Kiev in the presence of two exarchs appointed by the ecumenical patriarch, with the participation of the president of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko. Two Ukrainian Churches (previously non-canonical) merged to form the Unified Orthodox Church of Ukraine[7]. On January 6, 2019, this church received autocephaly from the Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew and was greeted by Poroshenko as a new "Baptism of Rus'", and the birth of "a Church without Putin, but a Church with God and with the 'Ukraine". In response to this, the Moscow Patriarchate interrupted Eucharistic communion not only with Constantinople, but also with the other Churches that recognized the newly formed Ukrainian Orthodox Church, namely Cyprus, the Greek Church and the Patriarchate of Alexandria, causing a profound crisis in the World of Orthodoxy which still exists today.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is part of the Russian Orthodox Church, although it has a certain autonomy. The highest government in the Church is exercised by the Council, made up of bishops and representatives of the secular, religious and lay clergy. Metropolitan Onufry (Berezovski) has been Metropolitan of Kiev and of the whole of Ukraine since 2014.

Starting from 2018, the year of the schism, as a result of which the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate ceased to be the largest Orthodox Church in the world, losing not only a significant part of its revenue, but an important instrument of influence on Ukraine

2. The impact of the conflict in Ukraine on the churches

According to what collected by the Razumkov Center by comparing the years 2019, 2020 and 2021 (see Table 1) about the sense of religious belonging, the majority of the interviewees recognize themselves as "belonging" to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. Going into the details of the geographical areas (Tab. 2), the highest percentages are found in the central (where, however, the majority is from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate) and eastern areas of the country. The western part sees a prevalence of the Uniate Church. The data collected therefore reflect the historical confessional distribution.

[7] "*Eto tserkov' bez Putina. Eto tserkov' - bez Kirilla": Poroshenko ob'javil o sozdanii Ukrainskoj pomestnoj pravoslavnoj avtokefal'noj tserkvi*. 15.12.2018 (last access 11.05.2022) https://www.dp.ru/a/2018/12/15/JEto_cerkov_bez_Putina

Confessional belonging																		
	PCU			UPC - MP			Just Orthodox			UGKC			Just Christian			Not recognising themselves in any religion		
	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021
Yes	72,2	75,2	66,9	71,8	69,6	76,8	44,3	37,2	41,1	90,6	98,4	93,3	32,9	49,2	34,3	4,3	5,9	10,0
No	27,1	33,1	33,1	28,2	30,4	22,8	55,4	62,8	58,4	9,4	1,6	6,7	67,1	50,3	65,1	35,3	93,8	90,0

(Tab. 1) Source Rozumkov Centre, pag. 48 (*https://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2021_Religiya.pdf)*

Grouped by geographical areas								
	West		Center		South		East	
	2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021
Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kiev Patriarchate (PCU)	31,2	24,2	48,3	47,2	12,0	7,5	8,5	21,1
Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate (UPC-MP)	22,3	20,2	34,7	34,6	6,6	12,3	36,5	32,9
Just Orthodox	7,2	9,8	41,7	40,2	14,5	16,8	36,7	33,2
Ukrainian Uniate Church (UGKC)	94,8	94,4	4,7	4,5	0,0	0,6	0,5	0,6
Just Christian	17,9	20,3	43,0	44,8	10,1	15,7	29,1	19,2
Do not recognising themselves in any religion	7,2	11,1	35,0	36,4	18,6	14,0	39,2	38,5

(Tab. 2) Source Rozumkov Centre, pag. 47 (*https://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2021_Religiya.pdf)*

However, internal discontent in the Orthodox churches following the conflict in Ukraine begins to manifest itself. Already in the first days of the "special operation", one after the other, the Ukrainian dioceses subordinate to Moscow stopped mentioning Patriarch Kirill I in their prayers which, in the Orthodox tradition, means "withdrawing from his jurisdiction". This type of refusal affects parishes regardless of whether they are in the east (Russian-speaking) or west (Ukrainian-speaking) of the country. According to a poll published last March 10[8], 63% of Ukrainians would be in favor of a complete break with the Moscow Patriarchate, while only 10% are against it. Among the interviewees there are also the faithful of the Church of Moscow. On March 21, the synod of the PCU, meeting in Kiev, invited the clergy and the community of the UPC-MP to sever the remaining canonical ties with Moscow and to join the PCU, ensuring the maintenance of the existing diocesan structure. The cause of this removal is mainly due to the reactions of the Moscow church to the ongoing conflict. After the outbreak of the war, in fact, it is no coincidence that the most explicit reaction was that of Cyril, the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, less popular were the sermons of Metropolitan Epiphanius or the bishops of both rites of the Catholic Church, even if equally - if not more - important for Ukraine's future. As the days go by and the crisis evolves, it almost seems that the independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church will be the main internal winner of the ongoing war, mainly because it has clearly opted for independence from Russia and because its birth is inextricably linked to the recent history of Ukraine, is therefore perceived as a symbol of the autonomous aspirations of the Ukrainian nation.

The Roman Catholic Church is also enjoying great acclaim, although Pope Francis, apart from the ritual appeals to stop the war, is not flaunting the support of one of the parties to the conflict, which can be explained by his personal acquaintance with Patriarch Kirill. Both hierarchs met in February

[8] *Ocenka Situacji v Ukrainie (8-9 marta 2022)*, Rejting Socjologichna Grupa, 10.03.2022 (last access 14.05.2022) https://ratinggroup.ua/ru/research/ukraine/ocenka_situacii_v_ukraine_8-9_marta_2022.html

2016 in Cuba, where they expressed their readiness for further cooperation[9]. Since the outbreak of the war, Francis has tried for a long time to establish contact with Kirill, a contact that took place remotely through a telephone call that took place only on the twenty-first day of the attack[10] and, during which, both sides "expressed concern about the existing situation ". The impression, in any case, is that it was a dialogue between deafs, especially in light of the declaration of the Church of Moscow published after the meeting in which: "the situation on Ukrainian soil was discussed in detail". attention also to the "humanitarian aspects of the current crisis and to the actions of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church to overcome its consequences." Therefore, despite a sharing of the "concern" relating to the cessation of military activities, the dialogue in fact resulted in pure rhetoric. What surprised however was the pope's next step: Friday, March 25 (Catholic Feast of the Annunciation), he consecrated Russia and Ukraine to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, a ceremony repeated on the same day in Fatima, by Cardinal Konrad Krayewski[11] "lands of Holy Russia" (Russia, Ukraine and Belarus), was not well received by the Patriarch. The gesture, applied to areas perceived as exclusivity of the Russian Church, was interpreted as a sort of provocation and not a rapprochement between the two Churches (especially if we have memory of the controversy unleashed in Russia by the creation of a Catholic network of dioceses in the area traditionally considered the domain of the Orthodox Church).

On the Church of Moscow, the comments continue after the words of Kirill pronounced in the course of the homily of last March 6 (Sunday of forgiveness that precedes the beginning of Lent). They constitute a whole, even in the context of the patriarch's brilliant career, which experts associate with the collaboration with the KGB dating back to the 1970s, but they seem to want above all to respond to the appeal signed by priests and monks for the cessation of the fratricidal war in Ukraine or at the synod of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (February 28, 2022) which asked the patriarch of Moscow to say his word on the cessation of fratricidal bloodshed in Ukraine.

The patriarch spoke of a deterioration of the situation in the Donbas, identifying as the reason for the hostilities the republic’s refusal to hold gay pride, the premise for entering the world of consumerism and apparent "freedom"[12]. In the words of the Patriarch, the current war takes the form of an eschatological struggle between good and evil in which Kirill insists on the clarity and meaning of the words, on the distinction between good and evil and on what is (homosexuality) or it is not a sin. In this context, he also seems to want an "external" enemy (the corrupted West) on which to place the greatest responsibility of the conflict, that is to widen the abyss between brothers (the war between Russia and Ukraine), and absolve the president Russian since on the right side.

In the context of Kirill's sermon, it is worth recalling some theses from Putin's essay from July last year, widely commented on by the Western media. In a text published on the Kremlin website[13], Putin states that "the true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible in partnership with Russia", reiterating the

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9 *RPC: reakcija SMI na vstreču papy i patriarcha byla na 90% položytel'noj*, Ria Novosti 24.02.2016 (last access 10.10.2022) https://ria.ru/20160224/1379779344.html

10 https://www.vaticannews.va/ru/pope/news/2022-03/papa-francisk-pozvonil-patriarhu-kirillu.html

11 The request to entrust Ukraine and Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary may have been presented to the Pope by the Roman Catholic bishops of Ukraine. However, it is more likely that it refers to a similar ceremony on March 25, 1984, when John Paul II made the act of entrusting himself to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in the Vatican, asking Mary to save the world from war. It is therefore possible that it was Cardinal Krajewski, the only continuator of the Polish tradition in the Vatican, who had such an idea.

12 *“[…] For eight years there have been attempts to destroy what exists in the Donbas. And in the Donbas there is a rejection, a fundamental rejection of the so-called values that are offered today by those who claim world power. Today there is a test for fidelity to this new world order, a sort of pass for that "happy" world, the world of excessive consumption, the world of false "freedom". Do you know what this test is? The test is very simple and at the same time terrible: it is the Gay Pride parade. The claims of many to hold a gay parade are proof of their loyalty to the new world order; and we know that if people or countries refuse these requests, then they do not enter that world order, they become strangers to it.", “In Ucraina una guerra metafisica contro il gay pride.*, Silere non Possum, 06.03.2022 (last access 16.05.2022) https://silerenonpossum.it/kirill-sermone-ucraina/

13 *Stat’ja Vladimira Putina “Ob istoricheskom edinstve russkikh i ukraintsev*. 12.07.2021 (last access 10.05.2022) http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181

opinion expressed several times that Russia and Ukraine are "one nation". According to the president, the current Ukrainian government creates an atmosphere of fear in society, panders to neo-Nazis and "militarizes the country". Kirill's speech on Sunday 6 March is an important complement to this.

Final remarks

The rift between the West and Russia is also deepening from a religious point of view. Western Orthodox Christians who have so far recognized the sovereignty of the Moscow Patriarchate perceive Kirill I and his subordinates as accomplices in the war in Ukraine, in such a scenario, if the Russian Orthodox Church loses the battle for Orthodox control in Ukraine it risks losing a lot. moreover. In the West, canonical ties with Moscow are severed by individual priests or Orthodox communities who turned to Constantinople. Even the Churches of the post-Soviet countries, hitherto loyal to Kirill, clearly express their opposition to the support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, so the Polish Orthodox bishops, following the Metropolitan of Kiev, compared the war to the "biblical sin of Cain". The situation has become so serious that the Moscow Patriarchate has established a special "administration for bishoprics in neighboring countries".

Furthermore, most of the former Soviet republics now have nominally or de facto independent Orthodox churches. The structures of the Russian Orthodox Church in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Lithuania remain the most subordinate to Moscow with a strong difference: if the first two obey, the third is increasingly at odds with authority. On March 17, Metropolitan Innocent, head of the Moscow Church in Lithuania, condemned the war between Russia and Ukraine and stressed that he and his fellow believers "live in a free and democratic country" and that "Lithuania is not Russia". The next day, Alexander, the Metropolitan of Riga and the whole of Latvia, spoke in a similar way. Metropolitan Yevgeny of the Russian Orthodox Church in Estonia, until recently the chancellor of the Moscow Theological Academy, signed a declaration by the Estonian Council of Churches in which he condemns "the terrible events (...) in Ukraine". At the moment it really seems that Putin's Orthodox Church is losing some of its influence outside Russia.

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The Ukrainian crisis impact

Russian intervention in Ukraine affects three main areas: political negotiations and military action, humanitarian aid and food security and gas and oil supplies[1].

Although politically the crisis has not yet imposed significant realignments, the Gulf countries are betting on their balance between the United States and Russia by trying to maximize gains in key areas of interest. However, long-term sanctions against Russia will be a challenge for Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have all diversified their defense industries and sought greater cooperation with Russia. Israel is concerned about growing Russia-Iran cooperation and possible limits to its aerial bombardments of Iranian targets in Syria.

There are also growing concerns about aid and food security in the region, especially in already fragile countries. The growing number of Ukrainian refugees and the rising costs of post-conflict reconstruction are raising concerns that critical humanitarian aid may be diverted from the Middle East to address the fallout from the conflict in Ukraine. For the millions of Palestinians, Lebanese, Yemeni and Syrians living in countries that are experiencing conflict, economic crises and growing humanitarian needs, this would be tantamount to disrupting critical life support.

The future of oil and gas supplies is crucial. Europe is trying to create alternative gas supplies and there is an opportunity for the Gulf and Eastern Mediterranean countries. The embargo on Russian products has brought oil prices to pre-August 2014 levels, well above $100 a barrel[2]. With the production capacity of other oil producers hampered for various reasons, oil prices may remain high for some time. Geo-politically, this development is perhaps the most important.

Gulf Cooperation Council

With small populations, high income per capita and large grain storage facilities, the Gulf states have more reserves than many other countries protecting them from supply shocks and rising agricultural commodity prices. The United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Oman import large volumes of wheat from Russia and Ukraine, but they have far fewer reasons to worry than, for example, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen: as energy exporters they can balance food inflation with rising oil revenues, while other countries are in a less favorable fiscal position[3].

In recent years, oil producers, in particular Saudi Arabia, have had to consider economic reforms necessary to restructure the classic system of rentier states and a welfare state model that has become difficult to sustain. There may be a stalemate on economic reform in favor of short-term political gains, or Riyadh may continue with the mandatory economic reforms, regardless of oil prices.

As oil and gas exporters, the Gulf states are ready to reap the benefits of rising prices following the Ukrainian crisis[4]. Saudi Arabia, for example, needs the price of crude oil to be slightly below $70 a barrel to balance its budget. Since the start of the Ukrainian crisis, the price has risen to over 130

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1 M. Yahya in “What the Russian War in Ukraine Means for the Middle East”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 24, 2022; https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/24/what-russian-war-in-ukraine-means-for-middle-east-pub-86711.

2 M. Muasher in “What the Russian War in Ukraine Means for the Middle East”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 24, 2022; https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/24/what-russian-war-in-ukraine-means-for-middle-east-pub-86711.

3 E. Woertz, “Food (In) Security in the Gulf States After Ukraine”, ISPI, 23 April 2022; https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/food-insecurity-gulf-states-after-ukraine-34721.

4 International Crisis Group, “The Impact of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa”, 14 April 2022; https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/impact-russias-invasion-ukraine-middle-east-and-north-africa.

dollars a barrel, before stabilizing at just under 100, only to rise again following the US embargo on Russian oil. To Gulf leaders, the prices rise is welcome as revenues dropped dramatically during the pandemic. In March[5], despite heavy pressure from the Biden administration to increase the production and a visit by British Prime Minister Johnson to Saudi Arabia[6] and in the UAE, the two countries have kept their previous production commitments[7] with the monthly increase to 400,000 barrels per day[8]. The Saudi Crown Prince said the kingdom is committed to the OPEC+ deal with Russia[9] while the UAE is less categorical. Meanwhile, Qatar has shown willingness to help European countries to break free from their energy dependence on Russia by signing a gas deal with Germany.

Saudi Arabia does not want to lose Moscow as a partner at the cost of the friendship with Washington as it does not ignore the price of taking sides in this conflict. Although the decision to diversify the kingdom's group of international partners was made in a period of post-Iraqi invasion tensions, it has become an established policy that affects the West as well as Russia. In 2007, President Putin was the first Russian leader to officially visit Saudi Arabia; ten years later, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud was the first Saudi king to officially make a state visit to Russia, followed by other bilateral visits and meetings with the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. When President Putin revisited the kingdom in 2019, relations between the two countries were progressing slowly but surely at a time when Saudi Arabia's relations with the West were extremely strained over the Khashoggi case. In 2021, the two countries signed an agreement on military cooperation.

Progress in Saudi-Russian relations, however, has always been in the shadow of the kingdom's relations with the United States, as evidenced so far by the failure of Saudi Arabia's 2017 plan to purchase Russian defense systems to date. Saudi Arabia shares incomparable vital interests with the United States, but its political value system is closer to that of Russia, despite the significantly lower density and slower pace of economic, political and military relations. Washington's reactions to Saudi Arabia's policies over the past two years, as well as the definition of the identity of the Russian intervention in Ukraine as "*the battle between democracy and autocracies*"[10], at the heart of the March 2022 State of the Union address, they put the kingdom on the same footing as Russia.

Beyond harmony between the authoritarian systems, the two countries have compatible national interests and few but significant foreign policy positions, as in Yemen. The most important of these is convergence in OPEC+ which has two significant consequences for Saudi Arabia: it is fueling the economic recovery from the pandemic and is the main Saudi lever in a difficult relationship with President Biden.

Oil producer group OPEC+ approved a small increase in production for June 2022 amid persistent concerns about weakening Chinese demand and shortly after the EU outlined proposals for new sanctions against Russian crude. OPEC+ is unlikely to provide additional oil to the market as any substantial increase in supply threatens these high prices, above $100 a barrel, so they are expected to continue with the slow recovery in the market share throughout 2022.

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5 France24, "'Not our war': Gulf states resist pressure to raise oil output", 03/03/2022; https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220303-not-our-war-gulf-states-resist-pressure-to-raise-oil-output.

6 F. Deknatel, "The Ukraine War's Impacts in the Middle East: A Democracy in Exile Roundtable", DAWN, April 6, 2022; https://dawnmena.org/the-ukraine-wars-impacts-in-the-middle-east-a-democracy-in-exile-roundtable/.

7 France24, "Not our war': Gulf states resist pressure to raise oil output", 03/03/2022; https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220303-not-our-war-gulf-states-resist-pressure-to-raise-oil-output.

8 B. Al-Majed, "GCC shielded from worst effects of Ukraine-Russia conflict", Arab News, April 5, 2022; https://www.arabnews.com/node/2057516.

9 A. Aboudouh, "Russia's war in Ukraine is making Saudi Arabia and the UAE rethink how they deal with US pressure over China", Atlantic Council, April 26, 2022; https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ukraine-war-is-making-saudi-arabia-and-the-uae-rethink-how-they-deal-with-us-pressure-over-china/.

10 J. Feldsher, "'Battle Between Democracy and Autocracy' Leads Biden's First State of the Union", Defence One , March 1, 2022; https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2022/03/battle-between-democracy-and-autocracy-leads-bidens-first-state-union/362643/.

The European Union announced in its latest round of economic sanctions the intention to ban imports of Russian oil within six months and refined products by the end of the year. The G7 leaders that met on May 8th in videoconference with President Zelensky announced a new series of sanctions against Moscow, in particular pledging to gradually end imports of Russian oil considering the difficulties encountered by the EU to find an agreement, especially with Hungary, which is heavily dependent on Russian oil.

Saudi Arabia faces a crisis of confidence in its relations with the United States but cannot fully rely on Moscow either. President Putin proved to be a reliable ally for his counterparts, such as Bashar al-Assad, while the United States dropped former Egyptian President Mubarak and earlier Iranian Shah Reza Palhavi in 1979.

Putin is unwilling to sacrifice Russia's relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia's staunchest enemy, and has shown himself willing to put pressure on Saudi Arabia in the oil market. If it comes to a tipping point, Saudi Arabia will continue to choose the US over Russia, but Riyadh is making sure Washington no longer takes it for granted[11].

Iran

Russia accounts for only 2-3% of Iran's non-oil foreign trade. The dominance of agricultural products in Iranian imports, however, is significant given the growing importance of grain purchases due to the drought that is hindering domestic production. If this trend extends into 2023, Iran's dependence on imported wheat will increase, raising concerns about the negative impact the Ukrainian crisis could have on the country.

Russian military operations in Ukraine have introduced an unexpected variable in the negotiations to revive the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal[12], *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, JCPOA. Since Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has prohibited Iranian diplomats from negotiating directly with the United States, Moscow has been a key intermediary between Washington and Tehran over the past year. In the midst of the global pressure campaign against Russia, Moscow has implicitly threatened to endanger the Iranian nuclear deal to secure its interests, demanding written guarantees that trade with Iran will not suffer the consequences of international sanctions[13], irritating Tehran[14]. Russia, which has now eclipsed Iran as the most sanctioned nation in the world, has an interest that its counterparts suffer as much as possible from the embargo that has been imposed. A nuclear deal ending the Iranian oil embargo would mitigate the global financial consequences of Russia's isolation. If the negotiators manage to revive the JCPOA, Iranian oil would add 1-1.5 million barrels a day to the world market.

Re-launching the nuclear deal with Iran means much more to Biden than to Putin, who does not feel threatened by Iranian nuclear progress and Tehran's isolation has served Russian interests. Iran depends on second-rate Russian technology, it is an opponent of the United States unable to exploit its vast energy resources and overlooks its historic competition with Moscow in Central Asia. A West-oriented Iran would be worse for Russia than a nuclear-armed Iran.

However, this Russian strategy has revived the historic distrust that many Iranian citizens historically feel towards their neighbor. In 1800, Imperial Russia forcibly conquered vast territories of the Caucasus from Iran. In 1946, Soviet forces occupied and attempted to annex the northwestern

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11 Y. Farouk in "What the Russian War in Ukraine Means for the Middle East", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 24, 2022; https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/24/what-russian-war-in-ukraine-means-for-middle-east-pub-86711.

12 K. Sadjadpour in "What the Russian War in Ukraine Means for the Middle East", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 24, 2022; https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/24/what-russian-war-in-ukraine-means-for-middle-east-pub-86711.

13 P. Hafezi, H. Pamuk, S. Lewis, "Russia says it has written guarantees on Iran nuclear deal", Reuters, March 15, 2022; https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/russia-says-it-has-written-guarantees-iran-nuclear-deal-2022-03-15/.

14 H. Notte, "How the Western-Russian Confrontation Will Shake the Middle East", ISPI, 9 Maggio 2022; https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/how-western-russian-confrontation-will-shake-middle-east-34858.

Iranian province of Azerbaijan, only to be expelled thanks to the efforts of then US President Truman. Indeed, it is an historical anomaly that today Russia and Iran are strategic partners, while the United States and Iran are bitter adversaries (since the 1979 Islamic Revolution).

Despite speculation, mutual distrust of Russia may foster greater US-Iran cooperation, the Ukrainian crisis has served to strengthen existing global alliances. The mutual isolation and Iran and Russia' resentment towards the West will make them interdependent on each other.

Iraq

In recent months, protests have erupted again in several southern provinces due to the increase in the prices of basic food products such as cereals and sunflower oil[15], both imported from Ukraine and Russia, although, unlike other countries in the region, Baghdad is not entirely dependent on both. Due to the rising of global prices, Iraq's cereal import bill is projected to rise nearly threefold compared to 2021. The effects of the Ukrainian crisis also coincide with those of a severe drought during 2021 when the 37% of farmers did not complete the harvest, forcing the government to buy more grain from abroad. Iraq's inefficient food distribution programs have exacerbated these problems: The government buys wheat and distributes it to private millers, then buys the flour from them, often at an inflated price, and distributes it for free to vulnerable families. While rationing can alleviate the immediate needs of the poorest Iraqis, the government can afford to increase food spending only if global oil prices remain high. If the oil price collapses, Baghdad could be forced to cut other expenses such as public sector salaries. As a rentier state, Iraq for its revenues is almost entirely dependent on crude oil sales.

There are also divisions between the two main blocs that emerged from the October 2021 elections. Some within the winning tripartite alliance, which includes the Sadrist movement, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Alliance for Sunni Sovereignty, have recognized Russia as an aggressor, while the Shiite coordination framework, made up mostly of Iranian-aligned parties, is closer to Russian security concerns than NATO.

Rising global energy costs have had mixed effects in different parts of Iraq: while the government has maintained the same price for fuel through subsidies in central Iraq, prices have doubled in the Kurdistan region where relations are more complex. Iraq's federal Supreme Court recently ruled against independent sales of Kurdish oil[16].

The regional government, KRG, relies on Western military and political support for its security but it is also indebted to Russia for its 2016-2017 bailout investments, when it faced a severe financial and economic crisis. The Russian energy company Rosneft then acquired a 60% stake in the region's main pipeline[17]. Furthermore, unlike Western countries, Russia did not oppose the KRG independence referendum in September 2017; in turn, KRG officials used a conciliatory tone towards the separatist-controlled areas of Ukraine. The KRG may now have to cede some control to the federal government over deals with other international oil companies, while it would have to dispense with Russian investment due to sanctions if Western countries insist on compliance with the international sanction regime.

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15 C. Bianco, Seminar "Russian Roulette: Repercussions of the Russian-Ukrainian War on the Middle East", Near East Policy Forum and the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, May 9, 2022; https://cais.cass.anu.edu.au/events/russian-roulette-repercussions-russian-ukrainian-war-middle-east.

16 R. Edwards, M. Mohamed, "Iraqi federal court deems Kurdish oil and gas law unconstitutional", Reuters, February 15, 2022; https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-federal-court-deems-kurdish-oil-gas-law-unconstitutional-2022-02-15/.

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine and its possible implications on Euro-Atlantic relations

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February was a significant turning point in the relationship between the US and its European allies. It seems also destined to play an equally important role in developing NATO's internal dynamics due to the Atlantic Alliance's central function in the current crisis. In due time, the Russian authorities presented the (remote) possibility that Ukraine could enter NATO as one of the reasons for the invasion. Later, such a reason was revamped, portraying the Russian initiative as a preemptive strike against NATO's aggressive eastward expansion (Brown, Ball and Callery, 2022). At the political level, Moscow's move is a potentially dangerous challenge, especially in the light of the cleavages that emerged, in the past, between the US and its European allies and among the European countries themselves. In this field, relations with Russia have been among the main bones of contention between "old" and "new Europe", i.e. between the Alliance's historical members and the countries entered after the Cold War. Today, such a cleavage seems partly healed. However, doubts remain regarding the "Western bloc"'s ability to preserve its cohesion in case of escalation or the transformation of the current war into a long-term conflict. Doubts also remain regarding how the Ukraine experience will affect NATO's future development. This final aspect is especially relevant since on 29-30 June 2022, in Madrid, during the summit of the Heads of State and Government of NATO's member countries, the Alliance's new Strategic concept will be adopted, the fourth since the end of the Cold War.

The reasons for a conflict

Over the years, the Alliance's enlargement has emerged as the most contentious issue in NATO-Russia relations. While criticized even in some US quarters (see, e.g., Haass, 1997), it has been instrumental in spreading NATO's influence in the power vacuum that emerged in Central-Eastern Europe in the late 1980's/early 1990 after the collapse of the Soviet "external empire" and the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself. Against this background, NATO's action played a pivotal role in strengthening the Western orientation of the former Warsaw Pact counties and supporting their democratization and socialization to the Western values and praxes (Gheciu, 2005). However, since the early 2000s, it has also fuelled Russia's growing hostility, which not even the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council (Pratica di Mare Summit, 28 May 2002) has been able to soothe. Such a new attitude mirrored deeper socio-political dynamics linked, on the one hand, to the different perceptions that the Russian elite developed in this period about the country's role in the world, on the other, to the worsening of US-Russia relations. Despite some positive results in practical cooperation, these relations had gradually deteriorated since at least 2008, when the outbreak of the Russo-Georgian war imposed the first partial stop on the NATO-Russia Council's activities. In the light of the many tensions of the previous years, Russian meddling in the clash between the Tbilisi government and the separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was a clear sign of how, despite the official declarations, Moscow and the West had never been able to elaborate a sense of mutual trust (Smith, 2008; Rumer and Sokolsy, 2019).

In this context, the 2014 crisis, which followed the events of the so-called "Revolution of dignity" ("Euromaidan"), has been a quantum leap. In terms of NATO-Russia relations, it led to the freeze of all cooperation activities in the NATO-Russia Council (which remained active only at the top political level). At the same time, the US-Russia confrontation entered an increasingly militarized phase, which impacted Central-Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, although the latter still plays quite a marginal role in the Western security system (Ullman, 2022). The transition from the second Obama administration (2013-17) to Donald Trump (2017-21) and, finally, Joe Biden (2021-) had just a limited impact, although, in the Trump's years, violent quarrels took place with the European allies, especially on the issue of sharing of the collective defence system's financial burden. Throughout the period, the amount of US military assistance to Ukraine remained high. The funds provided through the two main financial channels (the State Department's Foreign Military Financing program and the Defense Department's Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative) ranged between 247.6 (2017) and 390 million dollars (2017). Funds also came from other sources, first of all, the Presidential Drawdown Authority (by which the President can authorize the immediate transfer of articles and services from US stocks without congressional approval in response to an unforeseen emergency), whose relevance has steadily grown since the end of 2021[1].

When Russian troops started massing near the Ukraine border in November 2021, the situation seemed to a standstill, with pro-Russia separatist forces firmly in control of the disputed territories of Donetsk and Lugansk and widespread disillusionment about the possibility of a short-term Ukraine entry into the Atlantic Alliance. In the previous months, the issue had also led to some disagreements with the Ukraine government, forcing NATO's Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and President Joe Biden to take position and remark that Kyiv still had some efforts to make to reach the good governance standards NATO required as a precondition to the admission. Moreover, in the same months, there had already been other concentrations of Russian troops near the Ukraine border. Descaling the tension that those concentrations had raised was one of the aims of the Biden-Putin summit held in Geneva on 16 June. In September, the joint Russia-Belarus exercise Zapad-2021 (also involving troops from other CSTO countries) was another source of concern. Some analysts pointed out that not all the troops engaged in Zapad-2021 had been redeployed at the end of the exercise and remarked on the potentially threatening nature of this decision (Dani, 2021). However, it was difficult to forecast the military escalation that was about to come. The main question was about what the Russian authorities could gain by precipitating the status quo: a status quo that, at that moment, seemed favourable to their interest and allowed them to benefit from the results of the territorial gains made in 2014 without any fundamental limitation.

An uncertain future

The beginning of the military operations set the scenario in motion anew, and the new dynamics seem going against the Russian interests. Western support to the Kyiv government has led to the Ukraine arsenal's quantitative and qualitative improvement, a trend that the lasting of the conflict is strengthening. At the political and diplomatic level, the leading role that Washington has assumed in the Western bloc has relaunched the US role, severely weakened by the mismanagement of the Afghan withdrawal in the summer of 2021, after a twenty-year engagement. The relaunch of the US global role has also positively impacted its relations with its European allies, both within and outside NATO. Even the European countries have shown greater cohesion than (probably) the Russian authorities expected. It is not guaranteed that this cohesion can be maintained. On the contrary, a long-lasting conflict can highlight the cleavages that the most immediate needs and the emotional pressure pushed on the background. The war's direct and indirect costs are the primary source of division. The US and Europe quickly adopted several sanctions packages against Russia, hitting the country's leading political and economic figures and

[1] *U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 29 April 2022. Online: https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12040 (accessed: 14 May 2022). The decline that marked the first year of the Trump administration was largely compensated on the following ones, and in 2020 the total amount of the two programs was 371.7 million dollars.

a wide range of economic and financial sectors[2]. However, the cohesion of the Western bloc weakened when dealing with the energy sector, which is Russia's primary source of hard currency and Europe's most relevant area of dependence on Moscow's supplies. The compromise measures adopted until now (especially on coal import) have been only partially effective and have highlighted the divisions among the different EU member countries on the following steps to take (Brzozowski, 2022).

In this perspective, in a long-lasting conflict, the economic factor could play against the pro-Kyiv front more than against Russia. One of the reasons is that, due to their inherent nature, economic sanctions hardly can reach their aims in a short time. Moreover, in the first weeks of the war, Russia skilfully adopted damage-minimizing strategies (Morris, 2022) and countersanctions, the most well-known being the request to pay gas provisions in roubles and the use of selective stops of the energy supplies. On the other hand, the war put the European industry under heavy pressure, impacting the recovery phase that started after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. The conflict did not only affect the energy market but also the global supply chains and the price/availability of many raw materials, such as aluminium, copper, nickel, neon, platinum, and palladium (Curran, 2022). Moreover, Russia and Ukraine are among the world's most important producers of agricultural goods and fertilizers, another field where the war has had global effects. In a context of already high prices, this state of things can lead, in the coming months, to a worsening of the food security problems already existing in the war's theatre and several other parts of the world[3]. The systemic effects of these processes are difficult to assess. Adding up to the distortions that the COVID-19 pandemic has provoked, they can speed up the currently undergoing transfer of status, wealth, and political power from Europe (and, to a lesser extent, the US) to Asia. At the same time, they can push back to the surface the divisions existing between the US and Europe, among the different European counties and – in the domestic realm – among the different political forces, re-energizing pro-Russian positions that, in the aftermath of the invasion, were almost universally marginalized.

The will to leverage the benefits of a "long war" can be one of the reasons behind the change in Russia's strategy that has taken place some six weeks after the outbreak of the hostilities. Having missed a quick success (in terms of either territorial gains or regime change), Moscow's military effort seems now oriented toward consolidating its grip on Ukraine's eastern regions and building a permanent link between Crimea and Donbas. Such a link would give the Kremlin the additional benefits of complete control over the Azov Sea and strengthens its superiority in the Black Sea basin. At the same time, a protracted conflict can also give time to the above-mentioned disruptive factors to operate. In terms of direct engagement, the pro-Kyiv front, too, has started to adapt to the needs of a long-lasting conflict. The effort has led to the establishment of a Ukraine Defense Consultative Group to coordinate support, make the assistance that the participating countries provide more efficient, and ensure regular dialogue with Ukraine authorities and military leaders through periodic meetings to assess the emerging needs and the best way to fulfil them. The Group includes several non-European countries (Australia, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Liberia, Morocco, New Zealand, Qatar, South Korea, and Tunisia), while the US plays a central role due also to its overwhelming industrial and logistic capabilities. However, it is unclear whether such a mechanism can effectively coordinate the different political positions and adequately contrast the centrifugal forces that, in the long run, can sap the cohesion of the existing pro-Ukraine coalition.

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2 For a full list of the European measures, see https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/banking-and-finance/international-relations/restrictive-measures-sanctions/sanctions-adopted-following-russias-military-aggression-against-ukraine_en (accessed: 14 May 2022).

3 *Council - Hundred and sixty-ninth Session, 8 April 2022. Impact of the Ukraine-Russia conflict on global food security and related matters under the mandate of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)*, CL 169/3. Online: https://www.fao.org/3/ni734en/ni734en.pdf (accessed: 14 May 2022).

A growing "demand for NATO"?

Finally, there is the issue of the war's impact on NATO. According to Moscow's declarations, the need to contrast NATO's eastward enlargement was crucial in precipitating military intervention. In this sense, the aim to repulse the Western military presence far from the borders of the Russian Federation has been largely missed. Since the outbreak of the conflict, the flow of western technical assistance has allowed for a massive quantitative and qualitative improvement of Ukraine's armed forces: an improvement that interacted with a broader process of reorganization of the national military instrument, which started in 2016 to align it to NATO's standard by 2020 (Akimenko, 2018; Collins, 2022). The constant influx of US military personnel in Central-Eastern Europe, too, favoured the region's re-militarization. The new attention devoted to the Black Sea region has been already mentioned. The first outcome of this new attention has been the deployment of two battlegroups in Bulgaria and Romania. Two other battlegroups will be deployed in Hungary and Slovakia to integrate those already present in the three Baltic Republics and Poland. Moreover, since the beginning of the invasion, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Lithuania, Norway, the Netherlands, Poland, and Romania announced their willingness to increase their defence budgets; a decision that makes it more probable reaching in 2024 the targets adopted in 2014, during the Celtic Manor Summit (Defence Investment Pledge). The "pulling" components of these increases seem to be the procurement and research and development (R&D) sectors: two sectors where the European Union, too, has started moving more assertively after launching its first programs in 2021.

At the European level, also the overall "demand for NATO" seems on the rise, although with some reserves. In Ukraine, during the first days of the invasion, there was a peak in favour of the country's accession to NATO (76%). In the following days, this peak was reabsorbed, and the share returned around 68% compared to 62% of the pre-invasion period. According to some observers, this dynamic means that NATO can have a «credibility problem» in Ukraine (Fedosiuk, 2022). Among the NATO members, the invasion strengthened the sense of belonging and relaunched the value of an alliance that, in the past, was heavily criticized for its supposed usefulness in the post-Cold War environment. Finally, in other parts of Europe, Moscow's initiative contributed to approaching several countries to NATO; in these countries' eyes, NATO membership is seen as a way to enhance their international status or send Russia a message about their political alignment. Beyond Sweden and Finland, at the end of March, polls highlighted a growing consensus about Ireland's entry into the Atlantic Alliance (48% against 39%; in January, the pro-NATO share was 34%) (Pogatchnik, 2022). Bosnia's and Kosovo's authorities also expressed their willingness to join NATO. In the case of Pristina, NATO officials have been rapid in affirming that the admission is highly unlikely (Taylor, 2022) since four NATO members (Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain) do not recognize Kosovo's independence. However, the same fact that the request was put forward is a clue of the membership's attractiveness ad its importance for countries located in critical geopolitical areas.

Something similar can be said about Sweden and Finland. In their case, too, since the beginning of the Russian military intervention, polls show a sharp increase in favour of the countries' accession to NATO. In Sweden, in April, the share increased 57% against 51% in March; in the same period, those against the membership dropped from 24 to 21%, and undecided dipped to 22% from 25%[4]. Finland shows similar dynamics, with 65% in favour in March (they were 21% in 2017), 16% against, and 21% unsure[5]. Sweden and Finland have cooperated with NATO for a long time: they have been part of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program since its beginning in the mid-1990s, and their armed forces have contributed to several NATO missions. Swedish and Finnish contingents

[4] Growing majority of Swedes back joining NATO, opinion poll shows. *Reuters*, 22 April 2022. Online: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/growing-majority-swedes-back-joining-nato-opinion-poll-shows-2022-04-20 (accessed: 14 May 2022).

[5] Yle poll: Support for Nato membership hits record high. *YLE News*, 14 March 2022. Online: https://yle.fi/news/3-12357832 (accessed: 14 May 2022). At the end of February, figures were 53, 28 and 19% respectively.

participated in NATO training activities, and, since the outbreak of the Ukraine war, the two countries are benefitting from broader access to NATO intelligence data. Following a trend common also to Norway (a NATO country), both Sweden and Norway sharply increased their military expenditure in the last ten years. According to the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, in Sweden, between 2011 and 2021, it grew from 4.8 to 7.2 billion dollars and in Finland from 3.7. to 5.6 billion dollars, at constant 2020 prices. In Norway, expenditure grew from 5.2 and 7.3 billion dollars in the same years, always at constant 2020 prices, approaching the Celtic Manor targets in terms of defence expenditure/GDP ratio (1.8% compared to a 2.0% target; in 2011, the figure was 1.5%)[6]. NATO itself recognized the importance of its bonds with the two Scandinavian countries. For instance, the final report of the Reflection Group appointed by the Secretary-general in 2020, in the framework of the #NATO2030 initiative, explicitly underlined the need to expand and strengthen the partnerships with Sweden and Finland, proposing them as models for the development of partnerships in other regions[7].

Conclusions

The transformations that the outbreak of the Ukraine war triggered will reverberate in the Strategic Concept that the Atlantic Alliance should approve during the Madrid Summit on 29-30 June. While deterrence should remain the pillar of the Alliance's strategy, some observers have already pointed out the need to move away from the current deterrence by reinforcement and focus on deterrence by denial (which they consider more effective), increasing the presence of US and NATO personnel and assets in the Central and Eastern European countries (Binnendijk and Hamilton, 2022). The need for a more effective labour division between NATO and the EU has also been pointed out, especially in light of the European Union's will to play a more active role in the military realm. The possible entry of Sweden and Finland into NATO adds to these problems further complexity. In the same direction goes the need to rethink the Alliance's strategy in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean basin: a region, the latter, whose strategic relevance is enhanced, in the present-day scenario, due to the presence of massive oil and gas reserves, whose exploitation could contribute to reducing tensions among the riparian countries (Fannon, 2022; Rau, Seufert and Westphal, 2022). In this framework, Ukraine's invasion marks a turning point for NATO and its relation to the future of European security. It also re-proposes the issue of the US role as the political leader of the Western bloc and its military point of reference in the light of the new emerging conventional confrontation with Moscow and a possible revival of the old nuclear competition.

6 https://milex.sipri.org/sipri (accessed: 14 May 2022).

7 *NATO 2030: United for a New Era. Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General*, 25 November 2020: 59. Online: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf (accessed: 14 May 2022).

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REPowerEU: the EU strategy of energy diversification in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict

Ending the dependence on Russian gas imports: REPowerEU and energy security

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the current war scenario represent a serious threat to the EU energy security condition, which relies on the availability of regular energy supply at moderated prices (Yergin 2006). As a matter of fact, the unbalanced dependence on Russian gas imports exposes the European Union to a condition of high and dangerous vulnerability, in the case of sudden interruption of energy flows imposed by Moscow, so creating serious problems because of the difficulty to find additional volumes of natural gas in the international markets which could replace the lack of Russian gas. Moreover, the current instability scenario caused by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has triggered an exponential growth of natural gas prices, which directly affect European consumers and firms.

Eurostat data (2022) clearly certifies this unbalanced condition of energy dependence, considering that the EU received 46% of its natural gas imports from Russia, followed by Norway (21%), Algeria (11%), United States (6.3%), Qatar (4.3%), United Kingdom, Nigeria, Libya and Azerbaijan: on the one hand, in the last decade natural gas consumption remains stables (nearly 400 billion of cubic metres – bcm – per year), on the other hand the European gas production collapsed by 60%, from 159 bcm to 55 bcm. In order to meet its domestic energy needs, the EU has progressively exacerbated its dependence on natural gas imports – estimated at 83.6% – also considering that natural gas accounts for 23.4% in the EU energy mix, also composed by oil and petroleum products (34.5%), renewables (17.4), nuclear energy (12.7%), while solid fossil fuels accounts for 10.5% (Eurostat 2022).

This condition of dependence from Russian gas imports has been consolidated in the last 10-15 years, allowing Moscow to use the threat to halt natural gas deliveries as a kind of "geopolitical tool" to exert an effective pressure towards the EU, during the several crisis between Russia and Ukraine occurred in 2006, 2009, 2014 and 2022. Until the realization of the Nord Stream gas pipeline in 2011 – an underwater pipeline having a nominal capacity of 55 bcm/y which directly connects Russia and Germany bypassing Poland and the three Baltic republics – Ukraine played a strategic role as a transit country for Russian exports to the EU markets because 70% of these exports crossed Ukraine, while today only 26% of Russian gas (43 bcm/y) is delivered through Ukrainian territory: however, this energy corridor is highly relevant for supplying Slovakia, Austria and Italy (Tsafos 2022).

Energy sources	%
Oil and petroleum products	34,5%
Natural gas	23,4%
Renewables	17,4%
Nuclear energy	12,7%
Solid fossil fuels	10,5%

Tab.1: EU energy mix (source:Eurostat 2022)

In order to evaluate the level of real dependence of the EU member states on Russian gas imports, an analysis only focused on the volumes of imports is not exhaustive: the use of the vulnerability index elaborated by the Institute of International Political Studies (2022) instead allows a broader comprehension of this issue, providing an interpretative key which takes into consideration additional factors, such as the incidence of these Russian imports on the total national consumption and the shares of natural gas within the energy mix. On a scale of 1 to 30, Italy has a vulnerability index of 19, because Russian gas covers 40% of Italian gas imports, while France has an index of 3, due to the fact that this country uses nuclear energy to produce electricity and the impact of Russian gas is insignificant. Romania is a very illustrative case, because imports only Russian gas but the country has a low index of vulnerability domestically producing 90% of the consumed gas (ISPI 2022). The Russian-Ukrainian war has openly demonstrated Moscow's unreliability as energy partner, prompting the EU to develop and adopt initiatives aimed at reducing natural gas supplies from Russia - with the aim of eliminating them in the medium term - through the diversification of suppliers, supply routes and the energy mix (or the combination of energy sources necessary for the production of electricity). Since longtime the goal of diversification has been a key issue for the European Commission, contained in numerous documents and programs developed over the last decade (for example the European Energy Security Strategy of 2014), but its achivement has proved to be a very slow process due to a combination of factors (difficulties to find new suppliers and building new infrastructures, while Russian gas is always available in large volumes at low prices). In March, the EU Commission has launched the REPowerEU plan, in order to achieve the ambitious goal to permanently free itself from Russian gas: this strategy aims to enhance the European energy security eliminating imports of fossil fuels (oil, natural gas and coal) from Russia by 2030 (European Commission 2022a). Concerning natural gas, the EU Commission has planned to reduce Russian gas imports of 2/3 (100 bcm) by 2022, while the total replacement should be in 2030, also thanks to the implementation of the Fit for 55 plan, according to which the EU will reduce natural gas consumption of 100 bcm (European Commission 2021a)[1].

In order to achieve this ambitious target of reduction, REPower EU plan sets out different strategic actions, such as the diversification of suppliers and of supply routes, an increasing use of clean energy produced by renewable sources, to promote and to improve the energy efficiency. REPowerEU forecasts a large increase of LNG (Liquified Natural Gas) imports - 50 bcm by 2022 – which will allow to replace equal volumes of imports coming from Russia, thanks to the cooperation with some traditional suppliers (Qatar and the United States), West Africa and North Africa suppliers (Algeria and Egypt). Furthermore, additional 10 bcm will be obtained by increasing imports through the existent gas pipelines, filling the gap between the nominal capacity of transport and the volumes which are effectively delivered to the market (spare capacity). Energy storage is also an issue of strategic relevance, and the EU Commission has decided that the existent underground gas storage (which are considered critical infrastructures) must be filled up to at least 90% of its capacity by 1 October each year, enhancing the resilience of the states and their capacity to deal with sudden interruptions.

The EU Commission has high expectations on the role of biomethane: according to the Fit for 55 plan this source should provide 35 bcm per year by 2030 (European Commission 2021a) while biomethane should ensure nearly 3.5 bcm to replace Russian imports by 2022. In addition to the strategy of diversification, the other priority of the EU plan is to increase the production of energy from renewable sources, progressively reducing the dependence on fossil fuels and eliminating polluting emissions: according to the EU plan, the creation of new wind parks and photovoltaic farms (both onshore and offshore) will allow to replace 20 bcm of Russian gas[2].

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[1] In July 2021, the European Commission has adopted the Fit for 55 climate package, which contains policies and initiatives aimed to achieve the Green Deal's targets, namely the reduction the net greenhouse gas emissions by almost 55% by 2030 and the achievement of the carbon neutrality by 2050.

[2] Additional 2.5 bcm of Russia gas could be replaced through the creation of new photovoltaic plants on the roofs of houses and firms.

REPowerEU also focuses on the implementation of energy efficiency measures as well as to reduce energy consumption, which will be able to replace 14 bcm of Russian gas imports in a few months. In the long term, green hydrogen will play a growing role as energy source: according to the Fit for 55 package, 480 GW of wind power capacity and 420 GW of solar power capacity will be installed by 2030 so reducing European consumption of natural gas by 170 bcm, which will mean a reduction of 25-30 bcm of Russian gas imports. The main precondition for the success of the hydrogen strategy is the capacity to collect massive public and private investments aimed at realizing new production plants of renewable energy, at the development of an integrated distribution grid of natural gas and hydrogen, as well as new facilities to storage hydrogen. The installation of heat pumps will also contribute to reducing consumption: REPowerEU aims to install this year a number of pumps capable of replacing the equivalent of 1.5 bcm of Russian gas imports, while the Fit for 55 plan expects the deployment of 30 million heat pumps by 2030, in order to reduce consumption by approximately 35 bcm (Gili 2022).

Are these realistic targets? Analysis and evaluations

The purpose to increase natural gas imports by 10 bcm through the existing gas pipelines appears to be a difficult prospect in the short term: although the European Commission deems feasible this increase of flows by 2022, the reality of the facts appears different as - with the exception of Norway - the other EU suppliers (Algeria, Azerbaijan and Libya) are unable to significantly increase production within 12-24 months. Algeria is the EU's third largest supplier after Russia and Norway, with 55 bcm of natural gas exported in 2021 via pipelines and LNG tankers (Calik 2022): considering its huge natural gas reserves - 2,300 bcm (British Petroleum Statistical Review of World Energy 2021, 34) - Algeria is the main energy partner called to increase its exports to the EU through existing gas pipelines. The Italian peninsula should play the role as the main hub for the potential increase of Algerian gas exports to the EU, through the Transmed pipeline and exploiting the unused capacity which amounts to about 10 bcm.

Following the visit of Italian Prime Minister Draghi, the Algerian national energy company Sonatrach declared its willingness to increase exports up to 9 bcm per year by 2024, which is apparently a significant result but in reality means that only additional 3 bcm on natural gas will be delivered this year (Il Sole 24 Ore 2022). Algeria is unable to significantly increase its national production or to carry out new projects (gas pipelines and LNG terminals), because of scarce investments in exploration activities of new fields and the high production costs, also considering the growing domestic demand of energy that must be necessarily satisfied in order to avoid dangerous social tensions. Furthermore, Algerian decision to not renew the agreement with Morocco – due to diplomatic tensions with this transit country related to the Western Sahara issue and the role of the Polisario Front – will stop natural gas supply through the Maghreb-Europe gas pipeline, undermining the opportunity to use the spare capacity of this infrastructure (nearly 7 bcm) to increase exports to Spain and the EU (Fakir 2022).

The condition of permanent conflict in Libya and the lack of a nationally-recognized central power prevent the exploitation of the Libya’s huge gas potential: international companies are discouraged to invest in this country due to the high instability that negatively affects the exploration activities of new fields, any increases in hydrocarbon production, as well as the regularity of supplies.

Following the launch of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) – which represents the final segment of the Southern Energy Corridor, a EU-flagship project of energy diversification – Azerbaijan has confirmed its strategy of cooperation with Brussels, aimed at strengthening European energy security. Baku government has expressed its availability to increase the volumes of natural gas through the TAP (which currently delivers 7.5 bcm of natural gas) even if at the moment its maximum capacity is 10 bcm. Although the TAP consortium has already planned to double the infrastructure capacity, this project will take 4 to 6 years to complete the works to expand the capacity of the pipeline and to increase the production of gas from new Azerbaijani fields, which will be allocated for export (Frappi 2022). Moreover, Turkey's energy needs must be carefully considered, as a nation highly dependent on Russian gas imports and Azerbaijan's main energy partner in the construction of the Tanap gas pipeline, that delivers Azerbaijani gas through Turkey to the European borders (Sassi 2022).

Another relevant factor is represented by the influence of Moscow on the Caspian basin: Russia always opposes to any project to realize energy transport infrastructure that connects the Central Asian shore with the Caucasian one. It should be noted that two days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijani President Aliyev and Russian President Putin signed an agreement that substantially upgraded bilateral relations to the rank of "allies" (allied cooperation). In addition to an extended cooperation in various sectors (including energy), it appears significant that the agreement provides that the parties must avoid conducting economic activities that could cause direct or indirect damage to the other party (Azertag 2022); consequently, if we look at the current geopolitical scenario, an Azerbaijan's potential support for the construction of the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline - fuelled with natural gas exports from Turkmenistan (fourth nation in the world for natural gas reserves) - would produce an evident economic damage to Moscow, as these volumes would offer an alternative to the Russian gas imports in the European markets. Paradoxically, only a few months before the outbreak of the war, the European Commission removed the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline from the list of projects of common interest (European Commission 2021b), even if the changed scenario will certainly push Brussels and the member states to review their position.

As regards the priority of increasing LNG imports to replace Russian gas, the United States and Qatar can support the diversification efforts of European states. Following the summit of the European Council in mid-March, the US President Biden promised the EU 15 bcm of additional LNG exports by 2022, with the purpose to reach 50 bcm per year by 2030 (The White House 2022). This significant commitment of the United States - thanks to a natural gas production which is constantly rising - implies the urgent need for EU states to invest in the construction of new regasification terminals, both onshore and offshore (the so-called Floating Storage and Regasification Unit, FSRU, namely LNG carriers anchored offshore and specifically used for regasification purposes), in order to benefit from US LNG, which also has a higher price than Russian gas, which is economically convenient. Following this agreement, the United States strengthens its position as the main LNG exporter to the EU, combining the additional 15 bcm of gas expected for 2022 with the normal volumes of exports, which reached 22 bcm in 2021. However, it is necessary to underline the lack of balance which also characterizes EU's LNG imports, linked to the reliance on a small number of suppliers: in fact, in 2021, over 70% of European LNG imports came from three countries - the United States (26%), Qatar (24%) and Russia (20%) thanks to the Yamal terminal which exported mainly to the ports of northern Europe - a condition that makes it necessary and urgent to identify new suppliers in order to improve the strategy of energy diversification (US Energy Information Administration 2022).

Qatar - the world's second largest LNG exporter - has announced its intention to increase production from 77 million tons to 126 per year by 2027, part of which can be allocated for European markets but only in a few years, as 70% of Doha's current LNG exports is delivered to Asian markets on the basis of long-term contracts, and cannot be therefore redirected to the EU (Raimondi 2022). The need to increase imports of liquefied natural gas as part of a diversification strategy was also contained in the 2014 European Energy Security Strategy, and since then European states have tried to adapt their energy infrastructures. Despite the efforts, some critical issues have to be addresses: firstly, the EU has an adequate regasification capacity (215 bcm per year) but it widely under-used, if we consider that EU imported 77 bcm of natural gas in 2021. Furthermore, these LNG terminals are geographically located along the coasts of Western Europe bordering the Atlantic

(Spain and France are the main importing countries, respectively 21.3 and 18.3 bcm) and often not connected with the rest of the European markets (European Commission 2022b).

Conclusion

The will of the European Commission to achieve the ambitious targets included in the REPowerEU document, namely to completely eliminate Russian gas imports by 2030, is frustrated by the real scenario: if on the one hand, a reduction in the use of Russian gas seems realistic to obtain, thanks to the adoption of measures focusing on energy efficiency and on the increase of renewable sources' share in the energy mix, on the other hand it is hard to image that the EU will be able to obtain additional 60 bcm of natural gas from non-Russian suppliers in the next seven months. As a matter of fact, for the start of new hydrocarbon production and for the construction of new transport infrastructures it will take a few years and the availability of investments to finance these operations, also considering that these results could not alter the existing imbalance: for example, Azerbaijan certainly is a reliable energy partner, which would like to increase exports even if in reality the additional 12 bcm of natural gas (2 bcm of the current spare capacity and 10 bcm with the doubling of the TAP) will be able to replace only a small part of the Russian imports, which in 2021 amounted to 155 bcm.

In the medium term, a significant contribution could come from the construction of the Eastmed gas pipeline (not mentioned in the REPoweEU) designed to export gas production - 8-10 bcm - from offshore fields located in the Levant basin (Israel and Cyprus) to European markets, even if the sensitive issue concerning the transit of the underwater pipeline in the disputed territorial waters between the Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus remain to be solved. As regards the increase in imports of liquefied natural gas, the potential US contribution is strictly linked to the logic of international markets, according to which US LNG exports would be primarily delivered to the nations willing to pay the highest price, such as China, South Korea, Japan. It is therefore necessary to configure future US gas supplies within the framework of a transatlantic energy partnership aimed at achieving the strategic priority to bolster the energy security condition of the EU member countries.

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Pro-Kyiv foreign combatants in Ukraine

The first wave of foreign fighters in the Donbas

The current war in Ukraine has quickly created a flow of foreign combatants heading to the conflict area. However, it should be recalled that a first wave of volunteers from abroad had already appeared in 2014, with the outbreak of an armed conflict in the disputed region of the Donbas. At that time, after the so-called «Euromaydan» protests and clashes (November 2013 - February 2014) and the removal from office of the pro-Russian president Viktor F. Yanukovych (22 February 2014), Moscow unilaterally annexed Crimea (March 2014) and in practice supported the «separatist» claims of a part of the Donbass. In the spring of 2014, in this eastern region of Ukraine a serious conflict broke out between the Ukrainian armed forces and some paramilitary units, on the one hand, and the separatist militias supported by Moscow, on the other. The clashes were intense until February 2015, when a ceasefire was achieved, with the so-called Minsk II Protocol, but actually the conflict has never ended definitively (for example, Marone 2022). In recent years, Russia has practically supported the two separatist territories of eastern Donbass, the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic; finally, as is well known, on February 21, 2022, in a move fraught with consequences, President Putin officially recognized their independence.

The Ukrainian crisis of 2014 also led to the development of a flow of thousands of fighters from abroad. In this regard, it is worth noting that, in general, in the last eight years, while the interest in jihadist foreign fighters has been, rightly, very high (among others, Van Ginkel and Entenmann 2016; Marone and Vidino 2018), these foreign fighters in formally Ukrainian territory has so far received little attention (Rękawek 2017; Murauskaite 2020; Rękawek 2021). In total, according to recent estimates (Rękawek 2021), at least 17,000 volunteers, from more than 50 countries, would have fought in the Donbass region; the vast majority, about 15,000, would actually have come from neighboring Russia. About 1,000 people would have arrived from the West: significantly, a part of them in support of the Ukrainian national forces and groups and another portion in defense of the pro-Russian separatist militias (Rękawek 2021). Unlike jihadist foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, many volunteers in Ukraine did not interpret their relocation as definitive and, instead, they preferred to spend only more or less long periods in the theater of war.

Based on the (fragmentary) information currently available, it can be estimated that about 60 fighters left Italy, presumably with a prevalence of volunteers in support of the separatist militias (Marone 2022). On closer inspection, the size of this flow from Italy is not negligible if we consider that in the West only Germany (about 150 volunteers) and, including the Western Balkans, Serbia (about 100) would have shown significantly higher numbers (Rękawek 2021). Furthermore, it may be useful to note, by way of comparison, that in the same period the jihadist foreign fighters linked in some way to Italy were in total just over 140 (including women, who were not authorized to fight) (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2022, p. 85), but only about a fifth of these individuals actually had Italian passports (Marone and Vidino 2018).

For some fighters headed to the Donbas, genuinely ideological motives have presumably played a salient, if not decisive, role. In particular, most Western fighters in the region – 50 to 80 percent of the total, according to recent estimates (Rękawek 2021, p. 6) – would have had far-right views (see also MacKenzie and Kaunert 2021). Oddly, right-wing extremists have sided on both sides of the conflict, namely both Ukraine and the self-proclaimed separatist republics.

The new wave of foreign fighters in support of Ukraine

Today's new wave of foreign volunteers has emerged immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Unlike the first wave, from the beginning recruitment has been mainly managed by the two states involved in the conflict, often in highly publicized ways. In this sense, on closer inspection, the expression "foreign fighters" seems inappropriate in this circumstance, considering that usually this concept is used to technically identify foreign volunteers who join *non*-state armed groups (among others, see Hegghammer 2010; Malet 2013).

In particular, the Ukrainian government as early as February 27, 2022 (just three days after the Russian invasion) publicly announced the establishment of a special International Legion, incorporated into its regular armed forces. On March 5, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyiv even launched a special website in English, which indicates the contact details to which foreign citizens interested in fighting can turn, country by country (these countries currently do not include Italy). Selection and recruitment activities abroad are managed by Ukrainian diplomatic structures. It is worth noting that the activity of autonomous recruitment by controversial military units has so far been completely residual; the Azov Regiment, well known for its neo-Nazi roots (see Umland 2019), would have facilitated the arrival in Ukraine of only few dozen people (Rękawek 2022).

According to the available information, enlistment abroad involves a rapid selection phase of aspiring volunteers in support of Kyiv. At the beginning, no special requirements were required; nevertheless, after a few days, the Ukrainian authorities made it clear that would-be volunteers had to have previous military experience.

This Ukrainian initiative has attracted the interest of thousands of people around the world. According to the government authorities of Kyiv, no less than 20,000 foreign volunteers have enlisted so far; in other words, according to these indications, in a matter of few weeks this new flow would have surpassed the total number of foreign fighters deployed on both sides in the Donbass war, which broke out back in 2014.

Individual motivations

From a social science point of view, while the concept of «foreign fighter» is not very suitable to identify this new wave, the expression «mercenary» is also problematic (see, among others, Hegghammer 2010, p. 58); in fact, on the basis of the information currently available, most of these foreign volunteers do not appear to be motivated mainly by the promise of a material compensation.

Despite the multiplicity of biographical trajectories, it is possible to temporarily identify some trends in the individual profiles of recruits that suggest other types of motivation. A part, presumably a minority, of the foreign volunteers has clear ideological orientations, even radical ones. Interestingly, these kinds of ideological reasons appear to be less pronounced at the moment, compared to the first wave of foreign fighters in the Donbas.

In relation to the current wave, it can be assumed that many volunteers, even from the West, are enlisting with a view to support the Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion, without at the same time necessarily having radical ideological orientations. From their perspective, war is typically interpreted as the unacceptable aggression of a democratic and friendly nation by a great military power led by an authoritarian government; as in other conflicts in which foreign volunteers have been active (Malet 2013), the stakes are presented as even broader and higher than those associated with this specific, geographically circumscribed conflict. This motivation of an ideal nature can probably be combined, more or less consciously, with a variety of strictly personal reasons, such as a quest for identity, a desire to test oneself in an extreme condition, a sense of adventure (cf. Malet 2013; Arielli 2018).

The symbolic value of recruitment

It can be argued that the apparent rapid influx of thousands of foreign volunteers is a success for Kyiv, at least symbolically. As is well known, the Ukrainian government, also thanks to the communication skills of President Volodymyr O. Zelensky, has managed to present Ukraine's defense against the Russian invasion as a cause of global scope, presented not only as noble but also as directly relevant to the interests of other states and other populations.

For its part, the Russian Federation has tried, unsurprisingly, to belittle this flow of foreign volunteers. For example, in a speech, reported in English, too, on the website of the Russian Defense Minister on March 25, 2022, General Sergei Rudskoy claimed that Ukraine «has become the destination of 6,595 foreign mercenaries and terrorists from 62 states» (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation 2022b). Presumably this statement, which does not mention the source of this alleged information, is intended not only to diminish the total number of foreign volunteers who came to Ukraine, from a quantitative point of view, but also to devalue their role, from a qualitative point of view, by presenting them precisely as hired mercenaries and dangerous terrorists.

Actual performance on the battlefield

When it comes to actual military performance, the assessment appears more complex and probably depends on the skills and experience previously gained by individual combatants. Overall, the existing scientific literature on foreign fighters has suggested that their contribution on the battlefield is not necessarily positive (Bakke 2014; Rich and Conduit 2015): foreign fighters usually do not speak the local language, do not know places and customs of the conflict area, are sometimes inadequately prepared to fight, and even risk fueling tensions and divergences within armed groups.

In any case, for its part, Moscow has tried to deliberately target the flow of pro-Kyiv foreign volunteers. For example, in an official briefing, the spokesman of the Russian Ministry of Defense explicitly warned that «foreign mercenaries are not entitled to the status of prisoners of war» and the «best thing that awaits them at the time of arrest is a criminal prosecution» (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation 2022a). Russia also deliberately targeted training centers for foreign volunteers, even a few kilometers away from the border with Poland. It is likely that the purpose of these targeted attacks by the Russian Federation was not only to physically eliminate some foreign volunteers, but also, for the purpose of deterrence, to discourage the arrival of new recruits from abroad.

The legal profile

One of the most relevant and sensitive issues regarding foreign volunteers in Ukraine concerns their legal profile. In many Western countries, the legality of this choice is the subject of debate. It can be recalled, for example, that in the United Kingdom, on February 27, 2022, the Foreign Secretary, Elizabeth M. Truss, stated in an interview on British television that she supported British volunteers, only to be in practice contradicted by her colleague of the Ministry of Defence, Defence Secretary R. Ben Wallace, a few hours later (Merrick 2022). In Australia, on February 28, the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, while admitting that he could «absolutely understand the strong feelings and motivations» of people intending to leave for Ukraine, warned that «the legality of such actions are uncertain under Australian law» (Stayner 2022).

As for the states of the European Union, it is worth recalling that on 28 March 2022 a meeting of the Ministers of Justice of Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain (the so-called «Vendôme Group») in Brussels, with the participation of the European Commissioner for Justice, ended with an official press release according to which «Ministers unequivocally discourage Europeans to join the fight on the battleground» in Ukraine.

In Italy, from a technical point of view, the legislation on the subject is quite complex. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that, without an authorization from the Italian Government, being enrolled and, even more clearly, actively enlisting others can constitute a criminal offence. Along these lines, on March 24, 2022, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation clarified in a dedicated note that «such conduct can be considered criminally relevant pursuant to current legislation (art. 244 and 288 of the Penal Code)» and «in order to protect the safety of Italian citizens» it reiterated «the absolute discouragement to go to the country» (Farnesina 2022). According to open-source information (Ciriaco and Foschini 2022), at the time of writing, the Italian fighters in Ukraine would be less than 20.

Conclusions

The current war between Russia and Ukraine has resulted in the creation of a new wave of foreign fighters in support of Kyiv. This flow of volunteers, backed and organized directly by the Ukrainian government, may represent a symbolic success for the cause of the country attacked by foreign forces, but it does not necessarily represent a significant resource from a military point of view.

The individual motivations of these fighters are probably manifold. A substantial part of these volunteers could be motivated by the desire to support Ukraine and would not have clear extremist ideological orientations, unlike most of the fighters who left to participate in the armed conflict that broke out in the Donbass in 2014; nevertheless, the information about these new foreign combatants is still limited and fragmentary. In any case, the action of these volunteers, including Italian citizens, raises delicate legal questions.

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Osservatorio Strategico
Part Two

New Israeli-Palestinian Escalation: Low-intensity Conflict or All-out War?

The two drivers of the escalation

The approaching of the festivities of the three monotheistic religions – Ramadan, Passover and Easter – corresponded with a new cycle of tension, violence and terrorism in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. This is the most significant escalation since May 2021, when the fourth Gaza War took place. Although it began gradually from the end of February 2022, for the purposes of this study, it will be examined the period from March 22 – the day of the first terrorist attack on Israeli soil that resulted in casualties – to May 8. Even after the latter date, however, the escalation phase cannot be considered to have ended. The Israeli-Palestinian escalation of tensions is part of a permanent low-intensity conflict (LIC), meaning that it is not possible to indicate a clear beginning and end of the escalation, rather only an increase or decrease in a condition of continuous low-intensity warfare. There are two drivers along which the escalation of hostilities has been observed in the current phase. On one hand, the return of terrorist attacks with the use of firearms on the Israeli territory; on the other hand, the tensions and clashes in Jerusalem, with the epicenter being in the Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound/Temple Mount, to which are added stabbing terrorist attacks in the same city. The actors, the tactics used, and the geographical location of the events seem, for the moment, to suggest a different direction and thus the need to keep the two theatres separate. On the contrary, the objectives may turn out to be converging towards a single front in the medium term. Both cycles of violence have provoked two specular reactions: the first represented by the launching of a broad anti-terrorist military operation by Israel, with the epicenter in the Jenin area, northern West Bank; the second by the sporadic firing of rockets from the Gaza Strip to which the Israel Air Force (IAF) responded with air raids on Hamas hubs in Gaza.

With regard to the first driver of the escalation, five terrorist attacks have been carried out on the Israeli soil, respectively in Be'er Sheva, Hadera, Bnei Brak, Tel Aviv and El'ad[1]. Two elements should be underlined about this new terrorist wave that have not occurred for a long time: the use of firearms by the terrorists, with the exception of the first and the last attacks, and the high number of casualties (19) caused during a "peacetime" – i.e. excluding the periods of the so-called Gaza Wars (2008-09, 2012, 2014, 2021). The attack in Be'er Sheva, stabbing and ramming, took place on March 22 and provoked four casualties. The terrorist was identified as Muhammad Ghaleb Abu al-Qi'an, a Bedouin with Israeli citizenship from the village of Hura. The attacker had been sentenced in 2015 to four years in prison for supporting ISIS. The attack was not claimed by any organization, but only "inspired" by Daesh (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2022a). On March 27, the first gun attack was recorded in Hadera, with two victims. The terrorists were two Arab-Israelis from Umm al-Fahm, namely Ayman Ighbariah and Ibrahim Ighbariah[2]. The latter had been arrested in 2016 due to connections to ISIS. This time, the Islamic terrorist organization itself claimed responsibility for the attack, even though it is unlikely that there was any prior operational

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1. In the same time period, the total number of attacks is higher. Only the main ones have been considered here, using two selection criteria: the weapon used and the number of victims. For a more in-depth look at all other attacks, see the sources in the bibliography.
2. The issue of terrorism and, more generally, of internal violence, in which Arab citizens with Israeli passports are involved, has already become central again in last May's war, in connection with which urban guerrilla episodes occurred in some of Israel's main mixed cities, such as Lod. The clash on the Israeli home front is further fueled by the growing interconnection between terrorism and organized crime in the Arab sector of the population, especially with regard to illegal arms trafficking. For an in-depth discussion of the issue of organized crime, see Elran et. al, 2021.

coordination with the organization. On March 29, Bnei Brak, a north-eastern suburb of Tel Aviv with a Haredì population majority, was the scene of another gun attack that left five people dead. This time the terrorist was one, identified as Dhia Haramshah, a Palestinian from Ya'bed, a village near Jenin. The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, the Fatah's military wing, declared the attacker to be a member of their organization. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to verify his affiliation (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2022b). On April 7, a new terrorist attack with firearms occurred in Tel Aviv, in the Dizengoff central area, with three confirmed victims. The bomber was identified as Raad Fathi Zidan Hazzam, from the Jenin refugee camp, who is considered an operative of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, too (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2022c). On May 5, the Independence Day of the State of Israel, two Palestinians from the village of Rummanah, near Jenin, identified as Assad Yusuf Assad al-Rifa'i and Subhi 'Amad Subhi Sabihat, made an attack in El'ad, a small Israeli town in the center of the country, armed with an axe and knife, killing three civilians. There is no evidence of their affiliation to any organization (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2022d).

Overall, it is not possible to clearly identify the existence of a single coordinated strategy led by a single actor on this first driver of escalation. For its part, Hamas, the main actor of the so-called "Palestinian Resistance Front", has limited itself to welcoming the attacks, refraining from claiming a spiritual and/or operational role. Faced with what the Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett called a "new wave of terrorism", the Jewish State responded by launching the operation "Breaking the Wave", which sees the coordination of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Israeli police and the Shin Bet, the internal security agency. (Israel Prime Minister, 2022a; IDF, 2022). The epicenter of the operations is in the northern West Bank area around Jenin, where some of the terrorists came from.

Turning now to the second driver of the escalation, i.e. that of the clashes and attacks in Jerusalem, it is instead more evident the presence of a coordinated strategy behind the escalation, led by Hamas and the minor terrorist organizations allied to it, such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (JIP). To confirm this, it should be noted how the escalation of violence following April 13, the date on which the Hamas political bureau together with other Palestinian armed factions like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (FPLP), declared popular mobilization throughout the Palestinian territories «in defense of the population and the holy places of Islam» to coincide with the month of Ramadan (Hamas, 2022). On April 15 there was the heaviest day of clashes at the site of the Al - Aqsa Compound/Temple Mount between Palestinian militants and Israeli police forces, with the Israelis being accused of entering the mosque. The Palestinian militants also justified the violence by claiming that some Jews, likely belonging to the "Returning to Temple Mount" movement, wanted to replicate the animal sacrifice at the holy site for Muslims and Jews in view of the Pesach celebrations[3]. In alternating phases, the clashes were repeated over the following days, with peaks of tension recorded every Friday of the week until the last Friday of Ramadan, April 29. On April 30, the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Yaya Sinwar, further radicalized the narrative, claiming that «Israel's violation of Al-Aqsa means a regional, religious war», and announced a global response that would lead to the attack of synagogues worldwide (Boxerman, 2022). For their part, some militants of the Israeli national-religious right tried to challenge the Palestinian protest by attempting to organize a flag march starting from the Damascus Gate on April 20; an event that was cancelled when the Israeli police denied them permission precisely to avoid exacerbating tensions. The events in Jerusalem, in which there were also multiple attempts of stabbing against Israeli security forces,

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3 According to the so-called "Status quo of the holy sites in Jerusalem", Jews are allowed to visit the site of the Al-Aqsa Compound/Temple Mount but are not allowed to pray in. The Status quo is an agreement reached informally in 1967 between the then Israeli Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, and the Jordanian authorities, following the Six-Day War. Despite the Israeli conquest of the site, Dayan agreed on the need to return its control to the Jordanians in order to avoid further escalation between Israel and the Arab states. Since then, the site has been controlled by the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, a Jordanian foundation linked to the Hashemite crown.

were linked to the firing of rockets from Gaza into Israeli territory on April 18 and 20. The IAF responded in both cases by bombing Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip. The connection sought by Hamas between the events in Jerusalem and the launching of rockets from Gaza is symptomatic of the new strategy of the Palestinian faction that, since the May 2021 war, has strengthened its narrative as the sole defender of the Palestinian population and the holy places of Islam against the political-military factions within the Palestinian Authority (PA), led by the Fatah party, which controls the West Bank. In fact, last May, there was a change in the equation of deterrence between Israel and Hamas whereby the latter, faced with events occurring in Jerusalem, reacts with attacks from Gaza. In this sense, Hamas' conduct can be better explained within the framework of the struggle for intra-Palestinian hegemony rather than as an action realistically aimed at weakening Israel's security. The real goal, in fact, is metaphorically to conquer Ramallah, while acting in the battleground of Jerusalem[4]. The heart of this strategy lies in the attempts to penetrate and consequently take control of the Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound/Temple Mount. This reality has been denounced by the PA and Jordan, who are trying to strengthen their coordination at the site in order to weaken the influence of the Islamist movement (Abu Toameh, 2022). The only attack in which the two drivers presented seem to be interwoven is that of Ariel, a Jewish settlement in the West Bank, on April 30. Two Palestinians shot dead an Israeli guard at the entrance to the site. On that occasion, albeit two days later, Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack, in an unusual move that can be explained as an attempt to signal to rival Palestinian factions its activism in the West Bank, too (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2022e).

Domestic implications and international reactions: factors of containment of the escalation?

On the Israeli political arena, two dynamics should be highlighted. Firstly, the dialoguing response of the Bennett government, which, unlike its predecessor Netanyahu in May 2021, is attempting to flank a tough operational response on the security front with conciliatory political and communicative measures with the Palestinian side, in order to avert the outbreak of a new large-scale conflict. This approach has characterized the current Israeli executive since its formation, as demonstrated by the several meetings held between the Israeli ministers and their Palestinian counterparts; but also, by the launch of the Economy for Security Initiative in September 2021 by Foreign Minister Lapid. This new plan aims, if implemented, to roll out confidence-building measures designed to freeze, without necessarily resolving, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Israel MFA, 2021). This approach was followed by contingent decisions aimed at defusing the confrontation with the Palestinians in the weeks of escalation; for instance, the increasing work permits granted to Palestinian citizens from the West Bank and Gaza, and the decision to ban demonstrations of the Israeli national-religious right in Jerusalem as well. It should be also noted the communication narrative use by the Israeli government to signal its real intention to the Palestinians. This is the case of the unusual statement issued by the Prime Minister Office, in which Bennett publicly announced the ban on parliamentarian Itamar Ben-Gvir from demonstrating near the Damascus Gate; or even the press conference held by Lapid, in which he reaffirmed the Jewish state's commitment to respect the status quo in Jerusalem's holy sites (Israel Prime Minister, 2022b; Israel MFA, 2022).

Secondly, however, the escalation has triggered a dangerous political crisis within the heterogeneous government majority that support the Bennett government. The presence, for the first time in history, of an Arab party in the Israeli government is posing a constraint on Israel in taking

[4] The intra-Palestinian conflict has been prevalent since 2007, when Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, challenging the authority of the secular-nationalist Palestinian factions entrenched in the West Bank – not politically but militarily and institutionally. The convening and the subsequent suspension of new Palestinian legislative elections by the PA last year has reignite the internal rivalry.

more drastic measures against the Palestinians. At the same time, Ra'am, the Arab party led by Mansour Abbas, announced on April 18 the freezing of its participation in the government majority, in controversy with the government's handling of tensions in Jerusalem[5]. Any withdrawal of support for Bennett would bring down the government and lead Israel to have new elections. On May 11, a few days after the resumption of the Knesset's work, Abbas declared his return to full membership of the government coalition, only after noting that the critical issues highlighted had been positively overcome. It is clear, however, that the fragile condition of the Israeli executive is not destined to vanish, also due to the emergence of a critical front from the ranks of right-wing parties, as the party led by Bennett himself, *Yamina.*

On the Palestinian side, there should be noted a shrewd conduct of the escalation by both Hamas and the PA. As previously mentioned, Hamas at this stage has an interest in maintaining a political rather than a military confrontation, in order to marginalize the opposing Palestinian factions. That is why for the time being it has neither claimed nor orchestrated attacks on Israeli soil outside Jerusalem. On the contrary, a new military escalation in Gaza with Israel would weaken his position, undermine international reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip after the 2021 war, and end up exacerbating domestic popular discontent. More delicate is the position of Abu Mazen who, while firmly condemning the conduct of the Israeli security forces, has published, at the request of the Israeli Minister of Defense Gantz, two statements of condemnations after the Bnei Brak and El'ad terror attacks – together with the one in Tel Aviv, the three attacks perpetrated by Palestinians from the West Bank, hence from the territory under AP administration (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2022f). At this stage, the Palestinian president has an interest in not blowing up the most dialogue-oriented Israeli government in a decade. On the other hand, however, the supportive reaction to the attacks showed by a large part of the Palestinian population as well as by middle ranks of the AP administration should be highlighted.

On the international level, there is a common trend of actors either close to Israel or to the various Palestinian factions showing that they are not interested in further escalation or alternatively that they want to work towards a decreasing of tensions. In general, this preference for de-escalation is dictated by at least two dynamics. The first one, on a regional and medium-term level, it is represented by the appeasement process that has been involving the main regional player over the past two years; from Turkey to the UAE, from Iran to Saudi Arabia. An example was given by the end of the Gulf crisis, which had led to the isolation of Qatar from the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners. Another one is the Vienna negotiation on the Iranian nuclear issue, which lead Tehran to a policy of greater restraint on several dossiers. On a global and short-term level, the conflict in Ukraine is also having indirect negative implications in the Middle East.

Among the most active players on the diplomatic front is the United States. Unlike last year, the Biden administration is making efforts to calm tensions and foster dialogue between the parties. This includes several talks with representatives of Israel, the PA, Jordan and Egypt; the arrival of a State Department delegation in Jerusalem and Ramallah in mid-April; the visit of Jordanian King Abdullah II to the White House on May 13. Egypt and Jordan have placed themselves on the dialogue front, albeit following a strong condemnation of Israeli actions in Jerusalem. Cairo, historically engaged as the main mediator in the indirect dialogue between Israel and Hamas, has an interest in avoiding a new conflict in Gaza, where it is also investing economically in reconstruction work. Amman, while firmly condemning what happened in the Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound /Temple Mount, has the need to continue to cooperate with the Jewish state to prevent Jerusalem's holy sites from

[5] A decision described by many as symbolic and of no practical consequence, given that the Knesset was suspending its work in those days to reconvene on May 9 after the Jewish holidays. In reality, it should be pointed out that Abbas' move was agreed with Bennett and Lapid to calm criticism on Ra'am coming from the Arab-Israeli sector, which was calling for an immediate abandonment of the government.

falling under Hamas' control. More interesting is the position of Qatar and Turkey. Doha, a long-standing economic supporter of Gaza, has moved to the forefront of the mediation efforts to defuse the escalation on the Palestinian side through dialogue with the PA and Hamas. Like Egypt, Qatar is investing in the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip. For their part, since the end of 2021 Turkey has undertaken an attempt to normalize dialogue with Israel after years of bilateral crisis. The rapprochement culminated with the visit of the Israeli President Herzog to Ankara in early March which corresponded with a Turkish stricter control on the movement of Hamas operatives into Turkish territory. At this state Iran, the main supporter of Hamas and the Palestinian Resistance Front, is engaged in the Vienna talks on the nuclear issue, and has an interest in not exacerbating tensions with Western countries on delicate dossiers such as the Israeli-Palestinian one. Finally, the countries which are involved in the Abraham Accords, like the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have resumed the process of deepening relations with the Israel after an initial condemnation of the Israeli police actions in Jerusalem. This confirms how the Arab-Israeli dossier is now separate from the Israeli-Palestinian one. Those just presented, both on the domestic and international levels, are probably the main discontinuities that explain why the escalation of the last few weeks has not yet triggered an all-out war, as seen in May 2021 with casus belli of lesser magnitude[6] .

Assessments and future scenarios

At the moment, it is likely that the described escalation of terrorism and violence will settle down to a low intensity regime, as part of the traditional cyclical trend that afflicts Israeli-Palestinian relations. It will not cease in the short term, avoiding at the same time to turn towards an all-out conflict like instead happened last May. Of the two drivers described, the new terrorist wave in Israel is the most difficult to foresee and is therefore the one to pay the most attention to. That said, it is possible to identify some red flags that, if materialized, could directly or indirectly provoke a deterioration of the security landscape and, as a consequence, an explosion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the Israeli domestic front, the most important dynamic to monitor is the resilience of the government majority. Should it fail, and a return to elections takes place, we are likely to see a harsher political polarization from the election campaign that could push the current executive to abandon its policy of dialogue towards the Palestinian side. The main threats to stability of the current government at this stage do not come from the Arab Ra'am party but from the national-religious right-wing factions, starting with individual MPs from *Yamina,* who demand a tougher policy on the Palestinian issue. To confirm this, it should be noted that the Israeli government approved the construction of 4,000 new housing units in Jewish settlements in the West Bank at the beginning of May. A decision aimed at defusing pressure from the right wing of the government. Temporally, it is in the short term that the fate of the current government could be decided. The summer session of the Knesset opened on May 9 and will end at the end of July. The government will try to overcome this period.

On the Palestinian politics, there are no particular variables ready to shift at the moment. The political-institutional stalemate between the PA and Hamas and the division into two separate proto-state Palestinian entities in 2007, between the West Bank and Gaza, have made Palestinian politics much more immune to upheavals. A possible shock could come should President Abu Mazen's health deteriorate or lead to his death; a scenario on which it is not possible to make a reliable assessment at the moment. In such a scenario, there would be an upsurge of intra-Palestinian tensions in the West Bank with possible spillover into Israeli territory. It is therefore not possible to draw a time perspective on this point.

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[6] Among the contingent causes that led to the outbreak of the Fourth Gaza War last year was the issue of Sheik Jarrah, i.e. the attempted eviction of a number of Palestinian families from their homes claimed by Israeli associations.

On the international level, the main dossier to be monitored is the progress of the Iranian nuclear negotiations. For several weeks now, partly due to the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, the talks in Vienna have been at a standstill. On the initiative of Europe, attempts are being made to bring the parties, above all Washington and Tehran, back to the negotiating table. An eventual failure of the negotiations could push Iran towards a more radical regional policy. One of the issues to be impacted would be the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which Iran is Hamas' main partner. The implications, however, would not be direct, since the Palestinian organization, although dependent on Tehran from a technological and military point of view, enjoys almost complete operational and decision-making independence – quite different would be the case for actors like Hezbollah in Lebanon. Temporally, the fate of the JCPOA is likely to be decided in the short term, in a matter of weeks. A possible military and/or diplomatic freeze or resolution of the conflict in Ukraine would bring the turning point on this dossier closer.

Finally, it cannot be ruled out that sudden, accidental events not directly controlled by one of the players, could act as a black swan capable of distorting the assessments presented above, provoking a sudden escalation of the war. This event could be, for instance, a larger terrorist attack, or unexpected consequences generated by the IDF counter-terrorist operation in the West Bank. A partial example of this was what happened on May 11, when Al Jazeera's Palestinian correspondent, Shireen Abu Akleh, was killed while covering an Israeli operation in the Jenin refugee camp. The dynamics of that events are not clear at the moment, with Israelis and Palestinians accusing each other of shooting the journalist, one of the most well-known faces of the pan-Arab media. Events like this could spark an escalation. In case of greater escalation, we could witness the return of the practice of Israeli targeted killings, i.e. the targeted killings aimed at decapitating the leadership of Hamas, to which the Palestinian organization would respond, as already leaked, with a resumption of suicide/bombing attacks on Israeli territory, something that has not been seen since the end of the Second Intifada.

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Sahel, Gulf of Guinea, sub-Saharan Africa and Horn of Africa

Federico Donelli

GERD's file at the center of Beijing's African agenda: a litmus test of China's new orientation?

In 2019, the Trump administration revived GERD tripartite negotiations after a stalemate caused primarily by political instability inside Sudan and Ethiopia. The American delegation managed to organize three rounds of talks that ended with the signature of a preliminary agreement among the parties. The optimistic and cooperative mood was short-lived. Ethiopia chose to interrupt the negotiations, viewing its position as irreconcilable with the demands of Egypt and Sudan. Officially, two obstacles prompted Addis Ababa to decide to suspend talks. The first one concerns the volume of water Ethiopia would be willing to release from the dam in case of drought periods. The second issue of disagreement relates to the mechanisms for settling future controversies. On these two matters, the Ethiopian positions, on the one hand, and the Egyptian-Sudan ones seem irremovable. The two downstream countries are willing to reach a legally binding agreement on the filling and operation phases of the dam. However, Egypt and Sudan demand in exchange that Ethiopia agree to a binding mechanism, in the form of arbitration, to settle any future disputes. On the other hand, Addis Ababa has always stressed that the two issues must be addressed separately. Furthermore, Ethiopia does not want to finalize an agreement that defines mandatory mechanisms for future dispute resolution. According to the Ethiopian delegation, future disputes will be negotiated case by case. Therefore, mediation efforts promoted by the United States and partly led by representatives from the African Union have stalled on these two points. Moreover, the Ethiopian government considered the American attitude too pro-Egyptian. Consequently, negotiations have generated a deep distrust among Ethiopia's political elites toward the United States. As a result, Washington is no longer considered a neutral and reliable mediator by Ethiopia.

Although Ethiopia currently seems to have no intention to revise its unilateral policy, the efforts to revive diplomatic negotiations among the parties have continued. Some regional (African Union, Senegal, South Africa) and extra-regional actors such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and China encourage the quest for a solution to the Nile waters dispute. The latter group of players has increased diplomatic efforts by leveraging good political relations and economic/commercial ties with the three disputing countries. After years of low profile, China has increased its interest in regional political issues, including interstate disputes. The Chinese attitude indicates a possible move beyond the principle of non-interference that has marked Beijing's approach to the African continent over the past two decades. Since February, China has exploited the distraction of the U.S. and European countries to accelerate the path of consolidation of its political footprint in Africa. The Ukraine crisis exacerbated the pre-existing Biden administration's confusion about the African agenda. Within a few months, the succession of two special envoys to the Horn of Africa - Jeffrey Feltman and David Satterfield - shows the American difficulties. Satterfield's resignation highlighted the lack of a consistent policy that could address the many Horn's disputes, including the GERD one. Beijing has chosen to try to fill such a diplomatic vacuum.

China appointed an experienced diplomat, Xue Bing, as a special envoy for Africa's Horn. The office is new in China's diplomatic structure, and its establishment proves the geostrategic relevance of the region to Beijing's economic, political, and security interests. Xue Bing championed the "Outlook on Peace and Development" initiative for the Horn of Africa promoted by Foreign Minister Wang Yi. The initiative has launched a path to build a peaceful political environment in the region following three pillars or focus areas: security, economic development, and governance. The plan includes the management of the Nile dispute. Chinese engagement regarding GERD and other regional disputes aim to promote African solutions to African problems. Beijing's goal thus would not be to replace other international players but, on the contrary, to reduce external involvement and influence on the continent. For this purpose, Xue Bing promotes establishing a meeting platform where all regional stakeholders can express, discuss, and find solutions to the region's problems. While the idea seems ambitious, China has indicated its willingness to back the initiative fully by using its economic leverage. In doing so, Beijing will gain a prominent position in the Horn of Africa political affairs. At the same time, China could begin to drive political developments on the continent by failing to adhere to the cardinal principle of its foreign policy: non-interference in interstate disputes.

Over the two decades of China's expanding presence in Africa, Beijing has adopted a stance based on non-interference. China has thus emerged as a neutral partner for the African states. It has promoted an alternative model to Western countries' economic development agendas constrained by the regulatory and institutional conditionalities (Hanauer and Morris 2014). The energy sector is one of the most significant Chinese interests. China's investments in the sector, mainly the renewable energy field, have reconfigured Africa's infrastructure map. Chinese companies, supported politically and financially by the government, have exploited know-how to start building very ambitious infrastructure projects, including several dams. In the eyes of African governments, Beijing has become a large-scale funder of development projects. It represents a concrete alternative to traditional bodies (International Monetary Fund, IMF; World Bank, WB) and actors (United States, European Union). These dynamics have also impacted the geopolitics of the Nile River Basin by shifting the center of gravity toward Addis Ababa. Although Chinese support for Ethiopian projects has gradually turned the balance of power in Ethiopia's favor, Beijing has also succeeded in preserving excellent relations with Egypt and Sudan.

Nowadays, China enjoys many resources to leverage as a mediator in the Nile dispute. Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt share excellent political and trade relations with Beijing. As previously mentioned, China has financed part of the GERD-related facilities by providing a loan of about $1 billion. The Chinese built transmission lines from the dam to Addis Ababa (Nyabiage 2020). China is interesting in seeing the dam completed soon. Beijing considers the energy that GERD will produce necessary to fuel the growth of the many industrial parks created and financed by China on Ethiopian soil. The dam is only the core of a larger Ethiopian energy development project based on renewable resources, mostly hydropower, and funded by China for nearly $2 billionAs in other African countries, Beijing's financial weight in Ethiopia is essential to the resilience of the country's entire economic system. Chinese loans to Addis Ababa have reached more than $13 billion, and Beijing holds more than 50 percent of Ethiopia's foreign debt. Recently, there has been a strengthening of relations in the security sector. The conflict in Tigray has further tightened Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's bond with Beijing. During the months of conflict, China never failed to provide diplomatic support to Ethiopia within international organizations. Beijing also provided assistance and equipment to the Ethiopian army.

If Sino-Ethiopian ties are flourishing, Beijing's relations with Khartoum are also excellent. Despite the instability and political upheavals of the past three years, China has maintained a primary role in Sudan. Beijing currently supports the transitional government led by General Abdel-Fattah Al-Burhan. Sudan is relevant to China's African agenda due to its strategic ports on the Red Sea, such as Port Sudan. Further, Khartoum was one of the first African countries to sign the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) agreement. Nowadays, Beijing considers it essential to develop the future African trade network.

Like Ethiopia and Sudan, China has also increased political and trade relations with Egypt by integrating the country into the BRI project framework. Over the past five years, Beijing has invested significantly in President al-Sisi's mega-project of Egypt's New Administrative Capital (NAC).

Chinese financial commitment to Cairo's most ambitious political project since the Aswan Dam has enabled Beijing to gain greater leverage over the al-Sisi government.

Therefore, as briefly shown, China enjoys many tools to facilitate the opening of new GERD's tripartite negotiations. Beijing has a twofold interest in a peaceful solution to the dispute. On the one hand, the Chinese concern is to protect its investments in the Horn of Africa. The increasing instability triggered by the Nile issue will jeopardize China's interests. On the other hand, a growing member of the Chinese Communist Party's ruling class aspires to increase more and more the country's international prestige. To this end, a successful diplomatic effort on the Nile issue will mean that Beijing succeeded where the United States and the European Union have so far failed. Some signs suggest how Beijing intends to use its economic influence over the three African states to reach a diplomatic solution. If confirmed in the coming months, this trend would signal, along with the increase in the security dimension, that China's Africa policy has entered a new phase. Beijing's political-strategic interests are rapidly overlapping with its traditional economic-commercial ones. The GERD issue could become the first litmus test for China's new policy orientation. However, the opening of tripartite negotiations is not a given. Two conditions are needed for China to play the role of mediator. First, Bejing must revise its traditional neutral and non-interference approach in regional and interstate disputes. Second, Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia have to accept China as a neutral mediator. So far, despite Beijing's economic influence over the three African countries, their will is not sure. At the moment, there does not seem to be either condition.

Despite signs of an ongoing shift in China's policy toward Africa, the cautious and wait-and-see approach will likely prevail in the upcoming months. The Chinese approach tends to burden security costs on other actors (the United States) by reducing Chinese risk. Within the Chinese ruling class, there are also more lukewarm trends about the possibility of launching a mediation. Their main fear is getting stuck in a complicated negotiation that Beijing cannot completely control. More likely, China will decide to support the initiative of other actors without abandoning its intentions to develop an African platform for dispute settlement. Among the diplomatic initiatives, the best chances seem to lie with the efforts of the Emirates, which for several months, in collaboration with Senegal, has been trying to persuade the three African countries to reopen diplomatic talks.

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Beijing zero-Covid policy, an analysis

The zero-Covid policy, an iron strategy

Shanghai had reached, with outbreaks of infection located in the megalopolis, the rate of over 5,700 more infected per day, also considering the asymptomatic, for a few days in April (Coronalevel, 2022). The Beijing government had therefore decided to introduce exceptional restrictive measures, which are still partially in place. The main fear of the central government, as declared by official bodies, was not so much a massive spread of the disease as the unpredictability of the situation, especially in a strategic and highly productive area of the People's Republic of China (Xinhua news, 2022). In particular, the aim was to prevent Shanghai's internal outbreaks from touching other cities in the area or in the country, given the characteristics of Shanghai's financial hub. Initially, only some districts of the megalopolis were subjected to a very severe lockdown, prohibiting the passage from one district to another and introducing the curfew measure. With the worsening of the pandemic situation, the government has decided to place the entire city under severe isolation. Residents are allowed to leave their homes for basic needs a limited number of times a week, positives are immediately transported to quarantine centers, and their contacts (even if only from the neighborhood) are placed under severe isolation. In short, the Chinese government intended to maintain its zero-COVID strategy, for a complete eradication of the virus rather than for coexistence as occurs in Western countries. The city authorities, in particular Deputy Mayor Zong Ming, spoke of a plan in various stages, three to be precise, for the "resumption of production" and the return to "normalcy" by the end of June.

The effects of the very strict measures were decidedly negative for the economy and the social structure of the city. For example, many families remained isolated and, since food resources were distributed, in the worst stages of the lockdown, isolated by block and the distribution was not always widespread, some families remained without food for a few days. The mechanism put in place by the authorities in fact provided for a very strict door-to-door delivery for the positives and for all their contacts (therefore placed in isolation), at the time of maximum infections for the state organization but also for the sites and operators of delivery had become unsustainable the effort to make. Since the first months of the pandemic, the zero-COVID strategy has been one of the pillars of China's response policy to the spread of the infection, together with "health aid diplomacy" and "vaccine diplomacy" (Cenusa, 2021). The authorities have always maintained that the zero-COVID policy has also made it possible to start a prompt recovery from the pandemic and save many human lives. President Xi Jinping has repeatedly argued that human lives are of central importance for China to justify the protracted closures of the country's borders and the very strict policies observed for the return to China even of compatriots after the first global waves of infections. However, the latest measures imposed on the population of Shanghai, which are also known for having sparked discontent and small outbreaks of revolt - an extraordinary situation considering the bureaucratic and security apparatus of the Chinese Communist Party (Ni, 2022) - have caused no little surprise and negative comments also on the international stage. The situation created in Shanghai was, on the other hand, quite extreme, if many residents have even had to give up life-saving medical services, such as dialysis therapies because, in some cases, they do not have a negative swab required by the hospital regulations and nevertheless difficult retrieval given the situation. Yet the leaders of the CCP (in the person of Xi Jinping) were able to remember their marble position even on the stage of the Winter Olympics: "If there was a gold medal for the response to the pandemic, China would deserve it" (2022).

Critics to the Zero-Covid strategy and defence

The main criticisms of the Chinese way of dealing with the current phase of the pandemic are leveled in Beijing from a strictly technical-political point of view and from a socio-economic point of view. The World Health Organization, for example, has clearly expressed its skepticism against the application of the Chinese strategy. The WHO emergency policy executive said that the Chinese strategy has too high an impact on the economy and society and that WHO, in close cooperation with the People's Republic of China, is studying a more sustainable method of applying the Chinese strategy (France 24, 2022). Taking into account the importance of Chinese investments in WHO (The New York Times, 2020), the declaration has a very high specific weight. As for the economic concerns about Beijing's choices, these are moved by various Western countries, especially Europeans, which have strong commercial interests with China, also by virtue of the fact that the post-pandemic recovery can be negatively influenced by Beijing's health choices. .

The hard line of the CCP, while causing suffering to the Chinese economy, is placed in the wake of a well-determined social hard power that China, together with the legal hard power, for example expressed in the Hong Kong question, intends to show the international community as part of its “multidimensional” image.

Conclusion.

Beijing, with the imposition health care hard power, even knowing that the situation will be most likely detailed over time, since the summer months are approaching, in which the data of the infected have a tendency to decline, intends to remind the international community own image of determination and inflexibility and reinforce the image of seriousness and inflexibility of the CCP's control apparatus.

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Central Asia's attitude towards *spetzoperaciya*

Introduction

The Central Asian countries that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, follow the events in Ukraine with discretion and without making solemn proclamation. Conquered by Russia in the 19th century and independent republics since 1991, they actually continue to maintain close relations with the Russia Federation. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (like Armenia and Belarus) are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, while Uzbekistan joined the alliance twice (in 1994 and 2006) and withdrew twice (in 1999 and in 2012). The reason behind such discretion is not only the fact that, as Ukraine, the states of Central Asia - albeit with a very different historical link with Russia, arose as sovereign state entities after the collapse of the Soviet Union but because they are united with Ukraine by the arduous process of systemic transformation and identity construction.

Caution and fear of a domino effect.

The attack on Ukraine has turned on the emergency lights in the capitals of Central Asia causing reactions that differ somewhat from each other.

Turkmenistan and Tajikistan underline their neutrality and reluctance to take sides in the conflict, while declaring that any disputes will have to be resolved through dialogue. More positive signals to Moscow come instead from Kyrgyzstan where the Bishkek authorities have accepted the Russian attack with a certain "understanding", although they did not support it. At the same time, they allowed several demonstrations of support for Ukraine to take place in the country.

The clearest positions were taken by the authorities of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan where the authorities of Nur-Sultan and Tashkent refused to accept Russian aggression and did not express support for Moscow's actions. "*If the world is to be divided by the new Iron Curtain, we don't want to be on the wrong side*", Kazakhstan Deputy Minister of Diplomacy Roman Vasilienko confessed in an interview with the German newspaper Die Welt[1] urging Western investors to transfer their activities in Kazakhstan "just to circumvent sanctions against Russia"[2] further refused to recognize the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic. In the case of Kazakhstan, they decided to not provide military support to Russia's actions. The country has also sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine and allowed, albeit to a limited extent, street demonstrations in support of Ukraine. The Kazakhs have also declared to be ready to host Russians and Ukrainians for negotiations, and to act as mediators.

In any case, the Kazakh government seems focused on the potential economic effects of the sanctions. Thus, on February 25, during the summit of the heads of the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), President Tokayev mentioned that the meeting was taking place in a juncture with "an unprecedented increase in geopolitical tensions" without mentioning the fighting in Ukraine. The fears leaked from the meeting were related to a possible crisis that could be experienced by the entire EEU area following the sanctions.

At the same time, however, none of the Central Asian countries openly condemned the Russian attack. This is an easily understandable attitude since Moscow still plays a significant role for the

[1] Volkmann-Schluck P., *Wie Putin seinen Sowjet-Traum zerstört*, Die Welt, 28.03.2022 (last access 12.05.2022) https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/plus237816257/Kasachstan-und-Russland-Wie-Putin-seinen-Sowjet-Traum-zerstoert.html

[2] *V MID Kazachstana otkazalic' or "zheleznogo zanavesa" I prizvali investorov peremestit' svoy biznes v stranu*." KUN.UZ, 29.03.2022 (last access 09.05.2022) https://kun.uz/ru/39849861

Central Asian states and that its influence is considerable both in the political-military and in the economic-social sphere[3].

With regard to economic relations, the first investors in the region are the Russians and the Chinese. The economies of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are connected to Russia, mainly by the network of oil and gas pipelines, through which these countries export energy resources to world markets. Although an alternative pipeline network is being built which goes to the east, including China, without the need for Russian transit, these are still incomplete projects that require long completion times.

On the other hand, a fundamental element of dependence is represented by the manpower. Millions of citizens of these countries are employed in industrial plants or in Russian construction. Figures shows (for the 2021) almost 8 million economic migrants from Central Asia[4] who - with their financial transfers - cover a significant portion of national GDP[5]. It is therefore not difficult to imagine how a freezing of relations with Russia, caused by a possible condemnation of the war in Ukraine, could make challenging economic migration from Central Asia. A further issue linked to the human factor is the Russian-speaking population. In Kazakhstan alone, it represents over 20% of the population. Although there are fewer Russian speakers in other Central Asian countries, this factor still represents an important part of local societies. The idea promoted by the Kremlin that where Russians or only Russian speakers reside, Moscow can intervene in their defense in case of violations of their rights, sounds disturbing in the context of the events in Ukraine (although one must take into account a background and a historical commonality that profoundly differs from that of Central Asia or the Caucasus). The authorities of the Central Asian capitals are aware that in this case they are moving on dangerous ground.

Final remarks

If, therefore, on the one hand the policy of "merging the Tsarist and Soviet lands" causes anxiety in these countries, on the other hand they are closely linked to Russia and are not in a position to be able to challenge it openly. Taking into account the elements limiting the policies of Central Asian states, it is not difficult to see that China will most likely benefit from Russian aggression policy. China would increasingly tightening its ties in the region since it is also considered the most serious investor in this part of the world. At the same time, the current situation creates opportunities to strengthen economic ties in the West widely understood with the countries of Central Asia. The countries of the Central Asian region will seek partners with which they can reduce the extent of the still strong ties with Moscow.

The war in Ukraine has caused diplomatic headaches in Nur-Sultan, Tashkent, Dushanbe and Bishkek, but problems that are more serious threaten Central Asian economies. Economic sanctions, the exodus of foreign companies from Russia and the decline in the value of the ruble portend hard times, especially for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which live off the wages of seasonal workers. Many of the citizens of these countries will potentially lose their jobs, and if they will decide to return home, they will strengthen the army of the unemployed and the poor. This will only increases social hardship and the risk of internal riots.

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3 The Russian military bases are located both in Kyrgyzstan (Kant air base) and in Tajikistan - (Dushanbe and Kuliab), but the Russian military presence must also refer to the type of equipment which, in this case, is Soviet or Russian.

4 *Trudovaya migraciya iz Tsentral'noy Azii: postoyanno rasschityvat' na Rossiyu - oshibochnaya strategiya.* 18.06.2022 (last access 09.05.2022) https://cabar.asia/ru/trudovaya-migratsiya-iz-tsentralnoj-azii-postoyanno-rasschityvat-na-rossiyu-oshibochnaya-strategiya

5 According to 2021 data, income from the workforce employed in Russia represented 30% of the GDP of Tajikistan, 28% of GDP in Kyrgyzstan and almost 12% of the GDP of Uzbekistan. According to 2021 data, income from the workforce employed in Russia represented 30% of the GDP of Tajikistan, 28% of GDP in Kyrgyzstan and almost 12% of the GDP of Uzbekistan.

War and sanctions will also increase inflation and prices, triggered by the COVID epidemic that lasted more than two years. Even worse, Russia - hit by sanctions - has already announced it will no longer sell wheat or sugar to Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Tajiks. Thus, forced to choose between East (Russia) and West, Central Asia will be able to choose the South, i.e. Turkey, Iran, India, and as previously mentioned, China. The latter has been conducting political, and above all economic, expansion in this part of the world for years and the Ukrainian crisis could potentially deprive Central Asia of Russian domination, immediately pushing it towards a new dependency: that of China.

Yemen: the truce and the new government

In early April 2022, the United Nations announced a two-month truce[1], the negotiations led to a power handover from President Hadi to a Presidential Council[2] and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates promised an aid package of over $ 3 billion to the Central Bank of Yemen to stabilize the economy[3].

The establishment of a new Presidential Council and the injection of funds led to a rapid improvement in the value of the Yemeni riyal in the areas nominally controlled by the government. A stronger riyal will increase the purchasing power of the Yemenis[4] at a time when they are suffering from one of the biggest humanitarian crises in the world - according to the United Nations the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has risen from 17.4 to over 19 million people.

However, interruptions in Ukrainian wheat exports and wider price spikes on global commodity markets since early February have already had a significant impact as the country imports around 40-50% of its consumption from Ukraine and Russia[5]. Yemenis are struggling to secure alternative supplies, with only about four months of grain reserves available. Yemen is also a fuel importer, as a result of which fuel and grain prices have already risen significantly across the country. The impact has been particularly severe in areas controlled by the Houthi rebel group, where gasoline prices have risen by more than 50% since the beginning of February.

The higher prices on international markets mean that, to maintain current import levels, traders will need around 40% more strong currency available to support the rising cost of goods. Much of Yemen's strong currency supply comes from workers' remittances that may decline in the coming months given the rising cost of living in host countries. Although many people in Houthis-controlled areas are desperate for the economic situation, the rebels run a police state that does not tolerate and is able to suppress dissent[6].

Yemen quickly became a bargaining chip within the United Nations Security Council following the Ukrainian crisis. The UAE, a major supporter of the Hadi government, abstained from the Security Council resolution condemning the Russian aggression and three days later, as part of a broader agreement, Russia voted in favor of a resolution that included the UAE's proposal to add the Houthis in the list of terrorist groups. Previously, the Russian diplomatic mission to the United Nations had repeatedly threatened to veto similar language targeting the Houthis and called for more balance in declarations and resolutions. Whatever Russia's intentions are, it appears to be geared towards allowing renewed efforts to support a truce in Yemen and to start political negotiations.

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1 International Crisis Group, "The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa", 14 April 2022; https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/impact-russias-invasion-ukraine-middle-east-and-north-africa

2 AlJazeera, "Yemen's warring parties agree to two-month truce, UN says", 1 April 2022; https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/1/yemens-warring-parties-agree-to-two-month-truce-un-says.

3 ISPI, "Yemen: Is the war nearing an end?", 22 aprile 2022; https://ispo.campaign-view.eu/ua/viewinbrowser?od=3zfa5fd7b18d05b90a8ca9d41981ba8bf3&rd=166050ccf2f9c01&sd=166050ccf2efb17&n=11699e4c12d9167&mrd=166050ccf2efb05&m=1

4 International Crisis Group, "Overview, Yemen", April 2022; https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/may-alerts-and-april-trends?utm_source=Sign+Up+to+Crisis+Group%27s+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=a318ef619e-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_01_28_08_41_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1dab8c11ea-a318ef619e-359938605.

5 AlJazeera, "Overshadowed by Ukraine war, Yemen on brink as pledges fall short", 19 March 2022; https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/19/overshadowed-by-ukraine-war-yemen-on-brink-as-pledges-fall-short.

6 International Crisis Group, "Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives", 29 April 2022; https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/233-truce-test-huthis-and-yemens-war-narratives#:~:text=On%201%20April%2C%20the%20UN,by%20Abed%20Rabbo%20Mansour%20Hadi.

For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, this truce produces two results: the reduction of missile and drone attacks by the Houthis and the buildup of a credible anti-Houthi front[7].

Border security remains the key objective for Saudi Arabia but there will be no viable military exit strategy as long as the Houthis continue to achieve economic goals in the Red Sea. In the last decade, the Saudi influence in Yemen decreased indeed: the appointment of the Presidential Council also aims at strengthening Riyadh's position in the political process.

For the Emirates, the situation is the opposite: Abu Dhabi has acquired considerable influence in Yemen following the conflict and wants to preserve the geostrategic projection conquered in the coasts and the islands. Its influence is underlined by the presence in the Presidential Council of many military leaders they support. The launch of US-led Combined Task Force 153 in the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb and Gulf of Aden[8] is coherent with Saudi and Emirati strategies in Yemen: it also aims to combat arms smuggling, thus sending a message to Iran.

The balance of power therefore continues to be unfavorable to the Saudis and their Yemeni allies; furthermore, the prospects for the new Council are not good[9] since its members are a rather heterogeneous group[10] with a very different political, tribal and geographical background.

It includes, among others, Islah, an Islamist party, and the *Southern Transitional Council*, STC, a secessionist group that wants to re-establish an independent south (supported by the Emirates). The two groups in recent years have clashed several times. Representatives in the Council are Aidarous al-Zubaidi, head of the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC); Rashad al-Alimi, a member of the Islah Party who served as director of the presidential office of former President Hadi and the new head of state; Tariq Saleh, grandson of the former Yemeni leader who controls the forces on the Yemeni coast of the Red Sea; Faraj al-Bahsani, governor of Hadramout who leads Hadrami's elite forces; Abd al-Rahman Abu Zaraa, commander of the Brigade of Giants; Sultan al-Aradah, governor of Marib and Othman Mujali, a tribal chief of the Saada governorate who maintains ties with Riyadh[11].

UN Special Envoy Grundberg traveled to Sanaa to meet with the Houthi leadership in April[12]. If he can negotiate an extension of the truce and help initiate political talks it may be possible to avert some of the worst effects of the Ukrainian crisis on the cost of living in Yemen, but if the country returns to active conflict, the prospects for Yemenis are bleak.

So far, the Houthis have for the most part honored the truce, but the situation in the oil-rich province of Marib, where the Houthis have reportedly broken the truce in some cases, remains worrying.

7 AlJazeera, "Gulf states hold Yemen talks despite boycott by the Houthis", 29 March 2022; https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/29/gulf-states-to-hold-yemen-talks-despite-boycott-by-houthi-rebels.

8 Royal Navy, "Royal Navy joins new task force protecting Red Sea shipping", 6 May 2022; https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2022/may/06/20220506-royal-navy-joins-new-task-force-protecting-red-sea-shipping.

9 The Economist, "War-ravaged Yemen gets a truce and dumps a tired president", April 16, 2022; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/04/16/war-ravaged-yemen-gets-a-truce-and-dumps-a-tired-president.

10 E. Milliken, G. Cafiero, "Yemen: New presidential council aims to show it represents change", AlJazeera, 5 May 2022; https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/5/yemens-new-presidential-council-gets-started-on-the-right-foot.

11 Y. Aydi, "Who are the 8 members of Yemen's new presidential council?", AA, 08/04/2022; https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/who-are-the-8-members-of-yemens-new-presidential-council/2558354.

12 B. Riedel, "How to bolster Yemen and Saudi Arabia's brittle peace deal", Brookings Institution, May 10, 2022; https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/05/10/how-to-bolster-yemen-and-saudi-arabias-brittle-peace-deal/?utm_campaign=Brookings%20Brief&utm_medium=email&utm_content=212989793&utm_source=hs_email


SAUDI ARABIA
Sparsely populated
Marib province
Red Sea
Sana'a
Marib
YEMEN
Hodeida
Mixed or disputed
ERITREA
Taiz
Gulf of Aden
Aden
150 km
Areas of control, April 11th 2022
Houthi rebels
Saudi-led coalition
Southern Transitional Council
Source: Polgeonow.com
The Economist

REPowerEU: the European Union, Russia, and the challenge of energy dependence

The Ukraine crisis and the outbreak of the Ukraine war refocused the problem of Europe's dependence on Russia's energy and how such a state of things could affect the elaboration of a common strategy toward Moscow. The events of the following weeks and the difficulties met in elaborating a common sanction strategy confirmed such an impression. The risk that Moscow could leverage its energy resources to retaliate against a Western involvement has been a source of concern since the first days of the war due also to the outspoken Kremlin's declarations (Hackenbroich and Medunic, 2022). On the following day, the request to pay all energy shipments paid in roubles was not only an effort to circumvent the limits imposed on financial transactions but another move in the same direction. The supply agreements that Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) signed during the Winter Olympics in Beijing (4-20 February 2022) have been seen as further confirming the risk (Meidan, 2022). Despite its "thirst for energy", hardly the Asian market will be able to make up for the loss of the European one, at least in the short term. In 2019 (the last "normal" year before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic), the European market was worth 260 billion dollars of Russian energy export. However, a permanent diversion of the Russian flows is a source of concern not only for the countries more dependent on Moscow's supply but also for those that – for a long time – are pointing out the risks of the current situation.

For a long time, the European Union (EU) has remarked on the danger of concentrating in one single country the supply of more than 45% of the natural gas it employs, 27% of its oil import and 46% of its coal import (figures refer to 2021). The first concerns dated back to the age of the so-called "gas disputes", which started around the mid-2000s and resurfaced more or less regularly until the eve of the current crisis (Pifer, 2019). Against this backdrop, the European Commission, then led by José Manuel Barroso (in office: 2004-14), adopted the first set of organic measures[1], which evolved, in the following years, into a complete (albeit not always effective) toolbox of political, economic, and legal provisions. To overcome the existing imbalance in the light of the most recent event, in March 2022, the Commission issued the REPowerEU Plan[2] to increase the resilience of the EU-wide energy system and aim at the independence from the Russian natural gas «well before the end of the decade». The strategy laid out in the Communication (which focuses on the natural gas sector) pivots around three main targets: increasing the share of "green" energy, diversifying supply, and cutting consumption. Practically, it proposes a set of measures to increase energy efficiency in civil constructions, replace natural gas with electricity, e.g. as a source of heating for private houses, promote the role of renewable energies in power generation, and diversify the supply markets and the kind of gases used in the different contexts.

Within this framework, special attention is devoted to diversifying supply via pipeline, both increasing the stocks that the traditional markets provide and looking for new suppliers, e.g. among the North African countries. The strengthening of the LNG sector plays a pivotal role. According to the Commission's estimates, strengthening the LNG sector should cut Russian energy imports by 50 billion cubic meters (bcm). In comparison, acting on the pipeline side should contribute "only"

[1] *Communication from the Commission to the European Council and the European Parliament. An Energy Policy for Europe*. COM(2007) 1 final. Brussels, 10 January 2007. Online: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2007:0001:FIN:EN:PDF (accessed: 14 May 2022).

[2] *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. REPowerEU Plan*. COM(2022) 108 final. Strasbourg, 8 March 2022. Online: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:71767319-9f0a-11ec-83e1-01aa75ed71a1.0022.02/DOC_1&format=PDF (accessed: 14 May 2022).

ten bcm. However, reaching these targets depends on dynamics that the EU only partially controls and on structural interventions that take time to complete and have limited effects in the short run. For instance, the trends of the international LNG market show, in 2022, a further increase in the Asian demand – especially from the PRC, India and Bangladesh (Custer, 2022) – that could impact the stock of gas available for Europe and its price. At the same time, the European energy infrastructure pays the toll of its time-honoured reliance on pipelines, with the network of the regasification plants primarily located on the Atlantic coast and several bottlenecks among the different areas: structural limits that the EU strategy for liquified natural gas and gas storage already pointed out in 2016[3]. Moreover, these structural limits could negatively affect the access to the supplies that the US administration pledged to provide to the EU at the end of March 2022: at least 15 billion bcm in 2022 and even larger volumes in the years to come[4].

Final remarks

Despite their level of ambition and the Commission's expressed will to work at a fast pace, reaching the targets of the REPowerEU Plan will be difficult (Chestney, Rashad and Abnett, 2022), also because of the state of the gas storage, which has been heavily depleted during the winter. The European Parliament has already taken the issue under consideration[5]. Currently, at the EU level, gas storage is around 26% of its capacity, and the target is to reach 90% by October, to pass the cold season with relative ease. However, such a state of things has had a deep impact on gas prices, which, in the Amsterdam market (the leading European gas market), have grown about five times compared to 2021[6]. It is a problematic scenario in which market dynamics and infrastructural constraints interact to hamper the European efforts. This is why energy efficiency and consumption reduction keep attracting so much attention. Between March and April, the International Energy Agency presented three sets of indications to reduce oil and gas consumption at the EU level[7]. According to the IEA, the EU could save some 220 million barrels per year of oil and 17 bcm of natural gas by implementing these indications. The question is how much they could affect the industrial sector, which is already suffering from the war's effects on the global supply chains and the access to raw materials and which is still paying its toll on the commercial distortions that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered during the past two years.

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3 *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on an EU strategy for liquefied natural gas and gas storage*. COM(2016) 49 final. Bruxelles, 16 February 2016. Online: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0049&from=EN (accessed: 14 May 2022).

4 *Joint Statement between the European Commission and the United States on European Energy Security*. Brussels, 25 March 2022. Online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_2041 (accessed: 14 May 2022).

5 *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2017/1938 of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning measures to safeguard the security of gas supply and Regulation (EC) n°715/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council on conditions for access to natural gas transmission networks*. COM(2022) 135 final/2022/0090(COD). Bruxelles, 23 March 2022. Online: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2f3116bc-aaa3-11ec-83e1-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF (accessed: 14 May 2022).

6 https://www.theice.com/products/27996665/Dutch-TTF-Gas-Futures/data?marketId=5387641&span=2 (accessed: 14 May 2022). On 13 May 2022, gas price on the Amsterdam market was 96.881 euro per megawatt/hour (€/MWh) compared to 19.569 €/MWh on 17 May 2021. The last spike (7 March 2022) was 210.804 €/MWh. On 24 February 2022, when the Ukraine invasion begun, the price was 129.929 €/MWh.

7 *A 10-Point Plan to Reduce the European Union's Reliance on Russian Natural Gas*. 3 March 2022. Online: https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/1af70a5f-9059-47b4-a2dd-1b479918f3cb/A10-PointPlantoReducetheEuropeanUnionsRelianceonRussianNaturalGas.pdf; *A 10-Point Plan to Cut Oil Use.* 18 March 2022. Online: https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/c5043064-58b7-4066-b1e9-68d7d9203fe9/A10-PointPlantoCutOilUse.pdf; *Playing my part. How to save money, reduce reliance on Russian energy, support Ukraine and help the planet*. 21 April 2022. Online: https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/cbc97c70-8bcf-4376-a8a9-4cd875195f6a/Playingmypart.pdf (all documents: accessed: 14 May 2022).

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Poland and the Baltic republics facing the Russian energy blackmail: towards a new regional cooperation

The decision of the Russian energy company Gazprom to completely suspend supplies of natural gas to Poland and Bulgaria starting from April 27 represents an open violation of the existing contracts (which would have expired in any case at the end of 2022): Russia has justified its move as a consequence of the refusal to proceed with the payment in rubles (as requested by Moscow), a sort of retaliation against the sanctions applied by the EU for the invasion of Ukraine (Deutsche Welle 2022). The interruption of gas supplies is a threat to the energy security of these nations, even if at the moment the effects of this decision are weakened by the fact that heating consumption is low due to the end of the winter, but industrial demand of gas remain unchanged.

It is interesting to analyze the impact caused by the closure of the Yamal gas pipeline (which transports Russian gas to Poland and then to Germany, while a northward infrastructure link starting from Belarus allows to supply the three Baltic republics) on the energy security of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia: these countries have always been strongly critical about Moscow's energy blackmail, because of their vulnerability linked to their condition of reliance on Russian imports. In the short term, Moscow’s decision will have the result to accelerate and complete their ongoing strategy of energy diversification, which will allow them to definitively stop gas imports from Russia.

Since the beginning, Poland and the Baltic republics have opposed to the construction of the Nord Stream gas pipeline - an undersea pipeline through which Russia directly supplies Germany with 55 billion cubic metres (bcm) of natural gas per year, bypassing the territories of these states - and above all to the project to double its capacity (Nord Stream 2), which would have allowed Moscow to redirect its exports on this pipeline, reducing the strategic importance of energy transit through Yamal, and being able to threaten the interruption of supplies to Eastern Europe as a tool of geopolitical pressure. With the support of neighboring states, the Warsaw government appealed to the European Court of Justice claiming that Nord Stream pipeline violated the binding principle of European energy solidarity (Bochkarev 2020): however, following the Russian-Ukrainian conflict the launch of Nord Stream 2 (which is practically completed) appears to be a remote hypothesis due to the political will to freeze any kind of energy cooperation with Russia.

In the last years, Warsaw has undertaken an energy strategy aimed at reducing and eliminating dependence on Russian natural gas imports. Poland is a strategic area for Russian exports, as it represents the largest natural gas market in Central and Eastern Europe: the Polish demand for natural gas is around 18-20 bcm, half of which covered by Russian imports, while domestic production reaches 4 bcm (Kubiak 2022a). The diversification strategy adopted by the Polish government appears tailored to achieve these objectives. In 2016, Poland built a regasification terminal (Świnoujście) which allows it to import liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Qatar, the United States and Norway, reducing dependence on Russian imports. In February of this year, Polish government completed the works on the first phase of expansion of the regasification capacity, from 5 bcm to 6.2 bcm, while the capacity will be further extended by another 2 bcm by 2023 (Gas Transmission Operator GAZ -SYSTEM 2022). LNG supplies can theoretically meet the energy demand of Central-Eastern European nations, through the development and the enhancement of interconnections and a trans-regional distribution network, which are priorities strongly recommended by the 2014 European Energy Strategy: in November 2021, Polish authorities commissioned works for the interconnection with Slovakia (with a capacity of 5.7 bcm) whose realization - financed by the EU, which recognized the work as a Project of Community Interest - will help to strengthen integration of the European energy market and the availability of bi-directional flows of natural gas (Eustream 2022).

The works on the Baltic Pipeline will be completed at the end of 2022, opening a very interesting alternative: this underwater gas pipeline that will connect Norway to Poland crossing the territorial waters of Denmark and Sweden, will deliver to Poland 10 bcm of natural gas, volumes that would allow Poland to definitely renounce of Russian gas, moreover obtained from a European partner which is currently the second largest EU supplier. According to the plans, in the future this pipeline should also deliver biomethane and green hydrogen, in order to contribute to the European energy transition through the distribution of electricity produced from non-polluting sources (Gas Infrastructure Europe 2022).

The gas pipeline between Poland and Lithuania (GIPL) was inaugurated in May 2022, another important energy interconnection with a capacity of 1.9 bcm able to operate in both directions, but conceived to create a regional distribution network where the Polish terminal of Świnoujście and the Lithuanian LNG FSRU terminal of Klapeida (a Floating Storage and Regasification Unit) constitute the main pivots. Given the GIPL's relevance to strengthen European energy security and market integration, the Polish-Lithuanian gas pipeline is recognized as a EU Project of Community Interest, and as such co-financed within the Trans-European Networks for Energy (TEN-E) policy (European Commission 2022). The Lithuanian terminal of Klapeida is the result of the European energy strategy 2014's implementation (creating LNG terminals and regional interconnections to ensure regular and diversified supplies) and for some years Lithuania has been exporting gas to Polish markets: currently Klapeida has a capacity to 3.75 bcm but authorities have already planned an extension of up to 5 bcm per year.

Energy cooperation between Poland and Lithuania is part of a newly-established regional energy security architecture (Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan), which involves the nations bordering the Baltic Sea which share the common interest in freeing themselves from Russian imports. The combined consumption of the three Baltic republics is around 4 bcm, therefore Klapeida's exported volumes are not sufficient, and require the creation of further interconnections and new regasification terminals to increase gas supply to the regional markets: Poland plans to realize a second LNG FSRU terminal in the port of Gdansk by 2028, Finland and Estonia are engaged to build an FSRU terminal in the winter of 2022-2023, while the Latvian project to have a LNG terminal is under discussion, but it is interesting in perspective if combined with other regional initiatives (Kubiak 2022b).

At present, the creation of the Balticonnector and the interconnection between Latvia and Estonia have created an energy link with Finland, which has the possibility of accessing the gas storage facility of Inčukalns in Latvia, with a capacity of 2.3 bcm which it can be further extended. The construction of the interconnection between Latvia and Lithuania in 2023 will allow further expansion of the distribution network by strengthening energy security (European Commission 2022).

We can observe that that Russia's assertive policy and the threat of interruption of energy supplies has not caught unprepared Poland and the Baltic republics, which have long been planning to reduce Russia's imports by creating new infrastructures (LNG terminals, interconnections, storage facilities). Which will allow them to strengthen their energy security condition: furthermore, these structures are financed by the European Commission due to the importance that they play to ensure a diversification of supplies and the achievement of the energy security goals, not only at the national level but within a wider European Union dimension.

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The impact of the pandemic on violent extremism and terrorism

Pandemic and violent extremism in the West

As well known, the COVID-19 pandemic is a far-reaching fact that has produced significant consequences on many areas of social life. These effects have also included the phenomena of violent extremism and terrorism, even in the West (see Ackerman and Peterson 2020; Basit 2020; Marone 2020; Pantucci 2020; Kruglanski et al. 2021; Marone 2022).

Extremist propaganda

Especially in the short term, violent extremists have first tried to exploit the spread of the virus for propaganda purposes. Furthermore, the fact that a considerable amount of people during the pandemic have spent even more time on the Internet than usual, the detriment of face-to-face social interactions, has produced an increase in the risk of online radicalization (for example, Malik 2020).

Jihadists, in particular, have rapidly incorporated the new phenomenon into their usual narratives, with different (sometimes even contradictory) rhetorical strategies (Marone 2022). For example, some jihadist organizations, such as the so-called Islamic State / *Daesh*, initially presented the coronavirus as a divine punishment against the «unbelievers», pointing out that the epidemic had originated in China, a country already criticized by jihadists for the treatment reserved for the Muslim minority of the Uyghurs and then hit the West hard, as well as Shia Iran (Al-Lami 2020; see also Daymon and Criezis 2020).

For their part, right-wing extremists have taken advantage of the opportunity of the pandemic to renew the challenge to the authority of governments, to mobilize militants and sympathizers, sometimes even openly inciting violence, and to lash out at groups or social categories accused of being responsible for the infection (in particular, at first Chinese citizens or just people of Asian descent, but also Jews and other members of ethnic or religious minorities or well-known capitalists such as Bill Gates and George Soros) (McNeil-Willson 2020). This attribution of responsibility, based on the usual scapegoat mechanism, has often been associated with conspiracy theories (such as, for example, the view that 5G telephony technology would facilitate the spread of the virus) (among others, Farinelli 2021)

Personal grievances

In the medium and long term, it can be assumed that in the West the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic and social crisis caused by it may also exacerbate negative attitudes, states of mind and emotions that are often the basis for various forms of violent extremism (see, for example, Desmarais et al. 2017). In fact, the pandemic can create or at least reinforce attitudes of vulnerability, fear, distrust and frustration that extremist groups and individuals of various ideological orientations could exploit for their own purposes. Feelings of anger and resentment caused by the pandemic or its effects may turn into personal grievances, associated with the perception of having suffered alleged wrongs and unjust treatments, and may also be framed in political/ideological terms. In extreme cases, negative attitudes can even push groups or individuals to threaten or actually carry out acts of violence, even without a clear reference to a specific ideology (Marone 2022).

For example, in the United States as early as March 2020 two men were arrested for threatening acts of political violence, respectively against the Governor of New Mexico and the Orlando Police Department, with the aim of protesting against the restrictions adopted to deal with the spread of COVID-19. Similarly, on April 1, 2020, in Los Angeles a railway engineer was arrested for attempting to crash a train into a military ship docked in the city's harbor to assist the population during the pandemic; as the man confessed to the police, he thought that the ship had suspicious purposes related even to an imaginary plan for the overthrow of the US federal government during the emergency. On July 2, 2020, in Ottawa, an armed Canadian citizen stormed the official residence of the Governor general of Canada, driven by personal economic problems and at the same time by the idea that the Prime Minister of Canada was taking advantage of the health emergency to impose a «communist dictatorship».

Terrorist activities

The risk of real terrorist activities deserves attention, too. In the West, the pandemic has presumably presented both constraints and opportunities for this type of threat.

As for the constraints, it can be noted that, in the short term, the movements of terrorists for the planning or execution of complex attacks or for other activities related to the terrorist threat may have been less easy, especially at the international level. In addition, in principle, countries in lockdown or with severe restrictions on the movement of people have offered fewer «soft targets» for indiscriminate attacks on the population, particularly in indoor public places or on means of transport. However, there has been no lack of potential targets of terrorist violence (cf. Stern et al. 2020), especially for unsophisticated attacks by lone actors or small cells. For example, two alleged jihadist attacks were carried out by lone attackers in France in full national lockdown, respectively in Romans-sur-Isère on April 4, 2020 and in Colombes, on April 27, 2020, with rudimentary means (respectively, cutting weapons and a vehicle); moreover, an act of violence was carried out, again by a lone jihadist attacker armed with a knife, in a park in Reading, United Kingdom, on June 20, 2020 (an act officially defined as «terrorist» by the British authorities). In general, it is useful to point out that terrorists, accustomed to facing a more powerful enemy in the context of an asymmetrical conflict, tend to have considerable capacity for adaptation (Marone 2022). Finally, as regards constraints, it should be noted that, at least in the short term, the attention of the whole world to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences may have damaged the spasmodic search for visibility that is typical of most terrorists.

New forms of «anti-government» extremism

In addition to traditional forms of violent extremism (jihadism, the far right, the extreme left and anarchism), it should be noted that, within vast and heterogeneous movements that have opposed restrictive measures imposed by national governments to contain the pandemic, extremist fringes have also emerged. These minority sectors have sometimes combined with already existing extremist ideologies, such as some variants of the far right, and/or potentially dangerous conspiracy theories (see, for example, Bianchi 2021).

In some extreme circumstances, members of these extremist fringes have even been responsible for episodes of violence, including acts of terrorism. On the one hand, there have been significant, and even dramatic, acts of violence in the context of broader street demonstrations, such as the attempted assault on the *Reichstag* building in Berlin on August 29, 2020, and the raid on the national headquarters of the *CGIL* (Italy's largest trade union) in Rome on 9 October 2021. On the other hand, there have been plans for premeditated attacks, especially against political targets or healthcare-related targets. With regard to the first type of targets, there were alleged plans to kidnap the Governor of Michigan, United States, in 2020 and to assassinate the Minister-President of Saxony, Germany, in 2021 (see Heinke 2022). In relation to healthcare-related targets, we can mention, for example, the alleged plan of attack on a hospital, plotted by a far-right sympathizer from Missouri, USA (the man eventually lost his life during a shootout with FBI agents who wanted to arrest him, on March 24, 2020). In Italy, an arson attack was carried out on a vaccination center in the Northern city of Brescia, on the night of April 3, 2021; two suspects were arrested and subsequently received a first instance sentence with the aggravating circumstance of terrorism.

The struggle against extremism and terrorism

On the other hand, it cannot be ruled out that violent extremism could also indirectly and unintentionally benefit from the constraints and limits that the fight against subversive and terrorist phenomena, and in particular its traditional «human intelligence» component (based on the use of human sources), may have encountered during this historical phase. In the short term, as also explicitly mentioned by the so-called Islamic State in its official propaganda, the attention and energies of police and security forces may have been partly necessarily directed towards new responsibilities and tasks related to the coronavirus emergency. Moreover, in the medium and long term, the health crisis and the social and economic consequences it is causing could even lead some governments to revise their national security priorities, potentially even at the expense of their commitment to the fight against violent extremism (Pantucci 2020; Marone 2022).

Conclusions

The current COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on violent extremism and terrorism, including in the West. In examining and evaluating these effects, it is necessary to look not only at the direct consequences of the pandemic, linked to the health emergency, in the short term, but also at the far-reaching indirect consequences, of an economic, social, political and/or cultural nature, in the medium and long term.

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Acronyms list

5G:	Fifth Generation
ASEAN:	Association of South-East Asian Nations.
AU:	African Union
BCM:	billion cubic metres
BRI:	Belt and Road Initiative
CGIL:	Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (Italian General Confederation of Labour)
COVID-19:	Coronavirus Disease 19
CPC:	Chinese Communist Party
CSTO:	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EU:	European Union
FBI:	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FSRU:	Floating Storage and Regasification Unit
GDP:	Gross Domestic Product
GERD:	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
GLF:	Gumuz Liberation Front
GW:	gigawatt
IEA:	International Energy Agency
LNG:	Liquified Natural Gas
NAC:	New Administrative Capital
NATO:	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NBI:	Nile Basin Initiative
NKVD:	(*Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del)* The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs.
PCU-KP:	(*Ukrainska Pravoslavna Tserkva — Kiïvskyi Patriarkhat*) Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kiev Patriarchate;
PP:	Prosperity Party
PRC:	People's Republic of China
SIPRI:	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
TAP:	Trans Adriatic Pipeline
TPLF:	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UAE:	United Arab Emirates
UAOC:	(*Ukrainska avtokefalna pravoslavna tserkva*) Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.
UN:	United Nations
UPC-MP:	(*Ukrainskaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov Moskovskogo Patriarkhata*) Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate
US:	United States
USA:	United States of America
WHO:	World Health Organization

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