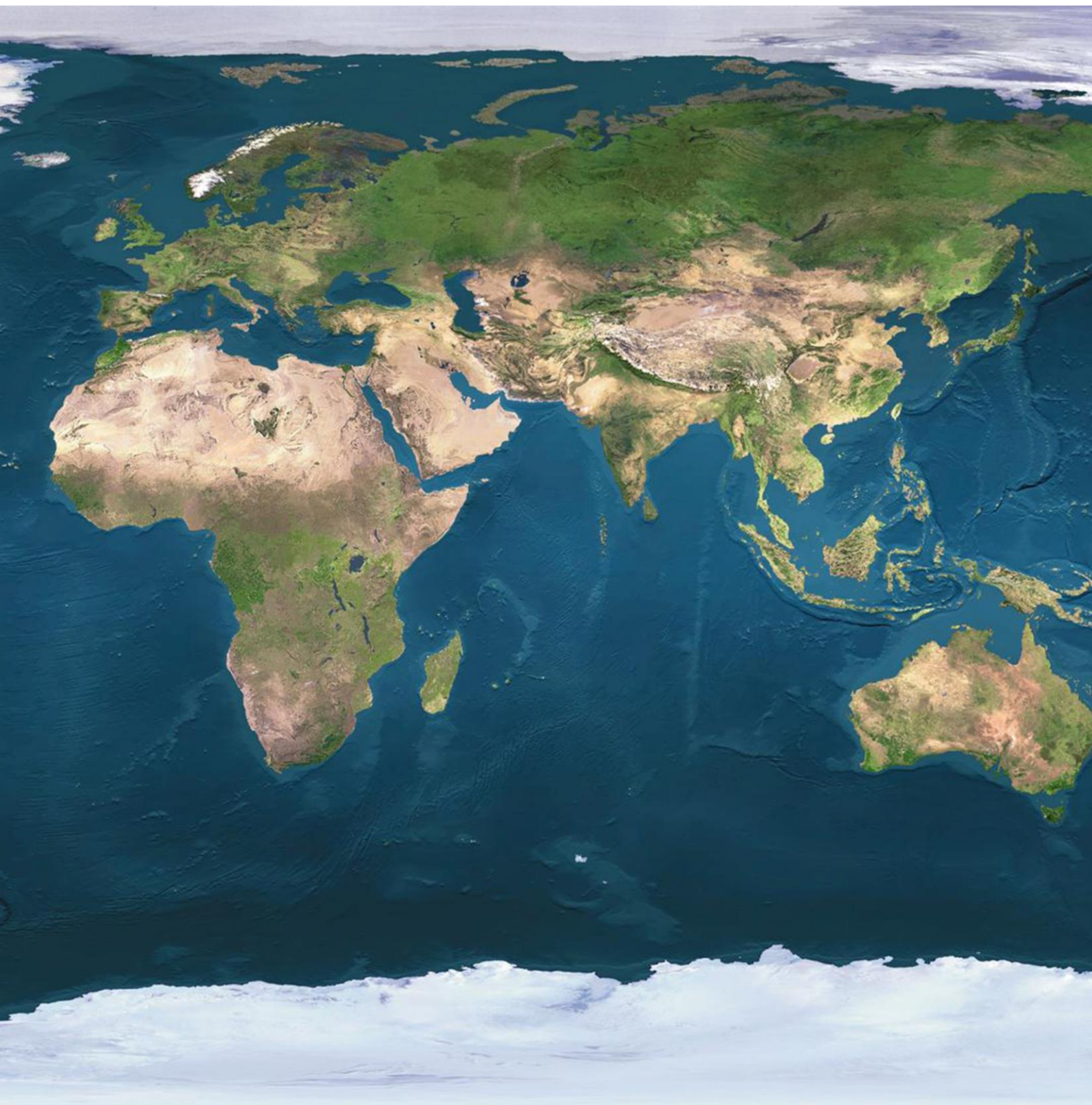




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Osservatorio Strategico

Part One

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The centrality of Hungary

Overview of the history of Hungary

Ancient Roman region named Pannonia was invaded in the sixth century by barbarian populations such as the Lombards and the Avars who then suffered in the eighth century the defeat by Charlemagne.

At that time, the Hungarians were people of the steppes formed by seven tribes, which mainly referred to the Ugric linguistic stock, the main one was the Magyars.

The area of the Hungarian plain, around the middle of the fifth century had become the sedentary base of the Huns, who in fact dominated all the plains and steppes that from the Roman limes reached then Sarmazia.

Of Uralic origin, with a migration that lasted several centuries, the Finno-Ugric group, divided into five branches: the Ugric, which includes Hungarian, the Vogule and the Ostiac; the Permian, with the Syriac and the Votiac; the Volga branch, with the Ceremisso and the Mordvino; the Balto-Finnish branch, with Finnish, Estonian and other minor dialects, and the Lappish branch, which includes the various dialects of Scandinavian Lapland¹.

The Magyars, crossing the present Ukraine, settled in the Danube basin, forming the nucleus of what would later become the Hungarian nation. The idea that the Magyars derived from the Huns was handed down until the nineteenth century and finds authoritative evidence in the works of various ancient Hungarian historiographers.

In the Middle Ages the foundations were laid for a centralized and strong government that aimed to expand Hungary into the borders of its natural region. The feudal order in the twelfth century consolidated Christianity and in 1222 the nobles imposed on the king the "golden bubble" as a guarantee of their prerogatives towards the sovereign², creating in fact an embryo of shared monarchy in the heart of Europe. There was at that time a territorial expansion to the detriment of neighboring countries where the privileges of the landed aristocracy were affirmed and where the whole plain to the west of the Carpathians, north of the Danube to the outlet on the Adriatic, came to be part of the Kingdom of Hungary.

There were several dynasties at the head of the kingdom including the Angevins (in which Hungary even annexed distant countries such as Bavaria, Bohemia and Lithuania) Luxembourg and the Jagiellons of Polish origin, and then the Hunyadi-Corvinus, whose highest representative was Matthias Corvinus in the second half of the 15th century, also known as the Renaissance prince, with which Hungary managed to have a military supremacy over the Turks until the beginning of the XVI century.

All this, however, was frustrated by the immobility of the Germans and the other Western countries, who, despite having been invited by the Hungarians to help them to limit the Turkish expansionist aims, remained firm on their neutral positions and the entire Hungarian plain (except for a border mark that remained in the hands of the Habsburgs of Austria) fell under the "Sublime Porta", then favoring even the two sieges of Vienna of 1529 and 1683, in which time the Ottoman troops in fact threatened central Europe starting from the Hungarian plain now subject.

The event that actually marks this domination is the Battle of Mohács, in 1526. Hungary's defeat remained formally independent only in the strip of land close to Austria under the name of "Royal Hungary" effectively a vassal state of the Habsburgs. The Turks instead divided the remaining

¹ www.wikipedia.org

² www.treccani.it

territory into two parts, with Transylvania becoming a principality, a direct tributary and to the south direct Ottoman Hungary, divided administratively into "vilajeti", with Ottoman governors³.

It was precisely from Habsburg Hungary that at the end of the seventeenth century the offensive for the reconquest of all Hungary started, taking advantage of the decadence that had begun to corrupt the Ottoman Empire. In 1683, after the Battle of Vienna, the Holy League was created between some European powers (Poland, Venice and Habsburg) in anti-Turky function. The Mediterranean had already been liberated after the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 from the Ottoman danger. Now it was time for the reconquest of land by the Christian powers. In 1686 Buda was liberated. In 1687, the Second Battle of Mohács occurred, in which Christian armies relentlessly defeated the Turks. This victory led to the liberation of most of the Hungarian plain and the annexation of Transylvania to Hungary. The Hungarian Diet of 1687 recognized the fusion of the Hungarian crown with that of the Habsburgs of Austria.

With the fall of Belgrade in 1688, the Ottomans were permanently ousted from the Hungarian plain, and the Peace of Carlowitz of 1699 ended 150 years of Turkish rule.

Although in different political forms the union with Austria will last until the end of the First World War. The heralds of independence were already visible with the Nationalist uprisings of 1848, led by Lajos Kossuth, who declared independence from Austria and began a process of economic reform. The following year this experiment was stifled by the Russian invasion that in fact brought Hungary back under the Habsburgs, who at first tried unsuccessfully a Germanization of the Hungarians and later came to a compromise (Ausgleich) in 1867 with which it was recognized the autonomous Magyar component within the newly constituted Austro-Hungarian Empire that found the melting point in the Habsburg crown for foreign policy, military and financial matters.

In this bicephalous monarchy, the Slavic component remained outside and in particular for Hungary the will for autonomy by the Croats was increasingly pressing, which led Budapest to an agreement (the "Nogodba") with which it granted Zagreb a significant autonomy in the cultural field but above all linguistic, although in 1868 the law on the primacy of Hungarian nationality was passed compared to the others of the kingdom.

The twentieth century brought profound changes for Hungary. The defeat in World War I, in addition to territorial mutilations sanctioned by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, which confined its territory to a small area, annulling its natural geographical borders, plunged the country into a serious economic crisis that caused several popular riots. There was no point in creating a Soviet Republic which lasted just over four months and which tried to intervene on social issues. The armed intervention of Admiral Horthy restored the monarchy, albeit without the appointment of a king, because a law of 1921 had declared the Habsburg dynasty⁴ to have fallen and the same high official had the regency of the kingdom.

In the following years, with the rise of Nazism in Germany, Hungary acquired territories along the Carpathian belt that descended from Slovakia to Ruthenia, but all this had a high price to pay, namely participation alongside the Axis powers on the Russian front, during Operation Barbarossa, which saw the defeat of the Hungarian army on the Don River.

Budapest government then tried to negotiate a separate peace with Moscow, but this caused the German occupation of the country which supported the local Nazi militias of the "Arrow Crosses", causing, among others, the extermination of the Hungarian Jewish community.

The arrival of the Red Army in 1945, on one hand, freed Hungary from German occupation, but on the other, it brought Budapest, in the logic of the partition of Yalta, into the area of Russian influence. The Communist Party won the elections and began a series of reforms that led to the nationalization of banks and industries, but especially agricultural land, effectively eliminating the

³ <https://www.ungheria.it/storia-breve/>

⁴ https://digilander.libero.it/memorie/estensi/storia_ungheria.htm

latifundia. Heavy industry was favoured and with the strengthening of the link with the USSR, in fact the Church, the main antagonist of socialism, was the object of the confiscation of property and property⁵. With Rakosi in government, the political opposition in the Hungarian country disappeared, though hotbeds of renewed freedom appeared with the death of Stalin, thanks to Imre Nagy, a moderate anti-Soviet, who managed to go to government. In his political program, in addition to easing the nationalisation of the country, there was also the exit of Hungary from the Warsaw Pact, and insurrection erupted throughout the country to support these choices. This, however, sparked the ire of the Kremlin, which in 1956 decided to intervene militarily, imposing a new government led by Kadar, which despite being "sponsored" by Moscow, in exchange for an alignment with the foreign policy of the Kremlin, He secured an internal autonomy that ensured a higher standard of living, through the modernization of the country, also leveraging on the ecclesiastical power, very felt in the population, with which a concordat was signed.

Hungary was the first socialist country to stake the "Iron Curtain", ensuring the transit of East Germans to Austria without the strict controls of the socialist state authorities. After the dissolution of the "Warsaw Pact" and the dissolution of the USSR, the communist system was overthrown and Hungary oriented its policy towards democratic Western systems that, in a short time, they first made her join NATO in 1999 and then the European Union in the fifth enlargement in 2004⁶. The country has had in those years great margins of increase that have involved also huge foreign investments. In this context, one of the problems to be solved was the question of the Hungarian minorities (the 2/3 of the Hungarian population) in the neighbouring countries.

Modern Hungary and its international position

Country that for its geographical conformation has a strong agricultural vocation (just think that it is among the first two countries supplier of corn and common wheat for Italy) located in the heart of Europe and crossed by the Danube, it is clearly a strategic country for the transport of goods to and from central Europe to the Black Sea. Also the subsoil is rich of minerals that in fact have allowed an important industrial development linked to the extraction and processing of the same.

Having come to political prominence as Prime Minister between 1998 and 2002, it is undeniable that Viktor Mihály Orbán is the most politically prominent figure in the country's politics. Again Prime Minister since 2010, he ruled the country continuously until the last re-election in 2022.

Orban based his domestic policy on a conservative populist area⁷, in which clear signs of opposition to indiscriminate immigration emerged and in which the extremist defense of the authoritarian concept of State/Nation⁸, has placed it on a profile of euroscepticism, which has given rise to very critical international comments, leading to the suspension of its own party (Fidesz) from the EPP from March 2019⁹ until March 2021, where Fidesz¹⁰ left the European People's Party.

Having joined NATO, the Orban government was immediately faced with the war in the former Yugoslavia, which, while allowing a modernization of its defensive apparatus, on the other hand it had economic repercussions due to the embargo imposed on the neighbouring country across the Danube, with which there was an important trade link. Surely Orban's nationalism became apparent in 1999 when Hungary passed the "status law" with which some three million Hungarians were granted a series of rights outside the border which allowed the preservation of a series of values that

⁵ Gizella Nemeth Papo e Adriano Papo - 2000 – Storia e cultura dell'Ungheria, Rubbettino editore, Soveria Mannelli.

⁶ Antonello Biagini, Storia dell'Ungheria contemporanea, Bompiani, Milano 2006.

⁷ **The Economist** del 22 June 2017 - "What to do when Viktor Orban erodes democracy".

⁸ **Washington Post** del 3 May 2017 - "Hungary's government is increasingly autocratic. What is the European Parliament doing about it?" e **New York Times** del 10 February 2018 - "As West Fears the Rise of Autocrats, Hungary shows what's possible".

⁹ **La Repubblica** del 20 March 2019 - "Il PPE accetta il compromesso: per il partito di Orban solo la sospensione con effetto immediato".

¹⁰ Following the parliamentary elections of 2022, Fidesz holds an absolute majority

distinguish the common Hungarian origin such as: education in the Hungarian language, extension of the right to health and civil and political participation in the social life of the countries where these minorities are located (in particular in Romanian Transylvania, in the territories north of the Danube of Croatia and Serbia, in Slovakia and in Ukrainian Ruthenia). At the announcement of the publication of the law, Orban declared that this law would remedy, albeit in part, the disastrous effects of the 1920 Treaty of Trianon¹¹.

The governments of the neighbouring countries affected by this rule protested strongly against Budapest, arguing that it was an interference by a foreign state in internal affairs, although it was pointed out, by the Hungarian media, that the same countries that had made complaints about the law in question, launched similar legal institutions for their minorities across the border.

Until 2010 Hungary had a convergent path and alignment with the Western community, first entering NATO (1999), then the European Union (2004) with entry into the Schengen area in 2007¹². After 2010, the nationalist drift led to a change in Budapest's attitude towards the assemblies to which it is incardinated, excluding even the last step, which was the entry into the euro, keeping the Hungarian forint as the national currency. Then in 2010 begins a decade that still continues, called "illiberal democracy"¹³. With the acquisition of full powers arising from the Covid emergency, restrictions have arisen on the dissemination of news not in line with government thinking¹⁴, which combined with rules that effectively restricted the rights of LGBT, have created warnings within the European institutions that have repeatedly resumed, with official calls, the autarchic drift of the Orban government.

Clash with the European Union and the Visegrad countries

The change of direction of the Hungarian government, with the establishment of Orban, as well as privileging international alliances with other European countries that have similar postures (countries of the Visegrad group)¹⁵, as in the case of Poland¹⁶, is creating many frictions with Europe because of the continuous vetoes that effectively immobilize the work of the European Commission. The tension is so high that Ursula Von der Leyen is trying in every way to get out of the "trap of unanimity", which in fact paralyzes Europe. In order to change this, however, we need an amendment to the Treaties and in order to do so, we need unanimity. The EU is exerting economic pressure through the conditionality of the "Next Generation EU", which is fundamental for the Hungarian economy, but the road is impassable¹⁷ and the hoped-for goal of achieving a "qualified majority" mechanism would seem utopian, having regard to the architecture of the European institutions. It should also be borne in mind, however, that President Orban's recent positions on the Russian-Ukrainian war have also alienated him from his closest partners in Europe, just like Poland.

In this regard, Hungary's submission to the procedure of Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union¹⁸, based on concerns about the functioning of the constitutional and electoral system, but above all on the real independence of the Hungarian judicial system and on asylum rights. The criticism of the Budapest government¹⁹ is that it has weakened the architecture of its democracy and the rule of law, with dangers of discrimination against ethnic minorities.

¹¹ Gizella Nemeth Papo e Adriano Papo - 2011 - Il Trianon e la fine della Grande Ungheria, Luglio editore, Trieste.

¹² Gizella Nemeth Papo e Adriano Papo - 2008 - L'Ungheria contemporanea, Carocci editore, Roma.

¹³ <https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/gwynne-dyer/2015/02/24/la-democrazia-illiberale-di-viktor-orban>

¹⁴ <https://www.ilpost.it/2020/07/27/liberta-stampa-ungheria-orban-index/amp/>

¹⁵ In addition to Hungary there are Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia

¹⁶ In Poland, the Constitutional Court's judgment K 3/21 questioned the prevalence of European law over national legislation.

¹⁷ <https://www.ilsussidiario.net/news/ue-vs-orban-via-unanimita-per-superare-veti-togliamo-potere-di-voto-a-ungheria/2353610>

¹⁸ Following the report presented on 4.7.2018 by Dutch MEP Judith Sargentini

¹⁹ <https://www.assemblea.emr.it/europedirect/news/2018/il-pe-a-favore-dellattivazione-dellart-7-del-trattato-ue-per-lungheria>

Art. Article 7 of the EU Treaty contains the measure that sanctions member countries deemed to be contrary to the founding values of the European Union and provides for the initiation of a procedure that could lead to sanctions. Activation shall take place on a reasoned proposal from one third of the Member States, the European Parliament or the European Commission. The Council, acting by a majority of four fifths of its members after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament, may establish that there is a clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State of the values referred to in Article 2. Before making such a determination, the Council shall hear the Member State concerned and may make recommendations to it, acting in accordance with the same procedure.

The Council shall regularly check whether the reasons which led to this finding remain valid. Thereafter, the European Council, acting unanimously on a proposal from one third of the Member States or the European Commission and after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament, may establish the existence of a serious and persistent breach by a Member State of the values referred to in Article 2²⁰, after inviting that Member State to submit observations. Where the statement of objections has been established, the Council, acting by a qualified majority, may decide to suspend certain of the rights deriving from the application of the Treaties to the Member State concerned, including the voting rights of the representative of the government of that Member State in the Council. In doing so, the Council shall take into account the possible consequences of such a suspension on the rights and obligations of natural and legal persons. The Member State in question shall in any event continue to be bound by its obligations under the Treaties. The Council, acting by a qualified majority, may subsequently decide to amend or revoke the measures adopted in response to any changes in the situation which led to their being imposed.

All these situations have created a lot of friction also with the USA²¹ and the positioning of Budapest in the current Russian-Ukrainian war, despite having supported the sanctions against Moscow, has stiffened and not little the relations with Washington, where the idea that Hungary is the Russian "Trojan horse" in Europe²² and that the country itself is slipping towards autarchy is increasingly spreading²³. Moreover, the current democratic administration of Biden does not forgive the Hungarian premier, as well as the proximity to Russia and China, also his proximity to the old republican administration of Donald Trump, This relationship has not ended with the change of tenant in the White House.

President Orbán's closeness to the Kremlin was highlighted during the agreement on the sixth package of sanctions, in which Hungary declared itself against sanctions against Kirill, the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, This is because the previous vetoes on sanctions against Russia had instead found logical reasons on the part of the Budapest government, given that Hungary has no access to the sea and is therefore unable to obtain any other supplies. In addition, the Magyar refineries are calibrated on Urals-type oil from Russia, and any remodulation would lead to very high costs.

Therefore the Kirill affair has created the doubt that Orbán is the destabilizing element in the European Union, through the continuous vetoes that effectively block the work of the Commission, as is Erdoğan for NATO, as we have seen in the adoption of the vetoes for the entry of Finland and Sweden into the Atlantic assembly.

²⁰ Art.2: The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society characterised by pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men.

²¹ Ungheria giù, Polonia su. Così la guerra in Ucraina ha cambiato i rapporti con gli Usa su [www.formiche.net](https://formiche.net/2022/06/polonia-ungheria-estratto-libri-simoni)
<https://formiche.net/2022/06/polonia-ungheria-estratto-libri-simoni>

²² <https://www.ildubbio.news/2022/06/02/orban-il-cavallo-di-troia-di-putin-per-scardinare-leuropa/> di M. Di Pace

²³ Ungheria: Rapporto Paese 2021 Libertà nel mondo | Casa della Libertà su [freedomhouse](https://freedomhouse.org) report 2020 e 2021

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Tunisia at a Crossroad: Transition toward Where?

Tunisia's institutional crisis: from power grab to Saied's road map

On July 25, 2021, Tunisia's President of the Republic, Kais Saied, announced a state of emergency by invoking article 80 of the constitution. During that time, the Tunisian president aimed to address the severe socio-economic crisis, the negative effects of the pandemic, and the delegitimization of the political parties represented in the local parliament. From his point of view, this measure was aimed to safeguard the democratic transition process that had made Tunisia the only successful revolution within the so-called Arab Springs. Since Saied's announcement, an institutional crisis has opened up, which has yet to come to an end. In the timespan between July 25, 2022 and December 17, 2022, we could arguably witness either a full restoration of the democratic order or a sharper transition toward an authoritarian rule. In fact, on July 25, a constitutional referendum will take place, while on December 17, there will be early legislative elections. The president's opponents use the term "constitutional coup" to define Saied's move, while on the other hand, however, others prefer to adopt the term "power grab", given that Saied was already occupying the highest office of the republic at the time when he invoked the state of emergency (Yerkes, 2021). To justify his moves, the Tunisian president invoked article 80 of the Tunisian constitution, which allows the president of the republic to get his hands on exceptional powers in the following cases: imminent danger to national institutions, against the security or the independence of the country¹.

There is no agreement on whether the measures taken by the Tunisian president are constitutionally legitimate or not. There certainly is, however, a *vulnus* which has to be underlined, that is represented by the absence of a Constitutional Court. According to the 2014 constitution, this institution should be called upon to judge the constitutional legitimacy of presidential decisions. Nevertheless, it has never been convened since 2014, given the political parties' inability to appoint its judges. This situation effectively took off the table the only power which would have been able to counterbalance the decisions adopted by the president² (Grewal, 2018). This path that began on July 25, 2021, led to an institutional crisis that is still ongoing. It thus effectively led to a suspension of the democratic order during which Saied progressively has been strengthening his power. Starting from July 25, the president appointed a new interior minister, Ridha Gharsallauoi, thus securing control over the police and not just on the Tunisian armed forces, which had been aligned with him from the outset³. On the same day he appointed a new director of state television, Awatef Dali. The most important measures were taken on July 26 and July 29 when, by issuing two presidential decrees, he dismissed the government – since September 2020 led by Hichem Mechichi – and suspended the Assembly of People's Representatives, i.e. the Tunisian parliament – removing the parliamentary immunities, too⁴ (Tunisian Presidency, 2021a; Tunisian Presidency, 2021b). The suspension of parliamentary work was extended for another thirty days on August 24, until a *sine die* suspension enacted through the presidential decree no. 117 of September 22, which also suspended other parts of the constitution (Tunisian Presidency, 2021c; Tunisian Presidency, 2021d).

¹ For the text of the Tunisian constitution see: <https://bit.ly/3yYHxvK>.

² Saied did not consult the prime minister and the speaker of parliament in advance before invoking the state of emergency, as required by article 80 of the constitution.

³ According to article 77 of the constitution, the Tunisian armed forces report directly to the president of the republic, who serves as commander-in-chief. The president also chairs the National Security Council, where the prime minister and the speaker of parliament are only "invited" to participate.

⁴ That measure turned out to be very important, as it subsequently led to the arrest of several members of parliament (France24, 2021).

Only in mid-September did Saied begin to outline a reformist agenda – though a very weak one – by announcing his willingness to amend the constitution (Al Jazeera, 2021). On September 29, the Tunisian president appointed a new prime minister, Najla Bouden Ramadhan – the first woman to hold that position in an Arab country (Tunisian Presidency of the Government, 2021). On February 6, Saied decided to dissolve the Supreme Judicial Council, which was replaced by an interim presidentially appointed body a week later (Tunisian Presidency, 2022a). On March 30, the harshest measure was taken when the Tunisian president ordered the dissolution of the Assembly of People's Representatives in light of an attempt by a group of parliamentarians, led by the speaker Rashid Ghannushi, leader of Ennahda, to force the presidential measures by convening an online parliamentary session (Tunisian Presidency, 2022b). On that occasion, the members of the assembly attempted to pass a law against the exceptional measures taken by the presidency. A final important measure with the potential to influence the electoral rounds of the coming months is the April 21 presidential decision to appoint the new members of the Independent Electoral Commission (Tunisian Presidency, 2022c). Farouk Bouasker, a former member of the previous commission, was appointed chairman in place of Nabil Baffoun, who is considered to be close to the Islamist Ennahda party. Of the seven members, three are presidential appointees, three are nominated by the Supreme Judicial Council – which, however, is now controlled by the president himself – and the remaining one is an engineer specializing in the field of security and information systems (Agenzia Nova, 2022).

Parallel to the power grab process, starting on December 13, 2021, president Saied launched a “road map” designed to indicate, in advance, the direction that he aims to pursue in order to put an end to the institutional crisis (Tunisian Presidency, 2022d). Three main steps were indicated: the first was an online popular consultation, which was held in early 2022, ending on March 20 (Profazio, 2021). At that stage, the Tunisian citizens could make proposals for the subsequent drafting of the new constitution⁵. Only 7 % of the eligible population voted, about 530,000 citizens, demonstrating the popular lack of confidence in such a consultation (Profazio, 2022). The second stage is the constitutional referendum, which will be held on July 25 (Tunisian Presidency, 2022e). In this regard, on May 19, Saied appointed a new commission to draft the new constitution that will be submitted to the referendum (Tunisian Presidency, 2022f). The commission is headed by Professor Sadok Belaid, and is composed of academics in law and political science (Tunisian Presidency, 2022g). A second advisory commission was then appointed to make proposals, in which six civil society organizations are included, like the powerful workers' union, the Union générale tunisienne du travail (UGTT). UGTT, however, has already announced that it will boycott the work of the body due to the absence of a true democratic participation. Indeed, it should be pointed out that political parties have been excluded from both commissions (Al Jazeera, 2022). Finally, the third and final planned step is early legislative elections, set for December 17, 2022. Ultimately, the road map presented on December 13 should be interpreted as an attempt to deal with domestic and international pressures that are playing as increasing constraints on the power taken by Saied (Dworkin, 2022).

Domestic and international reactions

Overall, president Saied's power grab has been fostered by the presence of a weak and delegitimized domestic opposition from Tunisian political parties, a discreet popular support, and the absence of international players able to influence, by countering, the Tunisian president's political agenda. As far as political parties are concerned, the Tunisian parliamentary has split into two different camps: pro-Saied and anti-Saied factions (Reuters, 2021). However, even political parties that have attempted to oppose the centralization of power in the hands of the president suffer from

⁵ It is hard to imagine that the proposals put forward will have any real influence on the drafting of the new constitution, which will be handled by a special commission appointed by president Saied himself.

a lack of popular legitimacy, as they are accused of being the culprits of the social, economic, and political crisis that Tunisia has been going through in recent years.

Ennahda is the main actor in the anti-Saied front. It is an Islamist movement and the leading political force in parliament – albeit one that emerged downsized from the 2019 legislative elections, falling from 69 to 52 seats. Since the early days, its leader Ghannushi has positioned himself as the main opponent against the Tunisian president, accusing him of organizing a coup. Even within Ennahda, however, discordant voices have emerged. For example, on July 31, a group of 130 members of the youth wing signed a letter entitled “correcting the course” in which they called on the party leadership to do *mea culpa*, for its failure to deal with popular demands. While continuing to use the term “coup”, after calling on the people to take to the streets, the Islamist party’s central committee turned toward a more moderate path, calling for a national dialogue (Ansa, 2021). On the other hand, as speaker of the parliament, Ghannushi attempted to force his hand, steadily calling for a return to the normal parliamentary life. He even went as far as to convene the aforementioned parliamentary session in late March, which subsequently led to the dissolution of the People’s Representative Assembly. In the anti-Saied front, there should be included other three important parties: Heart of Tunisia (38 seats), Democratic Current (22 seats) and Al Karama (18 seats). With different nuances they have called the Tunisian president’s action a “coup”, too. It was not until late April that the anti-Saied opposition attempted to organize itself in a more structured manner, through the creation of the so-called National Salvation Front (NSF), led by Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, a longtime leftist opponent of Ben Ali⁶.

On the opposite front, however, mention should be made of the People’s Movement, whose leaders called Saied’s action a “correction of the revolutionary path”. Alliance for Tunisia also supported Saied, calling Ghannushi’s behavior “a political crime against the homeland and citizens, and a threat to the country’s civil peace”. More interesting is the position of the Free Constitutionalists Party (a right-wing anti-Islamist party). Initially it did not take a clear position of condemnation or support. Only later did its leader, Abir Moussi, criticize Ghannushi’s decision to call a parliamentary session, defining it a threat to national security. Moussi also supported the dissolution of parliament, despite the fact that in mid-March he organized a popular demonstration calling for elections to be brought forward and not wait until December. This position of cautious support for the course taken by Saied is worth that party’s first place in the polls for the upcoming legislative elections.

Among internal actors, civil society organizations cannot be excluded from the analysis. Among them, the most prominent organization is the already mentioned UGTT, which has not taken a clear position of support or condemnation toward Saied, merely calling for a national dialogue. Over the months secretary general Noudreddine Taboubi has taken a critical stance toward the more radical opposition. For instance, in March he criticized the decision to convene a parliamentary session. At the same time, however, the UGTT has stated that it would not participate in the work of the advisory commission on constitutional amendment (Al Jazeera, 2022). Other organizations have taken a similar stance, continuing to participate in regular meetings organized by the presidency of the republic⁷. In opposition to Saied, however, a spontaneous, street-based organization, Cytoyens contre le Coup d’État, was born.

Nevertheless, the most surprising reaction came from the Tunisian public opinion. It is not possible to make a precise estimate, but it is certain that an important portion, perhaps a majority, of the Tunisian population still supports president Saied. A stance that can be explained in two motives: on one hand, a disillusionment with the democratic transition and the achievements made since

⁶ In addition to some civil society organizations and independent members of parliament, five parties join the NSF: Ennahda, Heart of Tunisia, the Dignity Coalition, the Movement Party and Al-Amal (the latter two have no representatives in parliament).

⁷ These include the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women; Tunisian Human Rights League; National Union of Journalists; National Union of Tunisian Women; Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fisheries; Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts.

2011. On the other hand, a more contingent and pragmatic hope of seeing their social and economic condition improve in the short term. Saied's measures are perceived by many as a last lifeline. An opinion poll conducted within days of the announcement of the state of emergency revealed how 87% of the respondents supported the measures taken by Saied, while only 3% were against them (Dejoui, 2021). A situation that the Tunisian president himself attempted to battle, for example, was by organizing a demonstration on August 1, 2021 in the avenue Bourguiba in downtown Tunis (Tunisian Presidency, 2021e).

Turning to the international level, it must be stated that the Tunisian institutional crisis at this stage is caused by endogenous rather than external factors, unlike other similar events in the past. Therefore, it is not possible to identify an international matrix behind president Saied's moves. Another matter is the influence that some countries are trying to increase by exploiting the course of the crisis. On the whole, most Western countries have been cautiously critical of the course taken by Saied, while advancing the need to pragmatically support any solution that could ensure stability in Tunisia; this is the case of the United States. For example, in a July 31 phone call between Saied and U.S. national security adviser Sullivan, the latter recalled the need to support democratic institutions, but without frontally condemning Saied⁸ (White House, 2021). Indeed, it should be reminded that Tunisia, along with Morocco and Egypt, represent the pillar of the U.S. political-military presence in the Maghreb⁹. Likewise, most European countries have shown pragmatism: Italy, France, Germany as well as the European Union. In particular, Rome has stated that it was following the evolution of events with concern, calling for a generic respect of the constitution (MAECI, 2021). At this stage, European countries are the main supporters of a solution that can avoid the implosion of the North African country, even at the cost of placing themselves in that gray zone of cautious support for the Tunisian president's power grab. Considering the regional players, Saied received the tacit support of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, i.e. the so-called "conservative" front¹⁰. Turkey is the only country to have openly come out against Saied, calling his actions a coup (Sevencan, 2021). However, Ankara has not gone beyond a mere statement of condemnation, being unable to concretely support Ennahda, its historical ally in Tunisia, due to the severe economic crisis afflicting the country. In general, at this level, the fault line between conservatives (Gulf monarchies and Egypt) and revisionists (Turkey, Iran, and movements within the galaxy of political Islam) of the status quo upon which the regional order has been structured since the Arab Springs of 2011 is being replicated.

Social and economic context

In order to understand the reasons behind Saied's power grab and, more importantly, the support he received from a large sector of the population, it is necessary to analyze the context of structural crisis afflicting Tunisia from a socioeconomic perspective. Even before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the pandemic had exacerbated the structural weakness of the Tunisian economy (IMF, 2021). In 2020, there was an 8.2% contraction in Tunisian GDP from the previous year – the worst figure since the Tunisian independence (Tab.1).

⁸ This ambiguous position connotes the whole Middle Eastern policy of the Biden administration, which is forced to balance between an international value-oriented agenda and an interest-oriented one.

⁹ Tunis enjoys the status of a major non-NATO ally of the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2021). In addition to this, in October 2020, Tunisia and the United States signed a 10-year framework agreement on defense cooperation. On that occasion, the U.S. Secretary of Defense Esper defined Tunisia as a "security exporter" in the region (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020).

¹⁰ Interestingly, in her first mission abroad, the new Tunisian premier Bouden headed to Riyadh, to attend the Middle East Green Initiative Summit (Ansa, 2021).

	2017	2018	2019	2020		2021		2022	2023	2024
			PreL	Proj.	RFI	Proj.	RFI		Proj.	
Production and prices										
(Annual percentage change)										
Real GDP (at 2010 prices)	1.9	2.7	1.0	-8.2	-4.3	3.8	4.1	2.4	2.0	1.8
GDP deflator	4.8	7.9	7.1	5.4	5.0	5.9	5.6	6.2	6.9	7.3
CPI inflation (average)	5.3	7.3	6.7	5.7	6.2	5.8	4.9	6.3	6.9	7.3
CPI inflation (eop)	6.2	7.5	6.1	5.5	6.0	6.0	4.8	6.4	6.9	7.4
Saving investment balance										
(Percent of GDP)										
Gross national savings	9.1	10.0	8.8	1.0	3.1	0.9	6.6	1.9	1.9	1.6
of which: central government	-0.4	1.0	1.4	-4.1	-1.1	-3.5	2.1	-1.4	-1.3	-1.0
Gross investment	19.4	21.1	17.2	7.8	10.6	10.5	14.8	11.4	11.2	10.8
of which: central government	5.6	5.6	5.3	6.1	3.3	5.8	4.6	5.5	5.3	5.0
Central government operations 1/										
(Percent of GDP, unless otherwise indicated)										
Total revenue and grants	24.6	26.0	27.7	26.9	26.4	27.0	27.8	27.2	27.2	27.4
Total expenditure and net lending	30.6	30.5	31.6	37.5	30.7	36.2	30.3	34.0	33.7	33.3
of which: wage bill	15.0	14.0	14.6	17.6	16.5	17.5	15.4	17.2	16.9	16.7
of which: energy subsidies	1.6	2.5	2.8	1.3	0.7	1.8	0.5	1.1	0.8	0.6
of which: transfers (incl. social programs and CNRPS)	2.2	2.5	2.8	3.6	3.3	2.9	3.2	2.9	2.9	2.9
of which: capital expenditure	5.6	5.6	5.3	6.1	3.3	5.8	4.6	5.5	5.3	5.0
Overall balance (incl. grants)	-6.0	-4.5	-3.9	-10.6	-4.3	-9.3	-2.5	-6.8	-6.5	-6.0
Overall balance (excl. grants)	-6.2	-4.8	-4.1	-11.5	-5.3	-9.9	-2.8	-7.1	-6.7	-6.2
Primary balance (incl. grants)	-3.6	-1.9	-1.1	-7.2	-1.2	-5.9	0.8	-3.0	-2.0	-1.0
Net foreign financing	6.3	3.6	2.4	1.2	4.3	4.2	1.1	1.8	2.0	2.0
Net domestic financing	5.3	0.8	2.2	9.4	0.0	5.1	1.4	5.0	4.5	3.9
Social spending 2/	1.9	2.4	2.8	2.5	3.2	2.4	3.1	2.3	2.3	2.3
Gross central government debt 3/	70.9	77.5	71.8	87.6	88.5	91.2	86.7	93.9	96.5	98.5
of which: foreign currency debt	49.6	57.3	52.4	59.8	67.1	61.9	66.0	62.7	64.2	65.6
Money and credit										
(Annual percentage change, unless otherwise indicated)										
Broad money	11.4	6.6	10.1	11.8	4.0	11.2	6.5	10.0	10.0	9.4
Credit to the economy	12.7	9.3	3.6	6.8	5.3	7.1	5.4	7.2	7.4	7.5
Velocity of circulation (GDP/M3)	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.1	1.3	1.1	1.3	1.1	1.1	1.1
External sector										
(Percent of GDP, unless otherwise indicated)										
Current account balance	-10.3	-11.1	-8.4	-6.8	-7.5	-9.5	-8.1	-9.4	-9.3	-9.2
Trade balance	-13.4	-14.8	-13.9	-9.4	-9.4	-14.3	-13.3	-13.1	-12.4	-12.4
Value of exports of goods (pct. change)	4.9	8.8	-3.5	-8.7	-20.1	16.6	13.8	6.4	4.9	4.2
Value of imports of goods (pct. change)	6.3	9.7	-5.0	-14.8	-24.5	28.0	19.3	3.6	3.1	4.2
Volume of exports of goods (pct. change)	3.2	3.5	-5.1	-12.3	-14.2	10.0	15.8	7.0	4.6	2.9
Volume of import of goods (pct. change)	3.4	1.0	-8.6	-13.7	-21.6	12.1	26.1	5.5	3.8	3.4
Terms of trade (pct. change, "-": deterioration)	-1.2	-3.2	-2.3	5.5	-3.2	-7.2	3.9	1.2	1.0	0.5
Foreign direct investment (net)	2.0	2.5	2.1	1.6	0.4	1.7	1.8	1.9	2.0	2.0
Gross official reserves (eop, billions of US\$)	5.6	5.2	7.4	9.0	6.5	8.4	6.5	7.6	6.7	5.6
Reserve coverage (months of next year's imports of goods)	3.0	2.9	4.9	4.6	4.0	4.1	3.7	3.6	3.1	2.5
Reserve coverage (months of next year's imports of GNFS)	2.6	2.5	4.3	4.1	3.6	3.7	3.3	3.2	2.8	2.2

Tab.1 Tunisia: Selected Economic and Financial Indicators, 2017-25
Source: International Monetary Fund

The fiscal deficit increased considerably to 11.5 % of GDP. Another worrying factor is that of unemployment. According to the World Bank in the third quarter of 2021, 18.4% of the Tunisian population was unemployed, with peaks reaching among low-skilled workers, youth, and women (World Bank, 2022). The poverty rate also increased from 14% in the pre-pandemic period to 20% in 2020. UNICEF calculates a 6-10 percentage point increase in the child poverty rate over the same period. Among the hardest hit economic sectors are transportation and tourism, with the latter contracting by 60% in 2020 compared to the previous year. Rating agencies, too, describes Tunisia's phase of severe weakness, further exacerbated in the months following Saied's power grab. Moody's, for example, downgraded Tunisia's rating from B3 to Caa1 as early as fall 2021, citing as one of the reasons the context of institutional weakness that could exacerbate the liquidity crisis and lead to the Tunisian default (Moody's, 2021).

With the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the economic outlook for Tunisia remains highly uncertain and volatile, and the economic rebound that was presented will have to be recalculated downward. In 2021, for example, there was a 2.9% rebound in GDP due to pandemic containment and increased vaccination rates, starting in the second half of the year (World Bank, 2021). At the rates shown before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, it would have taken the Tunisian economy three years to return back to pre-pandemic levels. Tunis is also a net importer of goods and services. The sudden rise in energy and food prices is leading to an increase in the current fiscal deficit, which is projected to stand at 7.65% of the GDP in 2022. The other indicator of steady growth as early as the last quarter of 2021, with an acceleration in early 2022, is the inflation rate (Fig.1). In April 2022 on a year-on-year basis, there was an increase in consumer prices of 7.5% (National Institute of Statistics, 2022). In this sense, foods commodities are the goods most affected by the price increase.

On an annual basis, the following increases were seen in 2022: eggs (22.2%), olive oil (20.6%), fresh fruits (18.9%), poultry (14.1%), and legumes (11.3%) (Fig.2). Thus, if macroeconomic indicators are already able to grasp the condition of extreme weakness, what is of greater concern are the effects in the daily life of the Tunisian population.

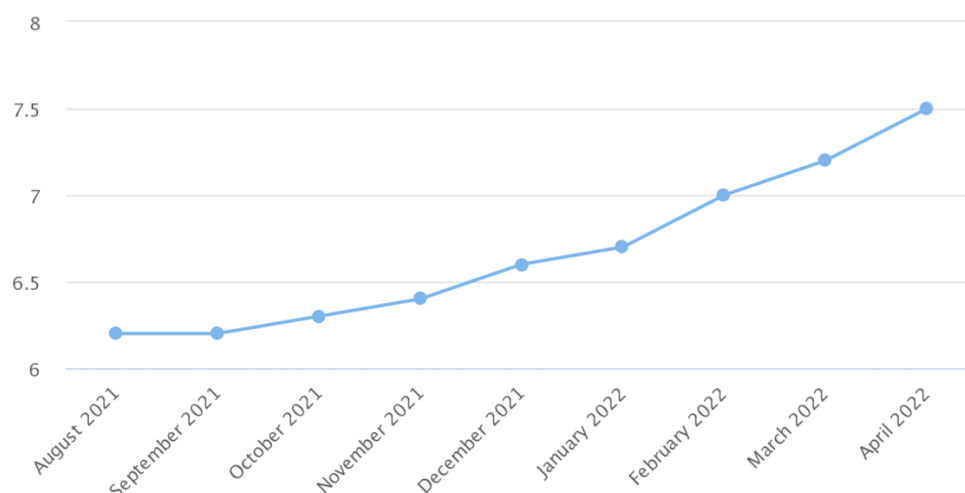


Fig.1 Tunisian Inflation Rate %
Source: National Institute of Statistics

Principaux produits	Variations mensuelles	variations annuelles	أهم المواد
	نسبة التغير الشهري	نسبة التغير السنوي	
Œufs	0,1%	22,2%	البيض
Huile d'olives	1,5%	20,6%	زيت الزيتون
Fruits frais	0,5%	18,9%	الفواكه الطازجة
Volailles	1,1%	14,1%	الدواجن
Légumes frais	2,2%	11,3%	الخضار الطازجة
Lait, fromage	0,6%	8,8%	الأجبان ومشتقات الحليب
Poisson frais	0,2%	8,6%	الأسماك الطازجة
Dérivés de céréales	1,3%	7,0%	مشتقات الحبوب
Café en poudre	0,0%	6,6%	القهوة (بن)
Eaux minérales, boissons et jus	2,7%	4,3%	الماء المعدني والمشروبات الغازية
Sels et condiments et autres	1,5%	4,0%	التوابل
Viande bovine	2,3%	3,7%	لحم البقر
Légumes secs	0,4%	3,1%	البقول الجافة
viande d'agneau, mouton	0,9%	3,1%	لحم الضأن
Chocolat et autres	0,3%	2,1%	الحلوى والشكولاتة
Fruits secs	0,5%	-4,3%	الفواكه الجافة

Fig.2 Inflation Rate by product %
Source: National Institute of Statistics

In this regard, the sector most affected by the conflict in Ukraine, which deserves more attention, is the wheat sector, as it is the skeleton of the Tunisian diet in qualitative terms and is driving, in quantitative terms, the increase in prices of other food items¹¹. Tunisia imports 41% of wheat from Ukraine (1st) and 5.14% from Russia (4th) (Fig.3) (OEC, 2022). Over the 2010-2020 decade, Tunisia's dependence on Kiev has increased considerably: +128%. While compared to Moscow there has been a modest increase: +4.62%. In the same time period, however, Tunisian imports from Western countries decreased. With the exception of Canada and Spain (second and

¹¹ For an in-depth discussion of the effects of the war in Ukraine on food security see Eurasia Group, 2022.

third country from which it imports) there was a decrease in imports from: France, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (Fig.4).

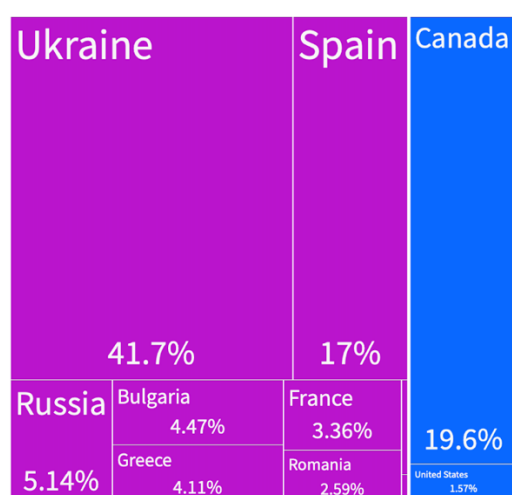


Fig.3 Tunisia's Import of Wheat by Country %
Source: OEC

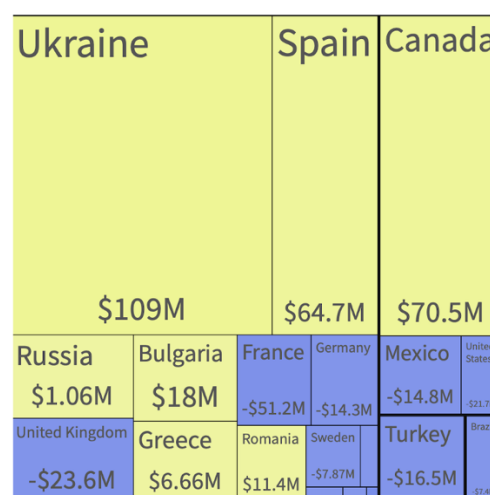


Fig. 4 Exporters of Wheat to Tunisia (2010-2020)
Source: OEC

In addition, unlike countries such as Egypt, Tunisia has a severely limited amount of stored wheat. For durum wheat and barley, Tunisia has a stored capacity only until May 2022; and for soft wheat until June 2022. In this sector, the problem is not only due to a reduction caused by disruptions, technical or political, in supply chains from Eastern Europe and the Black Sea. In fact, there is also a difficulty for the Tunisian authorities to pay for those goods due to the rising prices. For example, already at the end of 2021, two cargo ships were blocked for days in front of the port of Sfax because the Office des Céréales – dependent on the Ministry of Agriculture and de facto monopolist in the wheat trade – was unable to pay. (Poletti, 2022; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). Rising prices are putting a burden on the state budget as the Tunisian authorities have been subsidizing these sectors for years in order to ensure lowered prices for the consumers. With pre-war prices, the public outlay was worth 2.2 billion Tunisian dinars (TD) per year. With the current prices, the outlay would increase by 1.3 billion TD if consumer prices were to be left unchanged.

What measures is the government implementing to deal with price increases? On March 9, Saied announced a “war on speculation”, attempting to place the blame of the rising prices on enterprises. Under the new legal provisions, prison sentences of up to thirty years have been increased for those convicted of speculation on state-subsidized sectors (Volkman, 2022)¹². However, the Tunisian authorities have also been forced to gradually increase prices in order to partially absorb price increases by passing them onto the consumers. For example, this measure has been adopted to fuel, with monthly increases of 3% on the final consumer price. Domestic electricity prices also increased in May 2022 – 12% for those with annual consumption of 200kWh – and gas – 16% for those with consumption exceeding 30 cubic meters per month (MEMO, 2022). Overall, two deteriorating effects should be noted: one is the inevitable increase in government spending to maintain a minimum level of subsidies; and the second, the impossibility of fully balancing the generalized increase in prices, which inevitably will fall on the consumers, at least partially, that further exacerbates the precarious socio-economic condition of the population.

¹² The Tunisian Ministry of Trade has also started a social media campaign aimed at showing the results of this “war on speculation” by posting loads of goods seized in the various inspections. Nonetheless, reading comments from the public, it does not seem that the population is satisfied with the results. (Tunisian Ministry of Trade, 2022).

Assessments and future scenarios

On an economic level, the developments of the difficult trend currently facing the Tunisian economy will depend on at least two factors. The first is on the development of the conflict in Ukraine and the ability of the international community, at least in the short term, to imprint measures to counteract the negative effects, particularly in the food sector. The second is the ability/willingness of the Tunisian authorities to reach a new agreement with the International Monetary Fund, which requires the implementation of structural reforms in order to grant a new loan. However, this is currently strongly opposed not only by a large part of the political spectrum but also by the UGTT. The syndicate frowns upon the demands made by the Washington-based institution, to the point of having already organized a nationwide strike for June 16 against the feeble economic reform proposals put forward by Saied in recent weeks. The IMF calls for a significant reduction in the fiscal deficit and consequently in public debt to be sought through the following measures: tax reform, streamlining of public sector spending, streamlining of state subsidy policy, and deep structural reforms of public enterprises in order to strengthen the competitiveness of the Tunisian economy and improve the business climate (IMF, 2022). In both scenarios of agreement and non-agreement, an increase in social tensions is foreseeable (lose-lose situation). This is the reason why president Saied for the time being has not clarified what structural measures he intends to implement.

In the short term, bilateral and multilateral initiatives to alleviate the food crisis and the resulting price rise should be supported. From this point of view, initiatives in which Rome has taken the lead should be supported, such as the Mediterranean Ministerial Dialogue on Food Security, led by Italy and FAO, and the interlocution with the authorities in Moscow and Kiev to unblock cargoes stuck in Ukrainian ports. On a macroeconomic level, the European aid packages should be noted, with the second tranche of 300 million euros paid on May 25 by the European Commission as part of the Macro-Financial Assistance plan to mitigate the effects of the pandemic (European Commission, 2022). In the long run, however, structural reforms will be inevitable, which, with or without the IMF intervention, should make the North African country's economy more robust. From a socio-economic perspective, during fall 2022, there could be a peak in the crisis and a consequent increase in internal instability with a potential return of mass migratory flows directed toward Italy.

On the political dimension, it will be necessary to observe the evolution of events between July and December 2022: the upcoming election dates. Only after this stage will it be possible to understand more in depth what direction the political-institutional transition that began in 2021 will have taken. According to the roadmap presented by Saied, the constitutional draft will hopefully be published on June 30. There is no indication of what changes will be made to the current constitutional text; however, it is likely that Saied's most important proposal will be to move from a semi-presidential system to a presidential system tout court. This could be complemented by the introduction of tools of direct democracy, in the form of popular committees. Some political parties, including Ennahda, have already announced their intention to boycott the referendum. Politically, the first months of 2023 will be the most crucial, should no clear winner come from the polls – a highly likely scenario given the fragmentation of Tunisia's political system. In the medium term, however, it will have to be figured out how and whether the Tunisian president can envision an exit strategy for himself. Having been elected in 2019, under article 75 of the current constitution, his mandate will expire in 2024.

Finally, on an international dimension, it is currently unlikely that foreign countries would be able and/or willing to fuel Tunisian political polarization, given the détente and dialogue phase which the regional order is going through. The only concern, though remote at the moment, does not come from regional countries but from Russia. Moscow may try to exploit the possible passive behavior of Western countries to penetrate Tunisia and extend its influence in the Maghreb region, where it already has a presence in Libya and enjoys a fruitful military cooperation with Algeria. In this regard, Foreign Minister Lavov's later postponed trip to Tunis in mid-May should be worth highlighting.

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Jihadist pressures on Benin: the threats to domestic and regional stability

Considered by analysts as one of the most stable West African states, Benin has been the target of multiple attacks by armed groups since last winter. In February, an ambush hit a rangers patrol engaged in anti-poaching efforts in the country's northern regions within the heart of W. National Park (RFI, 2022). Following the traditional jihadist *modus operandi*, the assault was carried out in two rounds. Following the first ambush, jihadists blasted IEDs. The militants' goal was to strike the patrols that arrived to help the first wounded. The final toll was seven victims, including four rangers and a French trainer, and twelve injured. All the victims were employees of the South African NGO African Parks. The organization manages the two major national parks in northern Benin. A few weeks later, another attack inside Pendjari National Park killed five Beninese soldiers (JA, 2022). Although no domestic armed group or criminal organization has claimed responsibility for the assaults, several clues lead to Islamist militant groups from Burkina Faso. These, for several months, have found shelter in the thick border forests. The Beninese security apparatus fear that the activities of transnational Islamist armed groups active in the Sahel spill over into Benin by exploiting the wilderness areas in the north of the country. Islamist groups have found natural sanctuary and socio-economic power networks particularly suitable for their embedded in the region in the border areas. Although their activities' impact is still low, the intertwining with domestic instability phenomena could allow jihadist groups to thrive and increase their attack capabilities in Benin and neighboring countries. The increasing number of violent incidents in Beninese territory has prompted the government to send army units and start a recruitment campaign. The increasing number of violent incidents in Beninese territory has prompted the government to send army units and start a recruitment campaign. Fears are growing in recent weeks about the risk that Sahelian violence will spread to the coastal countries of West Africa. Consequently, the northern regions of Benin and other countries (Ivory Coast) are rapidly becoming the new front line in countering Islamist terrorism.

1. National parks as a sanctuary for jihadism in West Africa

The February attacks were the worst in a series of cross-border terrorist raids in northern Benin that began in late 2021 and intensified during the early months of 2022. The armed groups that have increased their cross-border incursions into Beninese territory come from Burkina Faso. The perpetrators of the attacks most likely belong to the jihadist group Ansaroul Islam (AI). The organization is ideologically linked to al Qaeda more than the Islamic State (Phillips, 2022). In recent years the AI, like other Islamist armed militias, has begun to operate within the W-Arly-Pendjari (WAP) complex. The WAP complex is a natural stretch of wild landscapes across three countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Due to the high biodiversity, the 34,000 km² of the WAP is considered the largest untouched wild ecosystem in West Africa. The area includes several wildlife reserves and two large national parks. W. National Park is at the 'crossroads between Benin, Niger, and Burkina Faso borders, and the Pendjari National Park is situated along the border between Benin and Burkina Faso. Transboundary areas were famous primarily for their poaching problem at the beginning of the new millennium. However, with the growth of armed Islamist groups, the WAP complex has become a haven for several militias, especially within Burkinabé and Niger territories. Some of the groups that have undermined the security and stability of the Sahel, such as the Jamaat Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS), have set up bases of operation in the heart of the region's forests (Châtelot, 2022). For this reason, in Burkina

Faso, even before Benin, the first targets of jihadist groups have been rangers. The most famous case involves the founder of the Chengeta Wildlife group, who died in an ambush while chaperoning two Spanish filmmakers in Arly National Park, bordering the Pendjari one (Mednick e Nsaibia, 2021). Strategic and propaganda considerations are behind the militia's decision to target officials, public and private, engaged in anti-poaching efforts. Strategically, the jihadist militias know that rangers and group members such as Chengeta Wildlife have in-depth knowledge of the areas. For this reason, they pose a threat to their shelters. From the propagandistic point of view, armed groups gain the sympathies and support of local communities by attacking officials active in anti-poaching operations. Many rural communities have been most affected by introducing rules that prevent hunting and livestock grazing within parks and reserves. Finally, Islamist armed groups also aim to seize control of anti-poaching patrols' weapons and military equipment.

2. The counter actions against Islamist armed groups

Following the February assault, France launched a series of airstrikes in the border area on Burkina Faso soil. The French military issued a statement claiming to have neutralized forty members of an armed terrorist group (France24, 2022). The French intervention followed the increasing cooperation between Western intelligence services, mainly French, the Beninese security forces, and the African Parks. The latter is a Johannesburg-based nongovernmental organization engaged in environmental protection. African Parks in 2020 signed an agreement with the government of Benin to take over the management and patrol of the two major national parks, W Park and neighboring Pendjari Park. More than just an environmental organization, the group exhibits some characteristics that seem to bring it closer to a private military company. The South African group can count on a standing force of more than 1,000 rangers, trained by military instructors from the United Kingdom, Israel, and France. The one hundred and fifty rangers deployed in Beninese territory thus received paramilitary training by acquiring counterterrorism techniques. In addition, African Parks patrol units are equipped with sophisticated high-tech equipment better than those used by the Beninese army. Unlike other nongovernmental organizations involved in environmental protection, African Parks enjoys greater autonomy on the ground. Usually, environmental protection organizations, by signing a management agreement for a reserve or national park, place their officers and rangers under the command, at least nominally, of the host country. Instead, the agreements signed by African Parks allow the host country to retain influence in the overall management plan of operations but not in the day-to-day operations on the ground. The rise of raids by armed groups in the two parks overseen by the NGO has strengthened African Parks' cooperation with the country's security forces and French intelligence. In April, Benin launched a new investment plan to recruit new troops and upgrade the army's equipment¹. However, it will take several months before the plan becomes operational. During this interim phase, African Parks rangers are playing a primary role. The group operates as a counterterrorism unit, becoming a border security force (de Bruijne, 2021). Thus, control and monitoring activities have turned African Parks officials into the front line of Beninese security and the main target of jihadist attacks.

3. Analysis, evaluation and forecasting

Nowadays, Benin is still one of the most stable states in West Africa. However, the presence of armed Islamist groups and their ability to exploit the local socio-political environment have increased the anxieties of Beninese authorities. The ongoing trend, if not halted, will affect both Benin's internal stability and that of the West African littoral countries. While doubts remain concerning the nature of the armed groups operating in the provinces of northern Benin, several sources from the ground indicate they belong to the movements active within Burkina Faso. Since

¹ See IS 2/2022.

mid-2019, Burkina Faso has become the target of increasing terrorist attacks. Three main militant Islamist groups have gradually gained prominence throughout the country: the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), a faction of the broader Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) coalition, and the Ansaroul Islam (AI) group. The AI has been the main factor of destabilization in the country's northern regions, along the porous border with Mali, for several years. Embedded mainly in Soum province, AI has experienced a period of decline that, while drastically reducing the number of attacks, has triggered a profound structural reorganization of the movement. The recent incidents in Benin ascribed to the group thus indicate how AI has resumed its initiatives and changed its scope of operations by increasingly focusing on the southeastern Burkinabé region. The progressive relocation is the consequence of two interrelated factors. Firstly, the increasing pressure exerted since 2018 by the Burkinabé security forces in cooperation with some French army units. The latter, operating in two areas not far from the border - Mali (Gao) and Niger (Niamey) - under Operation Barkhane, have carried out several raids on Burkinabé soil at the request of the local government, forcing militant groups to move south. The second factor is partly related to the search for a new area of operation and hiding place and partly to competition within the Islamist galaxy. AI group militants have found a suitable area in the southeastern region along the border with Benin, winning the competition from other movements belonging to the JNIM coalition. Along the Beninese border, the group has changed its strategy. Well known as a movement whose attacks mainly target civilians, the AI seems to have opted for a cooperative approach in the country's northern provinces. In Benin, the AI has established mutual aid relationships with organized crime and rural communities, especially herders. In Benin, organized crime consists mainly of unstructured networks of smuggling licit goods-motorcycles, fuel, and textiles-and illicit goods-primarily animals, hides, and ivory-operating along the country's many porous borders. The activities are survival-oriented in a complex socio-economic environment. However, criminal networks are increasingly nurturing relationships with Islamist armed groups from the Sahel. The latter are the primary beneficiaries of smuggled goods. Besides consumers, jihadist groups act as intermediaries between Beninese and global networks. The role of brokers allows militants to extract essential economic resources to fund their activities. Armed groups sheltering in the country's northern parks strengthen ties with poachers whose knowledge of the territory enables jihadists to find safety in forested areas almost unreachable by Beninese security forces. As was the case last February, poachers receive in exchange support against regular forces and rangers engaged in protecting nature reserves. The second social group with which jihadist movements have established cooperative relationships are herders. The herding communities supply the militants with essential goods but are also an important recruitment ground. Jihadist groups are leveraging the growing discontent among communities and villages devoted to pastoralism. The dissatisfaction stems from intercommunity tensions with farmers and distrust in the authorities to settle disputes fairly. Disputes between herders and farmers have historically been a driver of internal instability in Benin and neighboring countries (Brottem, 2021). Initially, clashes, even violent ones, were localized in rural and highland areas such as the Ouémé valleys, where the transhumance from Niger and Nigeria occurred. However, various factors such as climate change, an increase in intensive farming, and the institution of wildlife reserves have de facto reduced the transit areas for herders by spreading tense situations. Historically a transit area for pastoralists in the dry season, the subhumid savanna belt is increasingly monopolized by farms, making it progressively difficult for herds to survive. The government's failure to manage disputes through equitable land allocation has exacerbated feelings of injustice and anger, especially among young herders, increasing their receptivity to the extremist bid (Boni Biao, 2022). Militant groups have found fertile ground for recruitment among Muslim pastoral communities, often Fulani. Herders seek illegal deals with smugglers and jihadist networks to graze their cattle in protected areas such as wildlife reserves and parks. Islamist militants have already made agreements with small villages in the rural area where

they get supplies. The greatest threat is that armed extremist groups may decide to intervene directly in land disputes between herders and farmers, turning controversies into increasingly violent ones. The same conditions present in Mali almost a decade ago emerged in Benin. Even in those circumstances, Malian authorities had proved unprepared to deal with local disputes fairly and transparently, increasing the frustration of herders. The lack of confidence felt by the latter towards the government had prompted them to join Islamist movements, most notably the Macina Liberation Front (FLM). These launched a series of attacks against Malian farmers and security forces, triggering an escalation of violence and instability in the whole country.

Recent outbreaks of violence in Benin's northern provinces thus constitute more than a wake-up call. Reports from the country confirm that the two national parks along the country's northern border have become a haven for armed Islamist groups from the Sahel. This trend also affects other West African coastal countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Ghana. Indeed, historical socio-ethnic ties with the Sahel and the counter-jihadist activities along the border are fostering the spread of violent forms of extremism. If not promptly faced, the current trends threaten to increase the vulnerability of one of the wealthiest areas of the African continent. Among the future targets of some of the jihadist groups is the coastline rich in natural resources (hydrocarbons) and geo-strategically of primary importance to international trade. At the same time, it is not possible to rule out a dynamic similar to that experienced in Mozambique. If recruitment of new members accelerates, the extremist groups can decide to change strategy and launch an armed insurgency throughout the country's northern regions. Much will depend on the reaction of the Beninese security forces and, more generally, of the other littoral countries subjected to the growing jihadist pressure. The political fact is that the contagion of the Sahel instability, until recently merely feared, is now a severe reality.

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Russian Federation and its bilateral relations with the Polish neighbors' in the shadow of the Ukrainian crisis

Introduction

As well defined by the historian Bohdan Budurowycz, relations between Russia and Poland represent a longstanding antagonism that goes beyond the idea of a simple conflict between two important Slavic states, thus translating into a Gordian knot that is difficult to solve. From this point of view, the analysis of the historical-political context of the various phases is fundamental in understanding the reasons of a secular confrontation that will hardly have any perspective for improvement, at least in the short-medium term. In addition to the historical-political context, the element of Slavic commonality is of great interest (in particular, the failure of Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia), vital in understanding the religious-cultural substrate on which relations have developed and are currently based between the two countries.

1. Elements behind a difficult relationship

Poland and Russia, whose fates have been intertwined over centuries, have undoubtedly had a different historical importance and different destinies. Russia's fate had an imperial dimension first (although, until the modern era, the Union and, subsequently, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was one of the great states of Europe at a level almost equal to that of Russia) and one of the poles of attraction in the dispute of the Cold War then. Poland, dismembered and included in such empire, rose again only in 1918 to enter the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union following the end of the Second World War. The perception of the two countries in European culture is also different. Therefore Russia first embodied tsarist despotism and, in the twentieth century, the specter of communism or, as often incorrectly stated by many publicists and scholars, a new but eternal face: communism as a mutation of the tsarist autocracy. Poland, on the other hand, perceived, as a martyr nation raped by the tsarist autocracy but certainly not spared by other European powers, was a great figure in the European consciousness of the nineteenth century, revived in the second half of the twentieth, by its anti-Soviet and anti-communist resistance.

Furthermore, the respective visions of the other from oneself are different and, very rarely, move away from the stereotypical ones that see an anti-Polish Russia or a Russophobic Poland. In this context, the thought of the historian and thinker Georgij Fedotov who in 1939, when Poland, squeezed between the troops of Hitler and Stalin, was beginning a new phase of its historical journey, wrote in his "Polsha i My"¹ How incomprehensible seemed to him the indifference with which the Russians of the nineteenth century perceived the Polish tragedy. This happened in part because they easily accepted the fate of the Russian Empire (which participated in the partition of Poland), without doubting its solidity. The philosopher questioned countless among the great Russian writers, and tried to approach the tragedy of the brotherly people and try to understand it². A sentiment that differs well from the Pushkinian one (in particular in his patriotic poem of 1831, "To the slanderers of Russia") or Dostoyevskian, personalities who with regard to the insurgent Poland (1830-31), openly manifested their anti-Polish sentiments by making the mockery of the Polish is a typical theme of Russian literature.

¹ *Sobranie sochineniy v 12 tomakh* / G.P.Fedotov, Moskva: Martis: SAM and SAM, 1996-. / T. 7: articles in the journals "Novaya Rossiya", "Novyj Grad", "Sovremennye zapiski", "Pravoslavnoe delo" dall'almanacco "Krug", "Vladimirskogo sbornika". 2014. - 486 c. / *Polsha i My*. pp. 299-303 https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Georgij_Fedotov/polsha-i-my/ (last access 28.05.2022)

² Strada V., *Europe. La Russia come frontiera*, ed. I Nodi Marsilio, 2014.

These are the years in which the so-called "pan-Slavism" was born. It was a political and socio-cultural movement that emerged among the "Slavic peoples" (or rather, of the Slavic language speakers), whose unifying fulcrum was the existence of a common linguistic and cultural identity and the effort to create an equally common territorial space. It was codified during the 1848 Prague Slavic Congress, but already after the 2nd congress there was a change of course, the movement became Russian 'lead' (through self-election as "leading people" in the mission liberator of the Slavs) in which the Slavophiles prevailed; they saw the seed of discord with Russia in the adherence of Poland to the Catholic Church. In fact, the question was not limited merely to the Catholic faith (the good relations with Western states from the same profession such as Italy, France or even Protestant Germany could not be explained otherwise) but to the unacceptable Slavic-Catholic union that made in their eyes Poland the Judah of Orthodox "Slavicity". Such idea was reaffirmed in 1915 by the philosopher Nikolai Berdjaev in his essay *Slavophilism and the Slavic idea*³, where Slavophiles "*could not forgive the Polish people for their Catholicism. They could not understand and love the Polish soul because they could not understand and love the Catholic soul. And all the originality of Polish culture was determined by the fact that in it Catholicism had refracted into a Slavic soul. [...] For the Slavophiles, Poland was within the Slavic world that West to which they always opposed the Russian Orthodox East, the bearer of a superior spiritual type and the fullness of religious truth*"⁴. The Polish Pan-Slavic idea, on the other hand, was the result of that "messianism" promoted in France in the mid-nineteenth century. by the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz (during the lectures held as an exile at the *Collège de France* in 1840-41) who shared with the Russian Slavophiles only the critique of rationalism and rationalist individualism of political economics and law, as well as the condemnation of the Petrine reforms at the same time idealizing (the result of the times and of the so-called "*chłopomania*" or "peasant-mania" which exalted rural and bucolic life) the peasant commune, perceiving in the Slavic world a reserve of moral values.

The Pan-Slavist idea is once again exhumed to hold together the Slavic peoples against the Hitlerian campaign of "hunting the Slav" - which since 1933, at the time of the advent of Nazism, defined them *düngervolk* (a manure people) - by Stalin who, in his speech of November 6, 1941 recalled the need for union against the enemy⁵. Basically, if in the past the idea of Slavic commonality had met with considerable success, this can no longer be considered valid in the contemporary era (except for the Yugoslav experience that has kept, albeit with the limits of the case, united Slavic and non-Slavic peoples for decades) at least not as regards relations between Russia and Poland. Given the inevitable balance of power, the latter would in fact see its absorption in the vastness of the Russian Federation. The Pan-Slavic experience in particular with its Slavophilic deviation was nevertheless useful to outline the outline of an image which, albeit marginally, also includes the religious aspect.

In consideration of the fact that in the last three centuries it was Poland that was the object of Russian expansion and aggression, and not vice versa, it follows a different value that the two sides attribute to historical memory. While for the Poles the weight left by Russian actions over the centuries was decisive, the historical awareness of Russians in Russian-Polish relations focuses mainly on some pillars, including the belief in the lack of memory and gratitude of Poles for the liberation of the country of German occupation by the Red Army; the demolition of monuments in honor of the fallen of the Soviet army (which for the Poles represents an occupying force); the Polish-Bolshevik War of the years 1919-1920 and soldiers of the Bolshevik army who died during the Polish captivity; 2 years of occupation of Moscow by the Poles in the years 1610-1612. To this is added a further element of the Russian cultural genotype, namely the perception of Russia's identity through the prism of rivalry with

³ Berdjaev N.A. (1992), *L'idea russa. I problemi fondamentali del pensiero russo (XIX e inizio del XX secolo)*, Mursia, p. 6.

⁴ Strada V., *Europe. La Russia come frontiera*, Ed. I Nodi Marsilio, 2014, p.21.

⁵ Maksimenkov L., "*Gitler i Stalin: novyj vzgljad iz archiva. O Tom kak otec narodov zabolitsja ob imidzhe fashistskoy Germanii*". Rivista "Ogonëk" №8 del 05.03.2018, p.14 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3558723>; November 1941 Stalin's speech, <https://www.lasecondaguerramondiale.com/stalin-discorso-del-novembre-1941> (last access 28.05.2022)

the West. This was often accompanied by the belief that the enlargement of NATO and the EU to the post-Soviet countries was a manifestation of the West's "Russian encirclement" policy, an idea that has reinforced the secular syndrome in many Russians. of the "besieged fortress". This is also accompanied by the role of superpower (which vanished in the 1990s and was reborn with the Putin presidency) that the Russians feel are their own in the international context.

In general, however, and in the time span from 1991 to 2014⁶, Poland was of interest to the Russians mainly as an economic partner, until that date most of the Russian society did not have the perception of the country as "important" for Russia, having however, in most cases, little knowledge⁷. In this sense, the geographical proportions are directly proportional to the perception of the danger felt by the counterpart but inversely proportional to the quantity of the message passed on by the mass media. As Marek Moliński wrote in *Refleksje nad wzajemnym postrzeganiem stosunków Polska – Rosja* (Reflections on the mutual perception of Polish-Russian relations), in fact, the question of Polish-Russian relations is reported by the Polish media in an incomparably more frequent way than in Russia. The perception of Poland and Poles by the Russians, especially Russian political elites, was also influenced by the fact that Poland was seen as a country where a peaceful and successful political transformation took place and where the economy it proved to be relatively solid and resistant to the financial and economic crisis of 2008. On the other hand, however, there is a widespread image of Poland as a country that does not miss the opportunity to damage Russia. Part of such a frame is the Polish membership of the Atlantic Treaty as well as of the European Union (EU). Following such events the country has been increasingly perceived by the Russians as the protagonist of a plan concocted in the interest of the foreign policy of the United States and the West, whose implementation violates Russian interests in the Commonwealth of Independent States. This conviction, which has become increasingly strong in recent months after the intervention of the Warsaw government in the Ukrainian question, has contributed to increasing the feeling of alienation towards Poles in the Russian society and to the growth of negative attitudes.

2. The annexation of Crimea and the rapid disintegration of bilateral relations.

The current armed conflict in Ukraine marks, as previously mentioned, an important dividing line in Polish-Russian relations and materializes well before February 24, 2022; it already began at the end of November 2013, turning into a war in eastern Ukraine in the first months of 2014.

According to the survey conducted by the Polish Public Opinion Studies Center (CBOS) on April 3-4, 2014, 47% of respondents believed that, in the context of the events in Ukraine, there was a threat to the independence of Poland. The percentage of respondents increased when there was talk of a threat of a military nature, related to the possibility of an attack on Polish territory by another state (from December 2013 in which there was a 7% to April 2014, the percentage rose to 29%). When asked which countries Poland should fear the most, Russia was named by 80% of respondents, Germany by 7% and Ukraine by 4%⁸. Following the invasion of Ukraine last February, in the CBOS report of March 2022, the percentage of those who "firmly" support the Polish partnership with NATO has risen to 75%, "moderately" to 19% while those who agree on the presence on Polish soil the troops of other

⁶ As is well known, 2014 was marked by the annexation of Crimea which in Poland, as in the Baltic States, awakened the fear of a possible Russian expansion to the West. Since that date, bilateral relations have cooled and, since 24 February 2024, diplomatic relations are practically non-existent.

⁷ The Katyn massacre could be the emblematic example of such a little knowledge. It is a milestone in the historical memory of the Second World War for the Poles, practically unknown to the average Russian until the air disaster of 2010, the year in which (November 26, 2010) the State Duma recognized as guilty of the massacre the NKVD. *Gosduma prinyala zajavlenie "O Katynskoj tragedii i eë zhertvach"*. Pagina ufficiale Государственная Дума федерального Собрания Российской Федерации <http://duma.gov.ru/news/5093/> (ultimo accesso 10.06.2022).

⁸ K. Kowalczyk, *Polacy o bezpieczeństwie narodowym i NATO. Komunikat z badań CBOS*. Warszawa 2014, nr 48 www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K_048_PDF (last access 25.05.2022)

NATO countries rose to 85% (from 32% in 1999 and 57% in 2014)⁹. The data clearly reflect the fear of a violation of its territory and the specter of a return to the dark years under Soviet / Russian influence. The direct consequence of the perceived threat was a race for the consolidation of the national defense system through the implementation of new strategic plans and modernization of the weapon and equipment systems¹⁰. The signing of a further agreement to strengthen the US presence on Polish territory (which materialized in 2020 with the displacement of US troops stationed in Germany on Polish soil)¹¹ and, above all, to increase the investments in the defense sector with the achievement, expected initially for 2030 but subsequently brought forward to 2026, of 2.5% of GDP (well over 2% forecast by NATO) was probably the decisive but not final step. During the visit of the US president (25 March 2022) to Poland, Andrzej Duda thanked¹² the United States for the cooperation¹³ and support of these years, underlining how much the current conflict in Ukraine has influenced the recent - and rather quick - approval of the Law on Defense of the Fatherland¹⁴ which sees an increase in defense appropriations to 3% of GDP by 2023, złoty which will be used, among others, for modernization programs and, in particular, for the purchase of US vehicles and equipment¹⁵.

For the two countries, albeit to varying degrees, Ukraine represents a battleground. As per the considerations of Zbigniew Brzeziński, who defined the country as the "geopolitical pivot on the Eurasian chessboard"¹⁶, the elimination of Russian influence in Ukraine would prevent Russia from rebuilding its position of a Eurasian empire; however, even without Ukraine, Russia could still try to obtain imperial status, but in that case it would be primarily an Asian empire. Implementing this concept meant "pushing" Russia towards Asia.

In this context, Poland has tried to carve out a role for itself, especially through involvement in the processes that took place in Ukraine, both during the "Orange Revolution" and during the conflict in 2013-2014; an involvement considered by Russia to be a manifestation of the role of "subcontractor" of the United States in its efforts to expand influence in the post-Soviet zone and transfer the burden of conflicts with Russia to Poland, in exchange for close Polish-American bilateral security cooperation¹⁷.

As George Friedman argues, the United States, with the participation of Poland in the first place, should have prevented Russia from integrating with Europe and prevented the strengthening of

⁹ *Stosunek do NATO i obecności wojsk sojuszniczych w Polsce*. Warszawa 2022, nr.40/2022 https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2022/K_040_22.PDF (last access 25.05.2022)

¹⁰ *Plan modernizacji technicznej do 2026 roku. Wybrane zadania*. (last access 30.05.2022) https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/u/e1/aa/e1aa4b89-1045-4d1c-8a5c-7ffd4026e8d5/plan_modernizacji_techicznej_do_2026_r.pdf (last access 26.05.2022)

¹¹ *Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej-Umowa o wzmocnionej współpracy obronnej pomiędzy Polską a USA podpisana*. 15.08.2020 (last access 26.05.2022) <https://www.gov.pl/web/obrona-narodowa/umowa-o-wzmocnionej-wspolpracy-obronnej-pomiedzy-polska-a-usa-podpisana>

¹² *Wypowiedź Andrzeja Dudy podczas spotkania z Joe Bidenem*. Pagina ufficiale della Presidenza della Repubblica Polacca <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wystapienia/wypowiedz-andrzeja-dudy-podczas-spotkania-z-joe-bidenem,51198> (last access 25.05.2022)

¹³ In 2021, a trade exchange for 18bn USD was registered, Poland was also the first European country to buy US gas that arrives directly in the ports of Świnoujście. Still in the energy sector, nuclear power plants as part of the "environmental protection" program will soon be built by American companies.

¹⁴ *Ustawa o obronie ojczyzny* (Legge sulla Difesa della Patria) <https://www.prawo.pl/prawo/ustawa-o-obronie-ojczyzny-opublikowana,511406.html> (last access 27.05.2022)

¹⁵ *Mają być czołgi i nowa ustawa. Rok 2022 zweryfikuje obietnice dla armii*. 03.01.2022 <https://businessinsider.com.pl/wiadomosci/rok-2022-w-wojsku-maja-byc-czolgi-i-nowa-ustawa-co-czeka-armie/9bzjmyrn#:~:text=Konferencji%20dotycz%C4%85cych%20modernizacji%20armii%20by%C5%82o,to%20ponad%2023%20mld%20z%C5%82.;Do%20Polski%20docieraj%C4%85kluczowe%20systemy%20uzbrojenia%20zakupione%20w%20USA,25.03.2022> <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Do-Polski-docieraja-kluczowe-systemy-uzbrojenia-zakupione-w-USA-8306486.html> (last access 28.05.2022)

¹⁶ Brzeziński Z., *"The grand Chessboard"*, op. cit. Cap.2, pp.12-17

¹⁷ Borkowski R. (2014), *Bezpieczeństwo strategiczne RP w kontekście amerykańskiej polityki wobec Europy Środkowej i konfliktu ukraińskiego*. in: *Dylematy polityki bezpieczeństwa Polski na początku drugiej dekady XXI wieku*. Red. K. Czornik, M. Lakomy. Katowice, pp.126-135.

cooperation between Russia and Germany. According to G. Friedman, in fact, the strengthening of cooperation between Russia and Western Europe could threaten American hegemony¹⁸.

In Poland, as in many other countries, the opinion that the main reasons for the actions of the Russian government towards Ukraine in the years 2014-2015, as in the previous period, were not derived from geopolitical premises, but from Russia's internal fear of an escalation of "liberalizing the national political system" with, as a direct consequence, a change in the leadership team (fear of delegitimization of the regime). According to supporters of this position, the Putin regime was not so afraid of Ukraine joining NATO or the EU, as of the fact that a liberal democracy could become a model, a precedent and an inspiration for the Russian society¹⁹.

The crisis in Ukraine has certainly worsened the perception of Polish security. This position was shared by representatives of both parties in power in Poland²⁰ and opposition groups, as well as international affairs analysts and journalists and the overwhelming majority of civil society. This understandable fear, however, is also the result of the actions of the Polish political elites, aimed mainly at distancing the Russian counterpart, among them the unlimited and unilateral support for all actions, even illegal ones, undertaken by the demonstrators of *Maydan Nezalezhnosti* stands out. In fact, Polish politicians from all sides participated in many of the demonstrations²¹, also supporting the most radical groups (openly anti-Polish) and the paramilitary groups that the media and politicians recognized as democratic opposition, solely with an anti-Russian function²². The culmination of the efforts was the meeting and the signing of the foreign ministers of the Weimar Triangle (Poland, Germany and France) of an agreement on 21 February 2014 between President Yanukovych and the leaders of the main Ukrainian opposition parties. However, after his overthrow, the Polish foreign minister was one of the first to unreservedly acknowledge the coup in Ukraine. After Russia's annexation of Crimea, Polish diplomacy significantly strengthened its position vis-à-vis Russia. Poland belonged, and still belongs, to the group of countries calling for the imposition of more severe sanctions on Russia. In practice, action was taken on the Polish side not to ease the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, but to some extent intensify it. This is how the statements of President Bronisław Komorowski²³ must be evaluated, in which he admitted the possibility that Poland could rearm Ukraine, a position similar to that of Tomasz Siemoniak, former defense minister²⁴.

The subsequent involvement of Germany and France in the so-called Normandy Format, the Minsk I and Minsk II agreements were greeted with great reserve by representatives of the Polish government and met with strong criticism from the Polish media. Probably one of the reasons for this

¹⁸ Friedman G. (2011), *"The next decade. Where we've been...and where we're going"*, Doubleday, cap.8, pp.120-141.

¹⁹ D'Anieri P. (2015), *Democracy and Geopolitics: Understanding Ukraine's Threat to Russia. In Ukraine and Russia. People, politics, propaganda and perspectives*. E-IR Edited Collections Series, May 11, 2015, pp.221-228 (last access 28.05.2022) <https://www.e-ir.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Ukraine-and-Russia-E-IR-2016.pdf>

²⁰ *Informacja ministra spraw zagranicznych Polski, Radosława Sikorskiego, o zadaniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej, przedstawiona w Sejmie w dniu 8 maja 2014 r.* – www.msz.gov.pl (last access 28.05.2022)

²¹ Ciszak P. *Czypolscy politycy na Majdanie wiedzą, kogo popierają?* Money.pl 27.01.2014 (last access 06.06.2022) <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/komentarze/artykul/czy:polscy:politycy:na:majdanie:wiedza:kogo:popieraja,224,0,1466336.html>; Izakowicz-Zaleski T., *Kult Bandery a polscy politycy*. 24.01.2015 <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/kult-bandery-a-polscy-politycy/vrx9k>; Zasadni A. *To nie pierwsza wizyta Kaczyńskiego w Kijowie. Którzy polscy politycy podobnie wspierali Ukrainę?* 15.03.2014 <https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/raporty/raport-ukraina-rosja/aktualnosci/news-to-nie-pierwsza-wizyta-kaczynskiego-w-kijowie-ktorzy-polscy-,nId,5894262> (last access 06.06.2022)

²² Many of the Polish parliamentarians went to Kiev several times, spoke to the demonstrators alongside the leaders of the main Ukrainian groups, including the nationalist and anti-Polish party Svoboda, who referred directly to the symbolism, slogans and program of the UPA, whose leader, Oleh Tyahnybok, called on the Maydan to revolution and overthrow President Yanukovych. The support or at least the leniency of a significant part of the Polish public opinion-forming circles for the activities undertaken by the Ukrainian groups referring to the traditions of the OUN and UPA stemmed mainly from the belief that, since these groups are decidedly anti-Russians, they deserve full support from Poland. The fact that they were also anti-Poles didn't really matter to the political and media mainstream.

²³ *Chcemy stabilnej i bezpiecznej Ukrainy. Wywiad z prezydentem RP, Bronisławem Komorowskim*. Rzeczpospolita, 20 X 2014, pp.15-17.

²⁴ *Polska jest bezpieczna, ale bądźmy czujni. Rozmowa z Tomaszem Siemoniakiem, wicepremierem i ministrem obrony narodowej*. „Rzeczpospolita”, 12 I 2015, pp.8-10.

was the removal of Poland from the peace negotiations between Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine with the indirect participation of representatives of the pro-Russian separatists of the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts.

Final remarks

Russian-Polish relations have gone through various stages, few of which are of a non-conflicting nature. At the base of this conflict there are many factors, the most important of which is the discrepancy in the perception of the other from oneself, so the Polish perception of contemporary Russia is dominated by the prism of historical experience which is reflected in the image of a hostile superpower to the Polish state and its citizens and which represents a danger to national sovereignty. The struggle of the Poles for independence contributed to the strengthening of patriotic traditions and, at the same time, of anti-Russian complexes. In this sense, the experience under the rule of Imperial Russia and then the USSR strengthened the image of Russia as an empire that sought to "enslave" the Poles. The specularity of perception, in fact, does not exist. The Russians have had many enemies in their history and their national identity has certainly not been shaped by the influence of the wars with the Poles. On the other hand, being the citizen of a superpower is an element of considerable weight in national self-awareness, although the position of the Russian Federation today is undoubtedly less relevant than that of Tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century or of USSR, the condition of superpower persists and has a significant weight in the formation of a national identity and one's perception in the world.

After the reacquisition of full sovereignty in 1989, the Polish political elite carried out the democratic changes in the country, albeit with the perennial concern that the USSR would not allow it. In an attempt to obtain freedom in foreign policy, great efforts were made in the liquidation of existing ties such as the withdrawal of Soviet troops - to the collapse - from Polish territory, accompanied by requests for a "rule of accounts" with history (Katyń, etc.).

In Russia there was no heated controversy with Poland on the issues of martyrdom; only occasionally, to counterbalance requests for a full explanation of the circumstances of the Katyń massacre, some media have re-launched asking for further clarification about the deaths of thousands of Red Army prisoners of war in Polish captivity after the 1920 war. is that the average Russian citizen was unaware of the crimes committed by the Stalinist regime against Poles, much less against representatives of other nations. Until recently he was not aware of it, and the common knowledge of the millions of (generally anonymous) citizens of the USSR who died in the camps and prisons does not arouse any particular interest in the fate of other nations.

In the Polish perception of Russia, there is often a particular sensitivity towards symbolic issues, their excessive evaluation and the repeated use of the memory of tragic episodes and processes to place Russia below the standards of international opinion. The fact that Poles attach great importance to their own history of martyrdom is not understood in the West. Especially since the so-called historical politics has only strengthened the inclination in the country to exploit history for political purposes, or to implement policies that otherwise would not find approval in public opinion. This trend has distracted the country from looking to the future and deprived Polish diplomacy of pragmatism. It was not even a coincidence that Poland, after joining the European Union, did not participate in the co-creation of the EU's foreign policy that was proactive towards its eastern neighbor. Instead of focusing on present and future strategic planning, it emphasized the "individual", supported by the US "back-wagoning" strategy, pursuing national interests, shaped by the perennial "danger from the east". In the 1990s, with Poland's accession to NATO, relations between the two countries entered a difficult phase. In Russia this gesture was perceived as one of profound "ingratitude", a "betrayal" of Russia through the passage to the "hostile" military bloc, which then turned into initiatives deemed harmful for the Federation. The aforementioned "back-wagoning" policy was evaluated very negatively and in the

context of these evaluations, opinions were formulated on Poland as executor of orders from Washington. On the contrary, the accession of Poland to the EU did not arouse particularly negative judgments.

Russian-Polish relations should be seen as a factor that could contribute to shaping the international role of a country, built on the basis of various elements including material ones, but also subjective elements, such as the prestige of the nation and the state, and the effectiveness of its foreign or domestic policy.

On the contrary, the condition of Polish-Russian relations affects not only the international position of both countries, but also the ability to play various international roles. In this sense, the Polish-Russian rapprochement and the emerging possibility of reconciliation (a very remote possibility at the moment) should be used to remove from the Polish security policy the sense of threat of Russia and the so-called Yalta Syndrome.

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The new social contract of the "Visions"

In the Gulf monarchies, the state is managed in a highly centralized and personalized manner¹, but the structure traditionally centered on ruling families, religious leadership and bureaucratic systems is no longer predominant². Since this structure is strongly linked to the rentier state system, abundant state resources generated mainly by hydrocarbons, the social contract, based on the redistribution of economic and financial resources to citizens that in return do not require direct political participation, is undergoing a revision as well.

In recent years, from the massive presence of expatriate communities for the economic-administrative management of the country, especially in the pandemic period, there has been a revised shift towards policies favouring nationalism aimed at outlining both a greater local identity and a decreasing dependence from external human resources³. The number of national technocrats has therefore increased, but also the executives that do not come from royal families, who are younger and with a greater female presence - albeit closely linked to image needs, especially in the diplomatic service⁴. Many of these new administrators have studied abroad thanks to national support programs that were necessary to diversify, improve education and make it more suitable⁵ to the challenges of state institutions that must evolve in order not to extinct. The need of the Gulf monarchies to present a more modern international image and the projection in a post-oil economy are favouring the building up of new ruling classes following an intentional top-down plan to nationalize the workforce⁶.

The main challenge is to pursue economic and social change while maintaining the political status quo, but decision-making process and political leadership will not be exempt from transformation⁷.

The rising of the new national ruling classes reveals an initial change within the mechanisms of state ruling and established decision-making habits, but the ultimate goal is the strengthening of control by the rulers. In Saudi Arabia, for example, reforms necessarily imply a limitation of the importance of religion⁸ in political and social life by promoting moderate Islam⁹, more aligned with the

¹ M. Herb, *All in the family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1999.

² E. Ardemagni, "Deciphering Power: The Gulf's Nascent Ruling Classes", ISPI, 3 giugno 2022; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/deciphering-power-gulfs-nascent-ruling-classes-35237>.

³ C. M. Davidson, "Expatriates and the gulf monarchies: politics, security and the arab spring", *Asian Affairs*, June 2014, 45(2).

⁴ E. Alhussein, "Emirati and Saudi Women: Time for High Positions, Not Yet for Power", ISPI, 3 giugno 2022; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/emirati-and-saudi-women-time-high-positions-not-yet-power-35190>.

⁵ V. Nereim, "Saudis Plan Schools Revamp to Tackle Unemployment, Ideology", *Bloomberg*, 15 settembre 2021; <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-15/saudi-prince-plans-schools-revamp-to-boost-tolerance-employment?sref=zEzFg8RN>.

⁶ E. Ardemagni, "Not Only Royals: The Gulf's Policy-Makers in the 2020s", ISPI, 3 giugno 2022; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/not-only-royals-gulfs-policy-makers-2020s-35238>.

⁷ D. Clifton, "Why Saudi Arabia must modernise its social contract", *Gulf Business*, January 14, 2017; <https://gulfbusiness.com/why-saudi-arabia-must-modernise-its-social-contract/>.

⁸ E. Alhussein, "Saudi Arabia Champions "Moderate Islam" Underpinning Reform Efforts", *The Arab Gulf States Institute of Washington*, December 15, 2020; https://agsiw.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Alhussein_Saudi-Moderate-Islam_ONLINE.pdf.

⁹ M. Chulov, "I will return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam, says crown prince", *The Guardian*, 24 October 2017; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>.

government policy¹⁰, for a systematic restructuring of the role that religion plays¹¹ starting a post-Wahhabi era and the initiation of an inter-religious dialogue¹².

The Gulf states operate on two main axes: the approach at international level to entities that can support them in the transition and the realization of national "Visions".

In May 2022, the European Commission launched a strategic partnership with the Gulf states to promote greater stability¹³, provide for energy security, cooperate on climate change and green transition, digitalisation, trade and investment and strengthen contacts between students, researchers, businesses and citizens¹⁴. Through this partnership, the EU and the Gulf can develop new business and employment opportunities, especially for young people and women in different sectors¹⁵. The reasons for this approach are various and very pragmatic¹⁶. The diminishing role of the United States in the Middle East region¹⁷ offers to the EU more opportunities to exert influence; the West is no longer necessarily a priority for the Gulf States as China will also deepen its relations with the region; regional approaches are becoming increasingly important for conflict resolution: Iraq, for example, has played a central role in initiating and continuing the dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia; there is a common interest in greater cooperation in the field of renewable energy and the EU is a pioneer in this field; last but not least, the Gulf states' governments hardly react to public criticism to the human rights situation, but they are willing to dialogue in a discreet context.

All governments of the Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC, have designed economic and development "Visions" that detail their goals for the future¹⁸: Qatar's National Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Bahrain's Vision 2030, Kuwait's Vision 2035, Oman's Vision 2040 and UAE's Vision 2021 (2071).

The Emirates are far ahead of the group. Qatar and Kuwait have greater difficulties due to their smaller populations and higher per capita wealth¹⁹ and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman are less wealthy and more fiscally constrained: this implies greater pressure by austerity measures that led to the introduction of Value Added Tax²⁰ in 2018 in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. The plans bear similarities in parallel paths of infrastructure investments, privatization, localization policies, workforce retraining and creating a more attractive regulatory environment. The extent of these changes cannot be met in the short timeframe to which they have been assigned without simultaneously questioning or criticizing the political legitimacy of the institutions.

¹⁰ Arab News, "Saudi cleric apologizes for 'intolerant' views of Sahwa movement", May 7, 2019; <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1493956/saudi-arabia>

¹¹ Y. Farouk, N. J. Brown, "Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 7 June 2021; <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/07/saudi-arabia-s-religious-reforms-are-touching-nothing-but-changing-everything-pub-84650>.

¹² Religion News Service, "World faith leaders convene in Saudi Arabia for first time in ground-breaking conference to build bridges with Muslim leaders", May 12, 2022; <https://religionnews.com/2022/05/12/world-faith-leaders-convene-in-saudi-arabia-for-first-time-in-ground-breaking-conference-to-build-bridges-with-muslim-leaders/>.

¹³ Middle East Monitor, "GCC welcomes EU 'strategic partnership' with Gulf", May 19, 2022; <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220519-gcc-welcomes-eu-strategic-partnership-with-gulf/>.

¹⁴ J. Borrell, Joint Communication "GCC: EU unveils Strategic Partnership with the Gulf", European Commission, 18 May 2022; https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_3165.

¹⁵ European Commission, "Questions and answers on the Joint Communication on a Strategic Partnership with the Gulf", 18 May 2022; https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_22_3166.

¹⁶ H. Neumann, "The Strategic Partnership with the Gulf States: Exchange in the European Parliament", 23 March 2022; <https://hannahneumann.eu/en/the-strategic-partnership-with-the-gulf-states-exchange-in-the-european-parliament/>.

¹⁷ ISPI, MED This Week, "Russia and the Gulf: Cooperation, No Matter What", 09/06/2022; <https://med.ispionline.it/publication/med-this-week-russia-and-the-gulf-cooperation-no-matter-what/>.

¹⁸ R. Mogielnicki, "Competing Economic Visions in the Gulf", The Cairo Review of Global Affairs, Winter 2022; <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/competing-economic-visions-in-the-gulf/>.

¹⁹ S. Vakil, "Visions, Technocrats, and the Shifting Social Contract in the Gulf Countries", ISPI, 3 giugno 2022; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/visions-technocrats-and-shifting-social-contract-gulf-countries-35194>.

²⁰ Argaam, "Saudi Arabia imposes 15% VAT on goods as of today", 01/07/2020; <https://www.argaam.com/en/article/articledetail/id/1387918>.

The abundant availability of hydrocarbon resources has so far been the main driver of regional development - in many cases at least 70% of public sector revenues - despite the efforts for economic diversification, but this dependence increases vulnerabilities²¹.

The two GCC largest economies, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have initiated various regulatory reforms to attract companies from abroad.

The measures taken by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to diversify their economies are beginning to undermine the pre-existing social contracts that depend on the figure of *pater familias* of the sovereign, the tribal care of the state and the preservation of cultural norms and the privileges of the citizens²² for which up to now the axiom opposite to "*no taxation without representation*" had ruled: "*no taxation no representation*".²³

Citizens' long-standing acceptance of the strong welfare state is the main reason for supporting the economic interests of their nations. The issue now is whether citizens, who have given up or never questioned political participation in exchange for now rapidly diminishing economic privileges, are ready to violate the traditional acceptance that politics is the exclusive prerogative of the government without active participation of the people.

Riyadh's "Vision 2030" involves introducing vast social changes to make the Kingdom more attractive to international tourists and business. The austerity measures, in particular the tripling of the Value Added Tax to 15% in 2020²⁴, added another dimension to the changing reality. In an effort to alleviate the budget deficit, the Kingdom has accelerated the drive towards the privatization of several key sectors, including health and education. Public officials have downplayed the potential effects of privatization on citizens but the scarcity of information has left the Saudis fearful of the security they have long enjoyed as mostly public sector employees and as subsidized citizens in different aspects of daily life²⁵.

Saudi Arabia is reconfiguring its social contract by gradually altering traditional approaches to governance: adjustments in education, employment, national identity and socio-economic expectations are slowly widening the levels of public participation in the functioning of the state. Private sector job creation for Saudi youth - 60% of the population - has been essential to this process. Having long relied on expatriate labour, localization policies aim at reducing unemployment and the state's burden of providing public sector jobs.

The Emirates played an early and influential role in promoting citizenship and national identity in the Gulf with the practice of thematising a national symbol or aspiration, culminating in a multifaceted social engineering program, which included the introduction in 2016 of the military conscription. The pandemic, together with the imminent end of the oil era, forced the Emirates to pursue previously unthinkable policies: the normalization of relations with Israel, the decriminalization of alcohol consumption and cohabitation and the extension of citizenship to investors and professional expatriates.

What is distinctive about the Saudi approach is the link with a national feature, a strategy inaugurated by the Emirates²⁶ leadership. Yet, while the Emirati leadership worked in a space at least partly shaped by global and entrepreneurial Dubai, the Saudi state and society were forged by

²¹ A. Malik, "Rethinking the Rentier Curse", *Revue Internationale de politique de développement*, n. 7, 2017.

²² M. Al-Hussein, E. Alhussein, "The Social Contract and Post-Oil Dilemma in Saudi Arabia and the UAE", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 5, 2021; <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/85110>.

²³ M. Hachemaoui, "Does rent really hinder democracy?", *Revue française de science politique*, Vol. 62, Issue 2, 2012, pagg. 207-230.

²⁴ A. Al Omran, "Saudi shoppers hit by tripling of VAT rate", *Financial Times*, July 15, 2020; <https://www.ft.com/content/f605dada-9c93-49c3-a506-1f75e8104a74>.

²⁵ Government of Saudi Arabia, Social protection; [https://www.my.gov.sa/wps/portal/snp/aboutksa/SocialProtection!/ut/p/z0/04_Sj9CPykssy0xPLMnMz0vMAfljo8zivQN9DDycTAz9LZxCHQ0CA91MQyzMgo0NjMz0g1Pz9AuyHRUBHB5JZg!//](https://www.my.gov.sa/wps/portal/snp/aboutksa/SocialProtection!/ut/p/z0/04_Sj9CPykssy0xPLMnMz0vMAfljo8zivQN9DDycTAz9LZxCHQ0CA91MQyzMgo0NjMz0g1Pz9AuyHRUBHB5JZg!/).

²⁶ K. Smith Diwan, "Max Weber in Arabia: Saudi's Character Enrichment Program", *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, May 12, 2020; <https://agsiw.org/max-weber-in-arabia-saudis-character-enrichment-program/>

a different configuration of religion, state and economy. Saudi Vision 2030 must contend with a religious tradition that has generated greater suspicion about foreign influences and the pervasive paternalism of the Al Saud family. The effects of the pandemic on Saudi Arabia's political, economic and social system have reinforced the old incentives of the rentier state and the paternalistic values linked to the monarchy, highlighting the advantages of a secure job in the public sector and the risks of the private sector. However, this sends a contradictory message to the new executive and business class that must expand the post-oil economy. While the state has earmarked specific funds for small and medium-sized businesses affected by the pandemic, other cuts in state spending will result in fewer opportunities for recent graduates who are already struggling to find an employment. While more necessary than ever, indoctrinating Saudi youth into the values of hard work, ambition and optimism in a time of economic downturn can prove challenging.

The Visions convey messages of leadership's adaptability, aiming to strengthen the bonds between citizens and the personalist state and the legitimacy of the ruling families of the Gulf by enhancing the leaders' personal commitment on internal reform. While promoting greater inclusiveness and the creation of entrepreneurial citizens, the implementation of the Visions is still based on a top-down approach with consultation and communication mechanisms limited to one-way propaganda messages. Opaque decision making with little public interaction persists despite the different direction of policy changes often leaving stakeholders and beneficiaries unaware or uncertain about the course of change.

Social changes that undermine the privileges upon which the social contract is based could awaken citizens to an uncomfortable reality as these countries prepare for further changes. Growing polarization within Gulf societies following the 2011 riots and extensive social engineering programs pitted conservatives against liberals. The ability of the Gulf states to redefine their social contracts without turmoil will depend on the balance between economic needs for restructuring and requests for active participation in politics²⁷. These imply a division between the powers of the state - now completely centralized by the executives²⁸, greater transparency in political choices and communication and the accountability request by citizens regarding the use of resources generated by direct taxation.

²⁷ E. Nakhleh, "A new social contract for Arab states", *Responsible Statecraft*, January 21, 2022; <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/01/21/a-new-social-contract-for-arab-states/>.

²⁸ M. A. Alsuwayed, "Saudi Bureaucrats' Incentives Jeopardize the Vision 2030 Implementation Plan", *Euro-Gulf Information Centre*, 2020, pag. 16; <https://www.egic.info/report-launch-saudi-bureaucrats>.

The European Union and the “Strategic Compass”: a new step towards strategic autonomy?

Introduction

On 21 March 2022, the Council of the European Union officially endorsed the long-awaited Strategic Compass¹, the document that, by 2030, should lead to a quantum leap in the EU security and defence policy. According to the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, the Compass should also help the Union «face [its] security responsibilities, in front of [its] citizens and the rest of the world»². It aims to provide a shared assessment of the strategic environment in which the EU operates and of the threats and challenges the Union faces. Moreover, the document aims to provide concrete and actionable proposals, with a precise timetable for implementation, to improve the Union’s ability to act in crises and defend its security and citizens. The Compass covers all the aspects of the security and defence policy and is structured around four pillars: act, invest, partner and secure. The path that led to this result has been long and complex due also to the unexpected evolution of the international environment. Starting in the summer of 2020, it led to the presentation of the first public draft document in November 2021. In the following months, the draft was repeatedly revised following the evolution of the international context and the provisions of the Space and Defence packages that the EU Commission presented on 15 February 2022. Overall, observers’ opinion about this process and its outcome has been positive. The main doubts are about how the Compass will interact with the broader European security architecture and – more important – what will be its actual relations with the Atlantic Alliance, whose relevance has been growing since the outbreak of the Ukraine war.

The long way of the European military identity

Adopting the Strategic Compass has been only the last step (in chronological terms) of the long way to developing a credible European military identity. As the experience of the European Defence Community (EDC) testify (Filippi, 2016), the will to “be of value” also in the military field lies at the root of the European integration process. Frozen during the Cold War, this ambition resurfaced in the early 1990s with the revival of the political union idea. In 1993, the Treaty on European Union (TEU) created the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as the “second pillar” of the future Union. Its aims were preserving peace, strengthening international security, promoting international cooperation and developing and consolidating democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Along the same line, in December 1999, the European Council established the office of the CFSP High Representative. Together with abandoning the previous “three pillars” system, the Treaty of Lisbon (2009) created new CFSP actors (such as the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European External Action Service) and revised the existing European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP³), which is an integral part of the CFSP. Within this context, the ESDP defined the framework for the measures that the EU could take in defence and crisis management. It also defined the framework for cooperation and

¹ *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security*, Brussels, 21 March 2022. Online: <https://www.europeansources.info/record/a-strategic-compass-for-security-and-defence-for-a-european-union-that-protects-its-citizens-values-and-interests-and-contributes-to-international-peace-and-security> (accessed: 6 June 2022).

² *HR/VP Josep Borrell doorstep ahead of Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) on 21 March 2022*. Online: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/hrvp-doorstep-fac-defence-21032022-02-strategic-compass_en (accessed: 6 June 2022).

³ With the Treaty of Lisbon, ESDP assumes the current label of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

collaboration among member states. In June 2016, the first *Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* was adopted. This strategy focused on five priorities: the strengthening of EU's security; the promotion of state and societal resilience to the Union's East and South; the development of an integrated approach to conflicts; the establishment of cooperative regional orders; and the promotion of global governance in the 21st century⁴.

In November 2016, then High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini (in office: 2014-19) presented to the Council the *Implementation Plan on Security and Defence*⁵ to operationalize the vision set out in the *Global Strategy* on defence and security issues. From this plan derived the adoption of tools like the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), whose first programs in the fields of education, capability development and operational readiness have started in late 2017/early 2018. At the same time, the High Representative presented to member states the *European Defence Action Plan* (EDAP)⁶ and the proposal of establishing a European Defence Fund (EDF) focusing on defence research and capability development. Especially these two final proposals have been a relevant leap forward. They aimed at laying the foundations of the future European strategic autonomy by strengthening the defence industry and filling the existing capability gaps. The European Defence Agency (EDA) was established in 2004 with the same aims, viz «to support the Council and Member States in their effort to improve the Union's defence capabilities in the field of crisis management and to sustain the European Security and Defence Policy»⁷. The implementation of the EDF within the framework of the 2021-25 EU budget gave the process further momentum, although the revision of financial priorities due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic led to its curtailment compared to the first proposals (Pastori, 2020).

However, several questions are still open. In the past, the EU's vision as a «civilian power» often hampered the development of a credible military standing. When, during the press conference to introduce the new European Commission, the current President Ursula von der Leyen labelled it as a «geopolitical Commission», she faced several criticisms. Something similar happened to High Representative Borrell when he pointed out the need for the EU to «learn quickly to speak the language of power» (Borrell, 2020). On the one hand, such criticisms revolved around the supposed contradiction between the EU values and the need for a more «muscular» foreign policy. On the other, they pointed out the limits that the EU's institutional system poses to the Commission's ambitions and the need for the Commission to consider the obstacles standing in its path (Koenig, 2019). The most relevant one is probably the lack of coordination among the different European institutions and among member states, whose contrasting priorities heavily affected reaching the common aims. In the field of defence, this situation has led to the proliferation of extra-EU initiatives. If, on the one hand, such initiatives can help break some institutional rigidities of the EU system, on the other, they risk being a dangerous source of duplications. Great Britain's exit from the EU has been another source of complexity due to the re-nationalization of its security and defence policy and its framing

⁴ *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, 15 December 2016. Online: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/global-strategy-european-unions-foreign-and-security-policy_en (accessed: 6 June 2022).

⁵ *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. European Defence Action Plan*, COM(2016) 950 final, Brussels, 30 November 2016. Online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0950&from=en> (accessed: 6 June 2022).

⁶ *Implementation Plan on Security and Defence*, 14392/16, Brussels, 14 November 2016. Online: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_implementation_plan_st14392.en16_0.pdf (accessed: 6 June 2022).

⁷ *Council Joint Action 2004/551/CFSP of 12 July 2004 on the establishment of the European Defence Agency*. EDA's statute and operational rules have been later revised, first with Council decision 2011/411/CFSP (12 July 2011), later with Council decision 2015/1835 (12 October 2015), now in force: Council decision (CFSP) 2015/1835 of 12 October 2015 defining the statute, seat and operational rules of the European Defence Agency (recast), *Official Journal of the European Union*, 13 October 2015, pp. L 266/55-L 266/74. Online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32015D1835&from=en> (accessed: 6 June 2022).

into the “Global Britain” program⁸, the weight of its national defence industry at the European and global levels, and the importance – for London and Brussels – of the possibility to elaborate forms of collaboration in the post-Brexit period (Weber, 2022).

The many challenges of the Strategic Compass

In this context, what is the role of the Strategic Compass? The four pillars of the document already point out four directions where the Union can move. In terms of action, it points out the need to establish a robust military capacity to deploy in crises, with or without the NATO allies. Under this label can be filed the establishment of the “First entry force” that the Ministers of Defence endorsed last year on the eve of the US withdrawal from Kabul. However, under the same label can be filed the strengthening of the CSDP (Common Defence and Security Policy) missions and operations and the enhancement of the enabling capabilities, such as the tactical and strategic military mobility. In the field of investment, States pledged to substantially increase defence expenditures to reduce critical military and civilian capability gaps and strengthen the European defence’s technological and industrial base. Enhancing collaboration, boosting innovation, and reducing technical and industrial dependencies are among the aims, also to jointly develop strategic enablers and next-generation capabilities to operate on land, at sea, in the air, in the cyber domain and in outer space. Regarding the partnerships, the Compass stresses the need to strengthen cooperation with strategic partners such as NATO, UN, OSCE, the African Union (AU) and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). At the same time, it points out the need to develop more tailored bilateral partnerships with like-minded countries like the US, Canada, Norway, the United Kingdom, and Japan, and to develop tailored partnerships in the Western Balkans, the Near and the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America, including through enhancing dialogue and cooperation, promoting participation in CSDP missions and operations, and supporting capacity-building.

Finally, regarding security, the Compass aims to strengthen the EU’s ability to anticipate, deter and respond to current and fast-emerging threats and challenges and safeguard its security interest. To do so, it stresses the need to boost its intelligence analysis, develop instruments to detect and respond to hybrid threats and enhance its cybersecurity, counter-disinformation, and information warfare capabilities. It also stresses the need to define an EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence and strengthen its role as a maritime security actor. All of them are very ambitious targets. The relevance of some of them has been already emphasized. However, in the Strategic Compass, they find their first integrated and organic presentation. On the other hand, critics remarked how the document – beyond its provisions and auspices – does little to dent the traditional weakness of the EU’s defence and security policy, such as the lack of coordination among states and their tendency not to take initiatives that could jeopardize national policies. Finally, the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine would have already made obsolete a document that developed through different stratifications in a totally different international framework. The presence of an update forward by High Representative Borrell did not really affect this situation. As one author noted: «the Compass itself is full of the usual process-heavy gradualism, to be implemented over a decade and wrapped in conventional reflections on the dangerous world we live in and the ever-popular bromides about the EU’s need to “partner” with all and sundry» (Wintey, 2022).

Part of these remarks is well-known. They were already proposed when the draft document was first published and have accompanied the political debate in the following months. Among else, they highlighted the unbalance existing between the Compass’ ambitions and the relatively small “First entry force” envisaged in the document (the Compass labels this force as “EU Rapid

⁸ *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, 2 July 2021. Online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy> (accessed: 6 June 2022).

Deployment Capacity”). They also pointed out how the relationship between the European defence, the US and NATO (the primary reference of several EU states in the security field) remains “out of focus”. Finally, some observers remarked how the lack of clarity negatively affects the credibility of the European strategic autonomy and the political sustainability of the financial commitment that the countries should take to enforce the Compass’ provisions (on these aspects, see Perissich, 2021; see also Kaim and Kempin, 2022). The Compass only partially tackles these problems. Moreover, according to some authors, it would abandon some basic tenants of the previous EU’s strategic documents, especially the *Global Strategy* of 2016. It would be a significant and not necessarily positive change because, in doing so, the Compass shifts the emphasis from the traditional EU’s multilateral approach toward a vision mostly revolving around the internal dimension. The product would be «[a] defensive, and emergency-driven posture [that] may undermine the “multi-layered” dimension of EUFSP: it can put limits on partnerships and may be counterproductive in terms of achieving long-term objectives» (Bargués, 2022). This impact would be even more substantial if the reorientation process coupled with a clearer security vision since it would flatten the “old” EU’s multi-layered approach to international security on its military dimension.

The Compass and NATO: a still unsolved relationship?

When talking about European security, NATO is the traditional stone guest. Initially, the Compass idea emerged against the backdrop of a deteriorating transatlantic relationship and with the ambition to “free” Europe from a military dependency seen as increasingly dangerous due to the strongly anti-NATO positions of the Trump administration. This attitude is why the document devotes such scanty attention to the relationship between the European defence, the US and NATO. Later, this “antagonistic” attitude was somehow revised. The reasons partly refer to the Biden administration’s new agenda and its revival of US multilateralism and partly to the evolution of the international environment. When dealing with the transatlantic issue, the Compass thus highlights the need to enhance the existing EU/NATO collaboration and the complementarity between the Rapid Deployment Capacity and the NATO forces. However, the evolution that the Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered in the security field. This kind of relationship leaves little room for the EU’s strategic autonomy, especially if the Compass’ provisions and the measures they envisage should not be able to fill the existing capability gaps, and the difference between aims and means should increase. In other words, the risk is that if a gap between aims and means remains, the problem of EU’s subalternity to the Atlantic Alliance could resurface, worsened by the Compass’ decision to focus almost exclusively on hard security. In this perspective, one of Compass’s most innovative features (Nordin, 2022) risks becoming one relevant point of weakness.

The Atlantic Alliance repeatedly expressed its favour for enhancing the EU military role. The outbreak of the Ukraine war also promoted greater political coordination between the two bodies. At the same time, both NATO and the EU remain actively engaged in implementing the common proposals agreed in the *Joint Declaration* approved during the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit⁹. Against this backdrop, the Compass highlights the need for the EU to move in three main directions regarding NATO: (1) enhancing the ongoing cooperation on political dialogue, information sharing, crisis management operations, exercises and training, capability development, and military mobility; (2) deepening the existing cooperation on maritime security, countering hybrid threats and information manipulation and securing cyberspace, as well as the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPS); (3) expanding cooperation on emerging and disruptive technologies, climate change and defence, resilience, and space. However, how these guidelines could evolve in actual decisions is still to be defined. In this field, too, the Compass provides orientation more than

⁹ *Joint Declaration by the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, Warsaw, 8 July 2016. Online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21481/nato-eu-declaration-8-july-en-final.pdf> (accessed: 6 June 2022).

indications. Once again, the possibility of filling the bucket with “real” contents depends on the Union’s ability to leverage enough political and financial resources and negotiate with the Atlantic Alliance meaningful collaboration strategies. From this perspective, the new *Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation* will probably be an important step. The new Declaration will be signed during the next NATO Madrid Summit. As far as its provisions are concerned, they should not be very different from the previous documents, signed in 2016 and 2018.

In any case, states continue to play a pivotal role in NATO, just like in the EU. The implications of this situation are two. On the one hand, states provide the political and financial resources to keep the integration process running. Especially at the EU level, it is up to states’ willingness to relinquish portions of their sovereignty to move from defence policies’ coordination to integration. Moreover, states’ willingness is essential to define the above-mentioned “meaningful collaboration strategies” between the EU and NATO. It is an outcome that cannot be taken for granted since the membership of the two bodies does not fully coincide, and several EU countries – especially in the current strategic environment – regard NATO as their true military guarantee and allocate their defence budgets according to NATO’s priorities. From a financial perspective, the increase in military spending that some countries have announced (Germany first, but also Belgium, Italy, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Romania, while other countries, such as Finland, France, Britain, and the Baltic republics expressed their will to follow the same path) (Mackenzie, 2022) can help to solve part of the problem, but this is just one side of the dilemma. If buying military technology “off the shelf” can fill in a relatively short time part of the existing gaps, in the long run, the effect of this decision on the development of the European defence industry can be harmful. Nonetheless, strengthening their operational capabilities quickly (and, to a lesser extent, replenishing their depleted stocks) seems to be why so many states are increasing their military budgets. It is an aim that the European Union supports. Worth noting, the Union has already announced the possibility of establishing a Joint Procurement Defence Task Force to allocate national resources.

Conclusion

The Strategic Compass is another step toward a credible European security and defence system. However, its real meaning and implications are still largely to assess. States’ involvement in defining its contents, for instance, has been seen as a positive development, especially when implementation problems are considered (Blockmans, Macchiarini Crosson and Paikin, 2022). Still, several doubts remain about the possibility of fulfilling its ambitions. As happened in the past, these doubts mainly focus on how the Compass’ provisions can evolve into actual targets, a process that requires the states’ active collaboration. The Compass does not prioritize the different threats it lists, and this pragmatic approach leaves quite a large room for future negotiations. On the other hand, such a large room can also become a source of trouble if the divisions set aside while elaborating the document should re-emerge in ranking the different priorities. Another possible source of weakness has been seen in the too much attention devoted to the capability issue. In this perspective, it has been remarked how this attention «leads the text to overlook the shared principles which could guide the use of military forces in a European framework», so that the Compass «sets an industrial direction, but [...] not a strategic course» (Gnesotto, 2022). Overall, the Strategic Compass seems thus to “lose something” compared to previous elaborations. However, such losses can be regarded as the price to pay, on the one hand to the turbulence of an international system that limits the EU’s room for action, on the other to the greater pragmatism that the Compass expresses – beyond its limited targets – compared to the other EU strategic documents.

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The Italian energy policy and the dependence on Russian gas, between new partnership and domestic infrastructural distortions

The Italian energy scenario: how to overcome the Moscow's dependence

The vulnerability of the Italian energy scenario is essentially linked to the combination of two factors: the large dependence on natural gas imports (especially from Russia) and the collapse of the domestic hydrocarbon production. In 2021 Italy consumed 76.1 billion cubic meters of natural gas (bcm), almost entirely covered by imports as the current internal production reaches 3.3 bcm (which accounts for about 5% of the national demand), compared to 21 bcm produced at the beginning of the 2000s (Ministry of Ecological Transition 2022a). It is therefore evident an accentuated and unbalanced dependence on imports, which in 2021 satisfied over 90% of national natural gas consumption: for example, gas imports increased by 6.8% last year, especially those coming from Algeria. Together with renewable sources, natural gas constitutes a fundamental component within the energy mix necessary to produce electricity, where it accounts for 42%, with plans to progressively replace the use of coal, which is far more polluting (GSE 2021). Considering that 38% of imported natural gas comes from Russia, the Italian government has carefully monitored the evolution of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, expressing serious concerns about the economic and social effects linked to a possible interruption of Moscow supplies transiting through Ukraine. Italy has established a long-term energy cooperation with Russia: the current gas pipeline has been in operation since 1974 and passes through Ukraine, Slovakia and Austria before arriving in Italy from the Tarvisio entry point. Therefore, the conditions of instability and the conflict in Ukrainian territory represent a serious threat which could affect the regularity of supplies, putting national energy security at risk. In accordance with the position expressed by the EU, also Italy - because of Russia's unreliability as an international partner - intends to implement an energy strategy based on the progressive renunciation of Russian gas, to be substituted through imports from alternative suppliers, through increasing production and use of energy from renewable sources, and theoretically increasing the domestic production of hydrocarbons.

Supplier countries	Volumes of imported natural gas (in bcm/y)	% of the Italian consumption	Transport infrastructures	Capacity in bcm	Entry point
Russia	28,9	38%	TAG gas pipeline	32	Tarvisio
Algeria	22,5	29,6%	Transmed/Enrico Mattei gas pipeline/GNL	32	Mazara del Vallo/Panigaglia regasification terminal
Azerbaijan	7,2	9,4%	Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) gas pipeline	10	Melendugno
Qatar	6,8	8,9%	LNG	8	LNG Adriatic, Rovigo/Cavarzere regasification terminal
Libya	3,2	4,2%	Greenstream gas pipeline	10	Gela
Norway	1,9	2,5%	Transitgas gas pipeline	18	Passo Gries

United States	0,8	1%	LNG	4	OLT regasification (offshore)	Livorno terminal
Domestic production	3,3	4,8%				

Tab.1 Natural gas and Italian supplies (Source: Bilancio Gas Naturale 2021-MISE)

Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the Minister of Ecological Transition Cingolani declared that Italy could reach a condition of complete independence from Russian gas imports within 24-30 months, through a strengthening of the existing infrastructures - or by exploiting the entire capacity of the gas pipelines and regasification terminals already operational - and the installation of a new floating regasification terminal, which will make it possible to replace 15-16 bcm of Russian gas in a few months, compared to the 29 bcm annually imported from Moscow, thanks to a diversification of suppliers (Ansa 2022). A similar position was also expressed by the Prime Minister Draghi in his urgent report to the Chamber of Deputies on February 25, coinciding with the Russian invasion (Italian Government 2022). In an interview released in April to La Stampa (2022), Minister Cingolani stated that 2/3 of Russian imports will be replaced in the coming weeks, while a total independence from Russian gas will be achieved within eighteen months - or in the second half of 2023 - thanks to the results of the "energy diplomacy" carried out by the Italian government in search of alternative suppliers.

However, by analyzing the data of the last few months, the reality appears different: first of all, on the basis of the data of the Ministry of Ecological Transition (2022), it is noted that in the first three months of the current year, natural gas imports (compared to the same period in 2021) grew by 8.2%, especially those passing through Passo Gries (gas from Norway)¹ and Melendugno (gas from Azerbaijan), while Russian imports appeared instead stable in the comparison March 2021-March 2022. On the other hand, we can observe that in the period between April and May 2022, there was an increase of Russian gas imports through the Ukrainian corridor, as a combined result of low prices and for the need to fill storage depots, in order to have sufficient stocks to minimize the impact of the political decision to stop purchasing Russian gas (Savelli 2022).

The Italian energy diplomacy, lights and shadows

To avoid the negative repercussions linked to the condition of strong dependence on Russian imports, the Italian government has promoted an energy diplomacy aimed at strengthening relations and cooperation with gas producer and exporter countries, with the purpose to increase imports from non-Russian suppliers. In the short term, this goal can be achieved by using the existing infrastructures, while in the future the construction of new regasification terminals will be the best suitable solution. This foreign energy policy is undertaken thanks to the work and activism of diplomatic missions composed by top-level political-economic delegations, namely the Prime Minister Draghi, the Foreign Minister Di Maio, the Minister of Energy Transition Cingolani, the CEO of the national energy company Eni Claudio Descalzi: the composition of these missions clearly reflects the political will of the Italian government to implement a diversification strategy with the goal to reduce dependence on Russia.

Algeria, Qatar and Azerbaijan have been the first nations with which our country has enhanced energy cooperation, as reliable partners to guarantee the national supply of natural gas.

¹ The Transgas pipeline was realized in 2014 and at present it only carries on natural gas from Norway (crossing Germany and Switzerland, because of the production in the Groninga's gas field has been progressively reduced for both seismic and environmental issues (Gabanelli, Ravizza 2022)

Algeria was the second natural gas supplier for Italy in 2021 (22.5 bcm) doubling the volumes exported in the previous year, while in the quarter January-March 2022 imports from the North African nation were higher than those from Russia (Ministry of Ecological Transition 2022b). This privileged energy partnership is also facilitated by the geographical proximity between Algeria and the coasts of Sicily, a condition that made it possible in the 1980s to build the Transmed submarine pipeline that connects the Hassi R'Mel fields with Mazara del Vallo, crossing Tunisia. In addition to the underwater pipeline, Algeria also exports liquefied natural gas (LNG) to the Panigaglia regasification plant in Liguria. During the official visit of Premier Draghi to Algiers (11 April) the Memorandum of Understanding on energy cooperation between the two governments was signed, with the Algerian commitment to increase gas exports up to 9 bcm by 2024, exploiting the spare capacity (namely the difference between the nominal capacity of the pipeline and the volumes actually transported of the Transmed pipeline), which is 10 bcm (Il Sole 24 Ore 2022a).

Although this agreement represents a very significant step in the strategy of reducing Russian imports, for the current year, however, Algeria will be able to increase exports by only 3 bcm. In the medium term, massive investments will also be required to conduct new exploration activities and to further increase Algerian production, starting from the considerable reserves of conventional natural gas - estimated at 2.300 bcm (British Petroleum Statistical Review of World Energy 2021, 34) - and foreseeing the potential exploitation of shale gas reserves located in the Algerian subsoil, the third largest in the world (US EIA 2013). At the same time, investments must be also allocated for the construction of new transport infrastructures (gas pipelines and LNG terminals), which are necessities to reach the Italian market: in the last decade, the lack of new infrastructures has effectively prevented the implementation of some significant projects, first of all the Galsi gas pipeline - from Algeria to Sardinia and then towards the Tuscan coast - with a hypothetical capacity of 8 bcm. Furthermore, the energy cooperation between Eni and the Algerian national company Sonatrach² could lead to the Italian support (diplomatic and in terms of investments) for the realization of a major project such as the Nigal or Trans-Saharan gas pipeline, which should carry 30 bcm of natural gas per year for 4.000 km from Nigeria to Algeria (which would contribute to the project by also exporting its own gas). Over the last 15 years, this project has been repeatedly shelved due to the lack of investments and the instability of the territories crossed by the infrastructure, even if recently Algeria, Niger and Nigeria have reached an agreement for the realization (Fox 2022; Pagni 2022).

In March, the Italian delegation - which included the Minister of Foreign Affairs Di Maio and the Eni's CEO De Scalzi - paid a visit to the Emirate of Qatar (the world's second-largest LNG exporter) which promised to increase exports of liquefied natural gas to Italy, contributing to the strategy of diversification. Qatar is currently the main LNG supplier to our country (with 6.5 bcm in 2021), accounting for almost 10% of total imports: these volumes are entirely delivered to the Adriatic LNG terminal in Rovigo³ on the basis of a long-term contract signed with the energy company Edison (Zecchi 2022). Qatar's plans to increase natural gas production from 77 million tons to 126 per year by 2027 would allow Italy to theoretically benefit of huge additional volumes of natural gas to replace Russian imports: in reality instead, the Adriatic LNG terminal currently has a limited spare capacity (over 1 bcm) to be used, a condition which explains the urgent need to adequate the national capacities of regasification, as a priority that will allow to manage the potential increase of LNG imports. Moreover, an element of potential vulnerability to take into account is that Qatar can export its natural gas only in liquefied form - because of the lack of land pipelines - which must necessarily cross the Strait of Hormuz, a geo-energy chokepoint between Iran and Oman. For this reason, a

² In December 2021, the two companies signed an agreement to implement an ambitious exploration and development project in the Berkine basin onshore area.

³ Qatar Terminal Company Limited holds a 22% stake in the Adriatic LNG terminal

condition of instability or a conflict in the Persian Gulf could affect the regularity of supplies, causing a dangerous interruption.

Following the start of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) in early 2021, Azerbaijan has gradually legitimized itself as a reliable supplier of natural gas for our country, ranking at the third place after Russia and Algeria. After the reduction of Russian gas flows, Azerbaijan has promptly increased exports to Italy, even if these remain limited by the TAP maximum capacity of 10 bcm: negotiations to double the TAP current capacity have begun but concrete results will be expected in 2026-2028 (Frappi 2022). At the beginning of April, Minister Di Maio visited Baku, reiterating the importance of the bilateral energy partnership and hoping for a further increase in Azerbaijani gas exports, even if – as you mentioned before – these volumes cannot exceed the 2-2.5 bcm, namely the spare capacity of TAP.

In neighbouring North Africa, Egypt represents another important energy partner for the Italian diversification strategy: in April, Eni signed an agreement with the Egyptian company Egas for the supply of 3 bcm of natural gas, through the Damietta liquefaction plant, which resumed exports in 2021 (Zoppo 2022). This agreement is mainly linked to the Eni's strong presence in Egypt, where the Italian company is committed to exploit the enormous hydrocarbon reserves present in the country (Nile Delta, Eastern Mediterranean, Western Desert): Eni has in fact discovered and started production in Zohr giant gas field (850 bcm of natural gas reserves, the largest offshore discovery in the Mediterranean) and Nooros (Eni 2022).

On April 20-21, the Italian delegation - which included ministers Di Maio and Cingolani, as well as Eni's CEO De Scalzi - signed agreements with the Republic of Congo and Angola to increase gas supplies to Italy, which will be delivered through LNG tankers. Following the agreement with the Republic of Congo, Eni will work to develop a liquefied natural gas project (which should be completed by 2023), with a capacity of 4.5-5 bcm per year. The Memorandum of Understanding with Angola commits the African nation to deliver 1.5 bcm of natural gas to our country (Il Sole 24 Ore 2022b). These agreements are certainly important in perspective to boost the Italian energy security: however, it is necessary to highlight that these countries do not have proved hydrocarbon reserves which will be able to support a large natural gas production and export in the medium term, so their involvement within an energy partnership represents an engaging challenge for the Italian government.

Although the visit of the Italian delegation to Mozambique has been postponed (it was scheduled in May 2022), in the next months the country will certainly be involved as a relevant partner in the Italian energy diplomacy, with the aim of developing a profitable cooperation which will be facilitated by the availability of huge reserves and by the role played by ENI in the Mozambican energy sector. In fact, natural gas reserves in the Rovuma offshore basin are estimated at 2.800 bcm, which are the third largest gas reserves in Africa after Nigeria and Algeria (US EIA 2020). Eni works in the country since 2006, mainly in the Area 4 (Mozambique's national authorities divided the basin into six exploration areas) where it discovered the promising fields of Coral, Mamba and Agulha, with recoverable natural gas reserves of 2.400 bcm. Eni is engaged to develop Coral gas field (discovered in May 2012) which contains 450 bcm of natural gas reserves: the Coral South FLNG (Floating Liquefied Natural Gas) project envisages the construction of a floating plant for the treatment, liquefaction and storage of gas with a capacity of approximately 5 bcm, which will become operational in the second half of 2022 (Eni 2021a). However, there is a problem of instability in the region linked to the presence of jihadist groups - which captured the city of Palma in Cabo Delgado in the north of the country on the border with Tanzania in the spring of 2021 - which could represent a threat to the regularity of supplies and to the implementation of projects, as in the case of the French energy company Total, which was forced to stop its activities in Mozambique.

LNG terminals and the promising potential of the renewable energy sources

In order to maximize the results obtained by the Italian energy diplomacy in securing additional supplies of natural gas from various partners (also considering additional LNG imports from the US, based on the Biden's promise at the European Council in March), the key priority has to be the urgent adaptation and upgrade of the national regasification capacity: it is necessary to use the entire transport capacity of the existing infrastructures and to build new ones, in order to be able to fully dispose of the additional volumes of gas. Three regasification plants are currently operating in Italy: Panigaglia in the province of La Spezia (onshore), which is active since the 1970s; LNG Adriatic (Porto Viro / Rovigo), which started operations in 2009 and OLT Livorno, which is active since 2013, both offshore. The capacity of the three LNG terminals is 15.3 bcm, but they operate at 70-75% of their capacity. Given that the realization of new regasification terminals takes a long time, the Italian government has decided to entrust SNAM company⁴ to purchase a LNG tanker on the international market (and to start negotiations to rent another one) which will be transformed into offshore regasification facility (FSRU, Floating Storage and Regasification Unit) and to anchor these floating terminals close to two Italian ports to be identified (Condina 2022). Considering that these gas carriers have a capacity of 5-6 bcm, the success of this initiative would make possible to replace 10 bcm of Russian gas, which accounts for 30% of the total volumes imported from Moscow via pipeline.

Despite the international competition to grab these LNG carriers and to be transformed into floating regasification terminals (Germany, for example, has booked three of them), on June 1 SNAM has successfully purchased the "Golar Tundra" storage and regasification vessel, with a nominal capacity of 5 bcm. The FSRU "Golar Tundra" will probably be positioned in the Adriatic or in any case near the major centres of consumption in central-northern Italy, while it should be able to distribute natural gas in the national network by the spring 2023. This will be a significant step forward in the strategy of diversification, also considering that the national regasification capacity will reach 25% of total demand (SNAM 2022).

As regards the construction of traditional regasification facilities, a dozen projects have been presented in Italy since 2005 - thanks to its strategic geographic position for the development of LNG terminals to be connected to European markets - but only two were completed, because of a combination of factors including the excessive length of bureaucratic procedures and authorization processes, and the sudden changes in the energy markets. To date, three projects have received the authorization from the Ministry of Economic Development, but the bureaucratic process is suspended despite the identification of the sites: Gioia Tauro (with an expected capacity of 12 bcm), Porto Empedocle (with an expected capacity of 8 bcm) and Falconara Marittima (Ministry of Economic Development 2022). Indeed, their eventual realization over a three-year period would double the national regasification capacity, which would reach 40 bcm, further bolstering the strategy of diversification of supplies.

An increasing production of energy from renewable sources and a larger use in the energy mix is an effective tool to facilitate the replacement of Russian imports and, in the future, of natural gas, so promoting the energy transition process. Italy ranks at the second place among European countries for the share of renewable energy sources (RES) in total consumption (20.4%), largely overcoming the 17% target set for 2020 by the European Directive and the Plan of the National Action for Renewable Energy 2010. Furthermore, 38.1% of the national electricity production is covered by RES, within which the largest contribution is provided by hydroelectric energy (41%), followed by solar (21%), wind (17%), bioenergy (17%) and geothermal at 5% (GSE 2020).

⁴ SNAM is the public subsidiary that manages the national pipeline network: SNAM also owns one of the three Italian regasification terminals and has shares in the other two

Considering the achieved results and the Italian potential in the production of solar and wind energy, Enel CEO Francesco Starace stated that it is possible to produce 60 GW of electricity from renewable sources by three years, which could lead to a reduction of the gas demand until 18 bcm, corresponding to more than 50% of Russian imports (Lombardini 2022). This position was reiterated during a hearing in the Parliament by the president of *Elettricità Futura*, Rebaudengo, who argued for the need to authorize new wind and photovoltaic plants for 60 GW in a short time - by June 2022, through extraordinary procedures - divided into 48 GW of photovoltaic and 12 GW from a combination of wind, hydroelectric and biomass. In this perspective, the electricity sector would be ready to invest 85 billion euros in the next three years, necessary to install 60 GW of new renewable plants (*Elettricità Futura* 2022). This ambitious goal follows the guidelines of the National Integrated Energy and Climate Plan (2019) - which establishes the national objectives for 2030 - which provides for the installation of 40 GW of renewable energy plants, as well as the achievement of 55% of electricity consumption met by renewable energy sources and the gradual closure of coal-fired power plants by 2025. However, there are some distortions that actually delay the implementation of this project, such as a necessary adaptation of the transmission lines to transport any increase in production, and the availability of storage batteries (70 billion euros of estimated costs): without these interventions, 45% of the electricity produced by the 60 GW installed facilities could not be used, essentially nullifying the efforts to promote an energy transition process (Zollino, Agostini, and Giuliani 2022). There is also another important factor to be taken into account; the renewable energy plants installed in the Italian territory have a total power of 60.8 GW, but in 2020 only 1.35 GW (wind, photovoltaic, hydroelectric) was installed, due to an inefficient bureaucratic system which postpones the permissions' release. In April 2022, the first offshore wind farm in the Mediterranean was inaugurated in Taranto, conceived to produce 30 MW of energy per year, also allowing to avoid the production of 730 thousand tons of carbon dioxide, as well as satisfying the consumption of 60 thousand people (La Repubblica 2022).

Also an increase in domestic natural gas production would be an option to further reduce Russian gas supply, even if the current scenario appears to clash with this possibility: in fact, as mentioned above, in twenty years the domestic natural gas production has dropped from 21 bcm to the current 3.3 bcm. Furthermore, the estimates concerning onshore and offshore natural gas reserves show that a potential increase in production would not significantly affect the total national consumption. According to the Ministry of Ecological Transition (2021), natural gas reserves would amount to 39.8 bcm, 55.6% onshore and the remaining offshore. In addition to these proved reserves, we can add 44 bcm of probable⁵ reserves: consequently, the total between proved and probable reserves would be slightly higher than the national annual consumption. The two offshore fields of Argo and Cassiopea located in the Sicilian channel appear particularly promising (with reserves of 15 bcm): Eni has invested in both fields for extraction activities and for gas processing, with the construction of a treatment plant, whose production will start in the first half of 2024 (Eni 2021b). The supporters of the necessity to increase domestic hydrocarbon production argue that, due to the government's decision in 2018 to freeze exploration and drilling activities, it is not possible to have an updated picture of the potential gas reserves: according to some estimates realized by mining engineers and geologists about ten years ago, Italy could have 350 bcm of gas reserves, located in unexplored areas such as under the Ionian seabed and under the sea in north-west of Sardinia (Giliberto 2022). The supporters of drilling and exploration activities also mention the case

⁵ "The probable reserves represent the quantities of hydrocarbons which, on the basis of the geological and engineering data of the available reservoirs, can be recovered with a reasonable probability (greater than 50%) based on the technical contractual, economic and operational conditions existing at the time in question; the elements of residual uncertainty may concern the extension or other characteristics of the reservoir (mining risk), the cost-effectiveness (under the conditions of the development project), the existence or adequacy of the hydrocarbon transport system and / or the sales market "(Ministry of Ecological Transition 2021).

of Croatia, on the other side of the Adriatic, strongly engaged in the production of natural gas: however, it should be considered that these offshore fields are not so large (24 bcm of proved reserves), even if they are able to satisfy part of the national demand, which cannot be compared with the size of the Italian consumption. Expectations about promising reserves of the gas fields off the coast of Sicily are linked to their geographical proximity to the huge reserves discovered in the central-eastern Mediterranean, such as Zohr (Egypt, with reserves of 850 bcm), Leviathan (Israel, with reserves of 600 bcm) and Aphrodite (Cyprus, 140 bcm).

Conclusions

Despite the good results obtained by the Italian government through a wide-ranging energy diplomacy, the goal of entirely replacing gas imports from Russia in the short term appears excessively ambitious and difficult to achieve. In fact, the recent agreements with new suppliers are mere declaration of intents, and Italy will not have concrete and additional volumes of natural gas available in the coming months, due to the difficulties to expand the residual capacity of existing gas pipelines and regasification terminals as well as for the objective impossibility of the new partners to deliver additional volumes of natural gas to our country in the short term, due to technical issues and factors of internal and regional instability.

Energy cooperation with Libya represents one of the most explanatory examples in this sense: thanks to its huge hydrocarbon resources, the geographical proximity and the traditional political-energy relations with our government and Eni, Libya would be the ideal energy partner for the Italian strategy to replace Russian gas imports. However, internal political instability and a latent situation of conflict prevent the full exploitation of existing resources, negatively affecting the regularity of supplies. We can remember that during the civil war (between 2011 and 2012) that led to Gaddafi's dismissal - in the wake of the "Arab Spring" - Libyan natural gas exports through the Greenstream pipeline were cut off for seven months: ten years ago Libya was the third largest gas exporter to Italy, covering 12% of total imports (Indeo 2012, 14-15).

The decision to increase the number of regasification terminals appears to be correct and functional to respond to the current energy crisis, as they are strategic infrastructures that allow natural gas to be imported from various global producers without being tied to a single supplier as in the case of gas pipelines. However, Italy suffers a chronic delay in the construction of the regasification terminals (as mentioned before, in the last 16 years only two LNG terminals have been built out of over 12 project proposals presented), even if the idea of buying or renting floating regasification terminals represents a good solution to increase LNG supplies in the medium term.

As regards the contribution of renewables, the bureaucracy and the slowness in granting authorizations for new plants undermine the possibility to further increase RES in the energy mix so replacing natural gas: in a provocative way, the national president of Legambiente Stefano Ciafani noted that on the basis of the average installation of plants in the last three years (equal to 0.56 GW), the target of 70GW of new renewable energy plants by 2030 will be reached in 124 years (Legambiente 2022).

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The evolution of global jihadism

The cause of jihadism

As is well known, jihadism is one of the main security threats of our time. Although there are different definitions of this phenomenon, it can be argued that contemporary jihadism is, in essence, a modern ideological orientation of transnational scope, based on a political and militant interpretation of the Islamic religion, which promotes the use of violence framed as armed *jihad*, in order to achieve political goals (Stenersen, p. 776).

The rise of global jihadism with Al-Qaeda

In its current transnational form (Robinson 2020), jihadism emerged in Afghanistan in the 1980s, at the time of the influx of mujahideen determined to counter the Soviet invasion of this Muslim-majority country, which began in 1979.

In that context, Al-Qaeda established itself as the main protagonist of global jihadism. In general, this organization was able to unite militants and sympathizers who until then had focused their attention on local conflicts, becoming the leading exponent of a transnational mission.

Al-Qaeda soon devoted itself to terrorist activity and, as is known, this commitment reached its culmination with the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States, which cost the lives of almost 3,000 people (cf. Marone 2017).

After those catastrophic events, the vigorous reaction of the United States and numerous other States led to a pronounced process of decentralization of the group. Ten years after September 11, the killing of its leader and founder Osama bin Laden on 2 May 2011, represented a heavy blow to Al-Qaeda, at least symbolically, but it did not have a decisive effect on the organization and, even less, on the broader global extremist cause.

The experience of the so-called Islamic State (IS) or Daesh

Moreover, a few years after Bin Laden's death, Al-Qaeda's central position within the diverse galaxy of global jihadism was challenged by the heir to its Iraqi branch, the armed group that on 29 June 2014 took the name of Islamic State (IS).

The sudden rise of this powerful organization in 2014 had the effect of producing a considerable increase of the jihadist threat at the international level (Nesser et al 2016).

In the Levant, the self-proclaimed Islamic State or Daesh was able to conquer large portions of territory between Iraq and Syria, presenting itself as a new "Caliphate", in the form of a quasi-state entity.

Moreover, the organization was able to attract tens of thousands of militants from abroad. Existing estimates suggest that more than 40,000 people (mainly adult men, but also adult women and minors) from over 100 countries left their home for the self-proclaimed "Caliphate". The so-called jihadist foreign fighters from Europe were over 5,000 (see Cook and Vale 2019); of these about 150 were linked to Italy (Marone and Vidino 2019)¹.

In addition, outside the Syrian-Iraqi region, the self-styled Islamic State was able to inspire, encourage or, less frequently, directly organize numerous terrorist attacks (Nesser et al. 2016), including in the West (among others, Vidino et al. 2017; Marone 2021b).

¹ According to the latest publicly available data, jihadist foreign fighters with ties to Italy are 144, and 56 of them are already dead (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2022, p. 85)

The Islamic State's capacity for inspiration and attraction was also based on a propaganda production of exceptional level in terms of quantity and quality. The organization knew well how to use different means of propaganda (videos, audio recordings, magazines, ebooks, infographics, etc.) in different languages (among others, Maggioni and Magri 2015; Marone 2015).

Overall, the collapse of the territorial "Caliphate" caused a significant contraction in this propaganda activity.

In general, jihadist communication and propaganda have found very fertile ground on the Web and, in particular, on social media (among others, Marone 2019). From 2014 to 2016 the platform most used by jihadists was Twitter; following a growing activity of suspension of jihadist-inspired accounts on this social network, much of the traffic migrated to Telegram which - despite the initiatives to remove content carried out on the impulse of counter-terrorism authorities, especially in 2019 (Amarasingam et al. 2021) - still remains an important platform for this extremist cause.

The decline of the "Caliphate" of the Islamic State

The Islamic State's territorial experience in Syria and Iraq entered into crisis around 2017, due to the growing repressive commitment of its different enemies, and ended definitively in March 2019, with the fall of its last stronghold, the Syrian village of Baghuz.

During 2019 the jihadist organization also lost its most popular leader, known by the nom de guerre of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi (Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim, born in Iraq, probably in 1971). Al-Baghdadi blew himself up on the night of 26-27 October during a raid by the US armed forces in the Syrian Governorate of Idlib.

After Al-Baghdadi's death, the organization quickly appointed a successor, who was given the name Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi (Amir Mohammed Abdul Rahman al-Mawli al-Salbi, born in Iraq in 1976). The leadership of the new emir, however, turned out to be not very incisive and above all definitively short: Al-Qurashi did not appear in any propaganda product of the organization, well known in the past for the quantity and quality of its communication and propaganda activity; in fact, the second "Caliph" of the Islamic State privileged the imperative of secrecy over the needs of visibility and publicity, presumably for security reasons (cf. Marone 2021a). However, this choice did not prevent him from falling victim to a US raid, conducted on 3 February 2022 in a manner similar to the one that cost the life of Al-Baghdadi and in the same area of northwestern Syria, a short distance from the Turkish border.

After a relatively long pause since the death of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, on 10 March 2022, the Islamic State announced the appointment of its third "Caliph", Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi. At present, information on the new leader appears to be almost non-existent. On 26 May 2022, Turkish news sources claimed that Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi had been arrested in Istanbul (Kozok 2022), but at the time of writing this news has not yet found a definitive confirmation.

The persistence of the jihadist threat

The collapse of the territorial "Caliphate" in Syria and Iraq and the violent death of its first two "Caliphs" did not mark the end of this jihadist organization. The self-styled Islamic State, in fact, has reorganized itself as a clandestine armed group based in Iraq and Syria and has continued its activity of violence in a clandestine form in the region, even with high-profile actions. We can mention, in particular, the large-scale assault on a prison run by Kurdish-majority militias near the city of Al-Hasakah, in northeastern Syria, in January 2022.

For its part, although overshadowed by its powerful rival in the years of the territorial "Caliphate", Al-Qaeda has continued its extremist activity, under the leadership of Ayman Al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian militant. The organization founded by Bin Laden has also benefited from the resounding military victory that the Taliban, a long-time ally, achieved in August 2021.

The (re)conquest of Afghanistan has been a factor of inspiration and a model of emulation for the entire global jihadist galaxy, with the obvious exception of that portion of the movement, led by the Islamic State, which opposes the Taliban movement.

In the West, in correspondence with the decline of the “Caliphate” in Syria and Iraq, there has been a reduction in the number of terrorist attacks and, even more, in their actual level of lethality (Marone 2021b).

At the time of writing, the latest case of jihadist massacre in the region dates back to the summer of 2017, with the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, Spain, on 17-18 August. This, however, does not in any way mean that the threat has disappeared, as evidenced by the sequence of jihadist attacks carried out in recent months (among others, Europol 2021; Marone 2021b). One can consider, for example, the shocking murder of a British Member of Parliament, David A. A. Amess, on 15 October 2021 in England.

In recent years, some general trends of jihadist terrorism in the West have been consolidated; some of them were already visible in most (but not in the totality) of the attacks carried out at the time of the apogee of the territorial “Caliphate” (see Vidino et al. 2017).

The planning and execution of attacks directly at the hands of small autonomous groups or, even more frequently, of lone individuals (so-called lone actors), that are not organically affiliated with jihadist organizations such as the self-styled Islamic State / Daesh or Al-Qaeda.

The rather amateur nature of the attack plans; the use of unsophisticated, low-tech weapons, such as bladed weapons (kitchen knives and so on) (Marone 2021b); the limited number of victims.

Moreover, the sequence of terrorist attacks in recent years is only the culmination of a wider phenomenon of radicalization. In fact, the process of acceptance of the jihadist cause has continued, even without the extraordinary force of attraction of the territorial “Caliphate”.

As confirmed by recent police operations, the phenomenon has also affected Italy². Among the different environments in which these individual processes of jihadist radicalization can take place, the relevance of the virtual sphere of the internet (see, among others, Marone 2017) and prison (among others, Marone and Olimpio 2019) is confirmed.

The effects of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine

The evolution of global jihadism after the end of the territorial “Caliphate” has also been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Marone 2020; 2022). In the short term, the coronavirus has encouraged extremist organizations and individual sympathizers to change their communication and propaganda, especially online; in fact, organizations and individual sympathizers have tried to quickly incorporate the pandemic into their propaganda. In particular, organizations such as the self-styled Islamic State initially presented the epidemic that emerged in the West and in Iran as a “divine punishment” against enemies, respectively “infidels” and Shia (Marone 2022).

In addition, in the short and medium-long term, the pandemic has contributed to producing or exacerbating negative states of mind and to fueling new personal grievances which, at the individual (“micro”) level, can be the basis of various forms of violent extremism, including jihadism itself.

In particular, in the short term, the pandemic has caused loss and trauma, the alteration of daily living habits (including the reduction of face-to-face relationships), conditions of psychological distress for different individuals and, in general, high levels of uncertainty. In addition, in the medium and long term, the economic, social, political and cultural consequences of the pandemic, at the societal (“macro”) level, could create or reinforce a series of negative attitudes and emotions, such as fear, frustration and anger. Such negative states of mind can contribute to the emergence of

² For example, we can mention the recent, vast operation, conducted on 7 June 2022 by the Italian Police, against 14 Pakistani citizens allegedly linked to the Pakistani man who carried out a jihadist attack in Paris near the former headquarters of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo on 25 September 2020 (Polizia di Stato 2022)

relevant personal grievances, associated with a feeling of perceived injustice. Evidently, not all personal grievances lead to violent extremism; in this regard, propaganda is often crucial because it can lead to an interpretation and justification of personal difficulties in ideological terms (Marone 2022).

Although the pandemic has also exerted an influence on terrorist violence, it should be noted that jihadist attacks have not disappeared even during the most acute phases of the coronavirus emergency. For example, two jihadist-inspired attacks were carried out in France in 2020, in Romans-sur-Isère on April 4 and in Colombes on April 27, in the midst of the national lockdown (Marone 2020).

Finally, it cannot be excluded that the pandemic may also have negative effects on the fight against terrorism and violent extremism, in the short and medium term, with an overload of work for law enforcement, armed forces and intelligence agencies due precisely to the pandemic emergency, but hypothetically also in the medium-long term, with the potential risk of a reduction in resources allocated to this sector, diverted in order to tackle the pandemic and its negative consequences (Marone 2020; 2022).

Another macroscopic event that took place in the phase of jihadism following the collapse of the territorial “Caliphate” is obviously the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. This armed conflict in itself does not directly involve the extremist cause of global jihadism. Nevertheless, its levels of political relevance and media visibility are so high that it has also attracted the attention of jihadists. In particular, the Islamic State welcomed the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, presenting it as a war between “Crusaders” and an opportunity that can lead to the weakening of its Western enemies.

The expansion of jihadism in sub-Saharan Africa and in Afghanistan

In recent years, the expansion of jihadist organizations on the African continent has become particularly important, in contexts often already marked by pronounced dynamics of political instability. In the Sahel region there has even been a condition of intense rivalry between armed groups affiliated respectively with the self-styled Islamic State and with Al-Qaeda. Furthermore, in Mali in addition to the scheduled conclusion of the Barkhane military operation and the Takuba Task Force, the ruling military government in Bamako recently decided to leave the G5 Sahel regional cooperation initiative.

Finally, it is important to pay attention to Afghanistan the threat posed by the Afghan branch of the Islamic State, the so-called Islamic State – Khorasan Province, which has committed itself to countering the national government of the Taliban (the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan), even with the frequent recourse to terrorist attacks (such as the bloody attack at Kabul International Airport on 26 August 2021).

Conclusions

Recent years, also marked by the definitive collapse of the territorial “Caliphate” and the death of its historic leader in 2019, have seen a reduction in the jihadist threat at the international level, on the whole. Nevertheless, the risks remain significant. Furthermore, recent developments such as the Taliban’s military victory in Afghanistan and the penetration of various jihadist groups in sub-Saharan Africa underline the persistent dynamism of this insidious and changing phenomenon.

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Osservatorio Strategico

Part Two

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Elections in Lebanon: Outcomes and Scenarios

Lebanese legislative election results

On May 15, 2022, legislative elections were held in Lebanon to renew members of the National Assembly, Lebanon's single-chamber parliament¹. The Lebanese people arrived at the election with moderate hopes for change, given the context of severe economic crisis and social tensions that have seen major protests with the epicenter being the Lebanese capital since fall 2019. These were heightened by the political consequences of the August 4, 2020, explosion at the port of Beirut, which within days had led to the resignation of the Diab government. Despite the expectations, the effects on the election results were less disruptive than expected. Two changes are worth noting in an election round marked by vote-buying, and episodes of violence and intimidation (EU Election Observation Mission, 2022). On one hand, the Hezbollah-led coalition lost its absolute majority, dropping overall from 70 in 2018 to 62, with the majority set at 65. On the other hand, the 13 new independent MPs won a seat, including some from the 2019 protest movements – in 2018 only one seat had been won by an independent (Fig.1)². In the Sunni camp, it is worth noting the news announced back in January 2022 by the leader of the Future Movement, Saad Hariri, who had announced his retirement from the political scene and an election boycott by his party³ (Agenzia Nova, 2022). The voter turnout was almost unchanged from the 2018 elections, standing at 49 percent of eligible voters. What has to be underlined, however, is the high heterogeneity among electoral districts. While in Hezbollah's strongholds turnout even increased, districts traditionally hegemonized by Hariri's party saw a decrease in voters (Trombetta, 2022).

While losing as a coalition the absolute majority in parliament, Hezbollah actually increased its seats from 12 to 13 (The Orient Today, 2022a). Its leader Nasrallah said he was willing to seek broad dialogue and compromises, confirming how the Shiite party could still remain the pivot on which the new government will be formed. The main loser, however, is its ally, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) led by President of the Republic, Michel Aoun. By dropping from 18 to 17 seats, the FPM loses its decades-long role as the country's leading Maronite Christian party⁴. The other Shiite party, Amal, also stayed afloat by gaining 15 seats.

Beside, the winning party can be considered the Lebanese Forces, led by Samir Geagea⁵. Rising from 12 to 19 seats, the Lebanese Forces becomes the leading Maronite Christian party. However, it is difficult to expect that, in the short term, it can succeed in forming a parliamentary majority capable of forming a new government, even by allying with other smaller forces such as the Progressive Socialist Party (8 seats), led by Walid Jumblatt – expression of Lebanon's large Druze community. Returning to the 13 independent MPs, some unexpected surprises should be noted. For example, in district South 2, a Hezbollah stronghold, two independent candidates defeated figures close to the Shiite party. Among them is Firas Hamdan, one of the best-known faces of the popular protests in the fall of 2019 (Manfredi Firmian, 2022). Nevertheless, while they represent a breath of

¹ According to article 24 of the Lebanese constitution, the distribution of parliamentary seats must respect the equitable distribution between Christians and Muslims and, within them, among different religious denominations. The parliamentary term lasts four years. For the full text of the Lebanese constitution see: <https://bit.ly/3taVT8J>.

² For an in-depth discussion of candidates, turnout, and the elected see Lebanese Interior Ministry, 2022.

³ However, many politicians belonging to the party ran for election, formally as "independents". Eight of them won a seat.

⁴ The Lebanese political and electoral system are based on confessional criteria, whereby each institutional office and the distribution of seats also depends on religious affiliation. Nevertheless, especially since the Cedar Revolution of 2005, the Lebanese political system has split into two major opposing camps that transcend confessional divisions. On the one hand, the so-called pro-Syrian March 8 alliance. On the other, the March 14 alliance, anti-Syrian. This division deepened with the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011.

⁵ Samir Geagea is a highly controversial figure in the Lebanese political landscape. The only political-military leader indicted for the events of the civil war that ended in 1990, Geagea is a historical rival of Aoun himself.

fresh air in the Lebanese parliament, it remains to be seen what their real ability to influence the Lebanese political course will be. Furthermore, it has to be observed whether traditional parties will try to create informal alliances with them in the course of voting, co-opting them into the old system of power. Early evidence of how resistance to change might still prevail was manifested in the first parliamentary session, when the speaker of the assembly was to be elected. Nabih Berri, leader of Amal, came out on top for the seventh consecutive term (more than 30 years). Some parliamentarians opposed to his candidacy merely wrote protest slogans on the ballots, confirming the total absence of alternative candidates⁶. The only fact that should be noted is the minimum quorum reached for the election, set at 65. This is a much lower number of votes than in the previous election, when Berri obtained 98 votes in favor (France24, 2022).

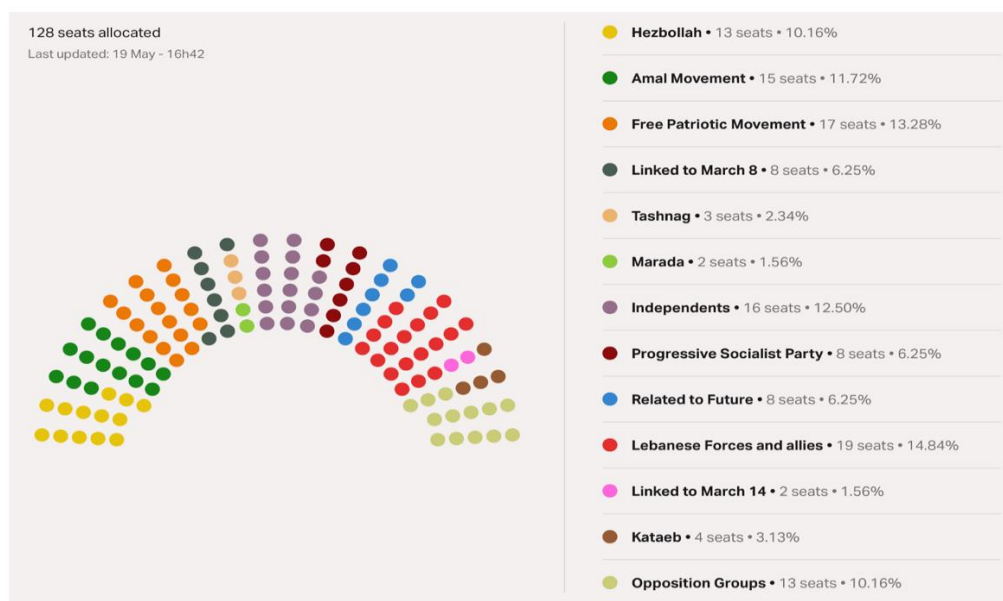


Fig.1 Lebanese election results by seats
Source: L'Orient Today

International reactions and the socio-economic context

Lebanon is historically a country subject to the influence of various international countries which therefore should be taken into account. Given also the uncertainty as to what will be the development on the front of negotiations for government formation, most countries have adopted a cautious stance with respect to the election results. For instance, the United States has limited itself to calling for the need for rapid government formation to deal with the country's structural problems (U.S. Department of State, 2022). A similar position was taken by France, the main European country that for historical reasons plays an influential role in Lebanon. Iran, an ally of Hezbollah, has adopted a sibylline position, declaring that it respects the results. At this stage Tehran has no intention of exacerbating tensions as it is engaged in the Vienna nuclear negotiations (Reuters, 2022). Turkey also hailed the elections positively, indicated as an important moment in Lebanese political life to restore calm and stability in the country (Daily Sabah, 2022). It is worth noting how, since the 2020 Beirut port explosion, Ankara has increased its presence in Lebanon, including by using the leverage of economic and humanitarian aid. Saudi Arabia adopted the most interesting position. The Saudi ambassador in Beirut hailed the election results positively, calling them a victory of state versus mini-state logic, referring implicitly and critically to the role played by Hezbollah inside the country (Jalkh, 2022). The elections reported a favorable situation for Riyadh. Indeed, in recent years, the Saudi

⁶ Among the slogans appeared writings calling for justice on behalf of the victims of the Beirut port explosion and Loqman Slim, a hostile Hezbollah intellectual killed last year in the south of the country by gunmen who remained unknown.

kingdom has seen its influence in Lebanon shrink. On one hand, because of the simultaneous increase in the power of Hezbollah, an ally of Tehran. On the other hand, because of the problems it has had with its historic domestic ally, Saad Hariri, strongman of the Sunni camp. In this regard, it is worth recalling the crisis that in 2017 had led to a kind of informal arrest of then-prime minister Hariri during his visit to Riyadh. The Hariri's exit from the political scene could also be explained, in part, as a Saudi attempt to invest on new politicians. Moreover, the diplomatic crisis that began in October 2021 should not be forgotten. On that occasion, during an interview, Lebanon's minister of Information, George Kordahi, had criticized the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen⁷ (France24, 2021). Riyadh had reacted by withdrawing its ambassador and blocking the import of Lebanese goods. This decision was later joined by Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. It was not until early April, thanks to the mediation of French president Macron, that the crisis was unblocked, with the ambassadors returning to Beirut (Talbot, 2022).

As anticipated, the Lebanese elections came at an extremely delicate stage in Lebanese history, among the most difficult since the end of the civil war in 1990. Economically, the World Bank called Lebanon's current economic situation «one of the three most severe crises since the mid-19th century» (World Bank, 2021). A situation that began well before the outbreak of the pandemic. In 2018, Lebanese GDP declined by 1.7 percent from the previous year, and in 2019 by 7.2 percent. With the outbreak of the pandemic, 2020 saw a 21.4 percent drop in GDP, followed by a further 10.5 percent decline in 2021. A 6.5 percent contraction in GDP is also expected in 2022 (World Bank, 2022). The other economic data that can grasp the Lebanese situation is the inflation rate. The Lebanese lira has been undergoing a gradual devaluation for many months now, with the peak of inflation at 240% reached in January 2022. In addition to that, the poverty rate reached 80% of the Lebanese population in 2022. Finally, among the worrisome aspects should be mentioned the collapse in the provision of essential services, such as electricity. A situation that, even on the food security front, is also deteriorating due to the indirect consequences of the conflict in Ukraine (Halabi, 2022).

It is on these premises that as of October 2019, Lebanon has witnessed a new wave of popular protests, in Beirut as in other urban centers. Known as the "October 17 Protests", the demonstrations had been sparked at the time by tax increases on fuel, tobacco, and the imposition of a tax on Whatsapp phone calls. The popular demonstrations forced prime minister Hariri to resign on October 29, 2019. Only the outbreak of the pandemic led to an easing of popular tensions.

Assessments and future scenarios

Despite the news presented, it is unlikely that the May 15 legislative elections will be able to lead to substantial reform of Lebanon's political system, which is plagued by endemic cronyism, corruption and inefficiency. Likewise, it is therefore likely that social tensions will persist. There are two tests with which the true health of Lebanese politics will be measured in the coming weeks. First, the negotiations to form a new government, a process that could take many months. A second and perhaps more immediate test will be the election of the new president of the republic. The term of office of Aoun, in office since 2016, will expire in five months, and he cannot be reelected under the provisions of article 49 of the constitution. The new power balance between political parties, as they emerged from the elections, will be measured on these two levels.

As soon as the new government sees the light it will be called upon to resume negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In early April, an IMF delegation visiting Beirut reached an agreement in principle with the current government led by Najib Mikati. This is a four-year plan worth about \$3 billion that the Washington-based institution intends to prepare in exchange for a package of structural reforms (IMF, 2022). However, it is clear that at this stage no party has

⁷ After the publication of the interview, which was actually recorded in August, Minister Kordahi resigned from his post.

sufficient political will and strength to support such a plan. Even a party such as Amal has opposed the deal, despite the finance minister who negotiated the deal is affiliated with the Shiite party (The Orient Today, 2022b). Finally, it has to be monitored with due attention how Hezbollah will react and absorb the election outcomes. Should the political weakening suffered by its coalition in the two described issues – formation of the government and election of the new president of the republic – become more acute, the Shiite party could decide to stiffen its position on the military front. Indeed, it should be remembered that Hezbollah is a hybrid actor, insofar as it is both a political party and a military militia, considered by some states to be a terrorist organization. In this sense, therefore, in the coming months the Shiite party may decide to provoke an increase in tensions with Israel in southern Lebanon, in a move for internal use aimed at exploiting its military might to keep the political and familistic-territorial consensus it enjoys in some areas of the country.

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Benin: jihadist threat accelerates democratic backsliding and restores military centrality

Over the past six months, the series of terrorist attacks in Benin has increased fears concerning the enlargement of Sahelian jihadist groups' activities.¹ Besides Benin, the northern provinces of other West African coastal countries (for instance, Côte d'Ivoire) have become a sanctuary for several Islamist militants. The phenomenon poses a severe threat to regional stability in the medium term. For this reason, regional countries are carrying out both unilateral and coordinated counter-strategies. However, the actions undertaken in recent months risk spawning two main side effects. The first is the danger that embracing violent countering and repressive tactics will indiscriminately target rural communities. Then the frustration of the youth will increase, prompting them to embrace the radical proposal of the jihadist movements.

A similar dynamic happened in Mali and Burkina Faso, exacerbating security conditions. In other words, African security forces' action could create favorable humus for recruitment by the Islamist groups. The second side effect generated by the counter-terrorist policies adopted by regional countries is likely to affect their fragile institutional structures. The need to cope with an emergency crisis coupled with pre-existing structural conditions is providing some West African regimes with a further pretext for halting democratic development paths or, as in the case of Benin, accelerating democratic backsliding processes.

Since 2016, after two decades of democratic progress, the Beninese trend has been reversed by the autocratic policies promoted by President Patrice Talon. Escalating terrorist activity along the borders with Burkina Faso and Niger will likely give further impetus to this path. The rise of jihadist threats has also restored centrality to the military components linked to the President. In the upcoming months, these developments could be a greater destabilizing factor than the Islamist armed groups.

The first consequence of the terrorist attacks carried out in the two Beninese national parks in February and April was the reshuffling of the Beninese army's cadres. For several years, the military had played a central role in the country's political affairs. Notably, the Forces Armées du Bénin (FAB) played a leading role in the first decades following the Beninese independence in 1960. During those years, Benin has gone through a long period of political instability with several coups led or, in some cases, supported by the military.

Since the Nineties, the country has succeeded in embarking on a path of institutional development. The gradual democratization process favored the spread of a burgeoning democratic culture. That period resulted in downsizing the military's role and influence in the Beninese political sphere.

Thanks to the improvements achieved, Benin can be formally considered a constitutional democracy ruled by the rule of law. However, in essence, for some years now, the reality has been different. Since his election in 2016, President Patrice Talon has eroded from within the constitutional norms and democratic institutions.

The process of democratic backsliding has led to the substantial disempowerment of the country's state institutions. Nowadays, Benin is no longer a free country (Paduano, 2019).² The 2021 elections marked the final turn toward an autocratic system. Before the vote, the judiciary,

¹ See OS 2/2022.

² Human Rights Watch Index. URL: www.hrw.org

increasingly linked to Talon's government, had banned the main opposition parties and their leaders (Duerksen, 2021).

As a result, a significant portion of the country's electorate decided to boycott the election. Therefore, Talon was re-elected to the presidency, but only 26 percent of Beninese eligible to vote went to the polls. In the months before the election, the President had also consolidated cooperation with the country's defense and security forces, giving them a more political character. For this purpose, the Talon executive launched a comprehensive reconfiguration of the security forces by exploiting the reports that two alleged coups had been foiled (Toukara, 2020).

The campaign of forced early retirements and purges within the FAB has strengthened military ties with the President. At the same time, the reshuffle left the Beninese defense and security forces more vulnerable and unprepared to face with the jihadist threat. The replacement of the military ranks gained momentum with the increase in terrorist attacks. In April, Talon promoted a new turnover within the FAB. Fructueux Gbaguidi became Chief of Staff, replacing Rear Admiral Patrick Aho (Dossou, 2022). Gbaguidi and the Minister of Defense Fortuné Alain Nouatin, who is also very close to Talon, have launched an investment plan for the Beninese security apparatus. Their agenda includes recruiting new troops and strengthening the FAB's heavy military equipment. The need to enlist recruits is due to the growing jihadist threat in the northern provinces and Benin's ongoing regional engagement.

The country recently hosted the 16th conference of intelligence chiefs of the Accra Initiative member countries (Benin, Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, and Niger).³ At the end of the meeting, member states decided to launch the military operation called Koudanglou Renforcée through the deployment of a joint multinational force (RFI, 2022). Benin's active involvement in operations to counter jihadist terrorism will further expose the country to the threat of new attacks. For this reason, the Beninese General Staff wants to strengthen the surveillance of border areas and the vast wildlife reserves by flanking the rangers of the NGO African Parks with FAB units. The troops engaged in patrol operations also need modern military equipment appropriate for the wooded areas where Islamist militants operate.

The purchase of new military equipment is thus the second task of the new Chief of Staff. Following the example of neighboring countries, the team led by Gbaguidi and Nouatin has gathered information about aerial surveillance systems. These systems are considered essential by African security forces to improve their ability to collect intelligence on armed groups' transfers.

Beninese officials have engaged in exploratory talks with three companies: the Turkish Baykar Group, the French company NSE, and the Chinese state-owned subsidiary PolyTech. While talks with Baykar have focused on the Bayraktar-TB2 and Akinci combat and surveillance drones, with NSE, Beninese interest has turned to the A-NSE aerial camera balloons, already used by Côte d'Ivoire (AI, 2021). The relationship established by the Beninese authorities with the Chinese state-owned company is different. PolyTech has long been operating in Africa as an import-export agency by providing, in cooperation with the Russian agency Rosoboronexport, military equipment to the armed forces of several African countries.

In Benin, PolyTech has already overseen the construction of the Allada military base, the new FBA's headquarters (Ayosso, 2020). In recent weeks, a delegation from the Chinese company has reportedly offered both Russian-made (Mil-171) and Chinese-made (Z-19E) attack and transport helicopters to the Talon government (IA, 2022). Most likely, the FABs will acquire new capabilities in the coming weeks. However, Gbaguidi's task is complicated by the low budget.

³ The Accra Initiative was launched in September 2017 by Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo in response to growing insecurity due to violent extremism in the region. The initiative aims to prevent the spillover effects of terrorism from the Sahel and address transnational organized crime along the border areas (Kwarkye et al. 2019)

The 2022 Beninese budget increased the financial resources allocated to defense by (+12 percent) over the previous year. Despite the increase, the budget remains under 100 million euros, too little to acquire the equipment needed to counter the activism of jihadist groups. Therefore, the Beninese government could acquire new equipment by using a Chinese loan or in exchange for concessions for new offshore drilling off the country's coast.

The autocratic methods adopted by the President in recent years have arrested democratic developments. In the short term, these dynamics risk damaging the ethnic-regional balances on which Beninese stability has been based in past decades.

The climate of emergency created by increasing jihadist activity has provided the executive branch with an opportunity to increase its control over society. At the same time, the country's security forces have regained centrality. Nowadays, there is a unity of views and intents between the Talon executive and the FAB. However, in the mid-to-long term, it cannot be ruled out that the President's autocratic policies and increased internal instability could provide some military factions with the motive to intervene in the country's political life.

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Tentative steps towards “democratization” in Kazakhstan

Introduction

The beginning of 2022 was not the best for the Kazakh government. In fact mass protests broke out in the city of Zhanaozen, (western Kazakhstan) in early January, formally caused by the sudden increase in the price of liquefied natural gas (the more widespread - and more available in the region - fuel for engines) but also the result of the overall economic situation of the country and of the tiredness towards the elites, due to a rigid political system that prevents ordinary citizens from carrying out important public functions. Last year, the cost of a liter of liquefied gas was about 50-60 tenge (€ 0.10), at the end of December 2021-early 2022 the citizens of Kazakhstan had to pay a price that was doubled, or about 120 tenge. The price increase was mainly due to the liberalization of prices or the revocation of the tariff limits present until the end of last year. Following the demonstrations that have spread throughout most of the country, on March 16th the government announced a package of constitutional changes that will come into force upon popular approval to be obtained through the referendum instrument. On June 5th, a referendum took place on the amendments to the Constitution proposed by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who sees them as a step towards the democratization of Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, many political scientists, activists and ordinary citizens believe that the main goal of the referendum is to strengthen the power of Tokayev himself.

“New Kazakhstan” project

On January 5th, the authorities declared a state of emergency² and, two days later, President Tokayev in his speech to the nation, said that “20,000 terrorists had attacked Kazakhstan”³. Thus, he addressed to the heads of other countries adhering to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (OTSC) to send – in the framework of - peacekeepers to the country “to help restore constitutional order”. Moscow also shared the same opinion, which saw the involvement of external actors in the demonstrations and, in particular⁴, Islamic fundamentalists. While protests were suppressed across the country⁵, Tokayev sacked the government, lowered the prices of liquefied natural gas and food products, and announced plans to build a “New Kazakhstan”⁶. The project involved 56 amendments to the current constitution, which should lead the country on the path of democracy by transitioning from one super-presidential government structure to a presidential republic with a more powerful parliament. The head of state and other supporters of the proposed changes argue that the amendments will limit the president's powers: for instance, he will not be able to join any political

¹ *Poslanie Glavy gosudarstva Kassym-Zhomarta Tokayeva narodu Kazachstana: Novyj Kazakhstan-put'obnovlenija i modernizacii*. 16.03.2022, Premier's official website [https://www.primeminister.kz/ru/addresses/16032022\(last](https://www.primeminister.kz/ru/addresses/16032022(last) access 11.06.2022)

² *Vystuplenie Glavy Gosudarstva K.K.Tokayeva na zasedanii Mazhilisa Parlamenta Respubliki Kazachstan*. Official website of the President of Kazakhstan's Republic: <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/vystuplenie-glavy-gosudarstva-kk-tokayeva-na-zasedanii-mazhilisa-parlamenta-respubliki-kazachstan-1104414> (last access 11.06.2022)

³ *Prezident Kazachstana udalil tvit o yakobynapavshikhna Almaty “20 tysyachachterroristov”*. 08.01.2022 <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/prezident-kazachstana-udalil-tvit-o-yakoby-napavshih-na-almaty-20-tysyachah-terroristah/31645139.html> (last access 11.06.2022)

⁴ “Аль-Каида” или фонд Сороса: кто стоит за беспорядками в Казахстане”, Вести.Ру, 09.01.2021 <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2661641> (last access 11.06.2022)

⁵ According to foreign figures, there were averagely 160 death and 5.000 arrested (last access 11.06.2022) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/10/kazakh-leader-declares-attempted-coup-detat-over>

⁶ *Obrazbaj A., “Vperedistritel'stvonovogoKazachstana” – Tokayevobratilcja k almatincam*. Tengrinews, 21.03.2022 (last access 11.06.2022) https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/vperedi-stroitelstvo-novogo-kazachstana-Tokayev-obratilsya-464696/

party. The authorities present him as an example of political impartiality, although in reality it will not limit his power at all. Members of the president's family will be prohibited from holding state and leadership positions in the semi-public sector. The new constitution will also prohibit judges, members of election commissions, military personnel, employees of the national security services and law enforcement agencies from joining political parties, which, until now, was essentially an unofficial requirement for state employees.

The amendments will also change the way in which the *akims* (heads of local governments) are selected, they will still be appointed by the president but their appointments will require the approval of the *maslihats* (local representative bodies). Furthermore, the amendments will officially ban Kazakhstan's first president, 81-year-old Nursultan Nazarbayev, from politics. The former president Nazarbayev formally left office in 2019 by stepping down from his post as head of the country's ruling party he had led since 1999. Until a few months before leaving, he retained a powerful influence as he held the role (for life) as president of the Security Council of Kazakhstan. However, Nazarbayev has left an important legacy made up of family members and people very close to him, who hold key positions⁷ both in the government and in the surrounding economic structures. The new amendments will abolish his status as "people's leader".

The biggest challenge, however, seems to be the introduction of a clear division between the political and business spheres since the existing border is not clearly drawn. This is largely confirmed by the combination and coexistence of illegal business and political ties not only on a regional scale, but also in the very centers of power. As previously mentioned, the relatively high level of corruption and nepotism was one of the reasons behind the January riots, especially in the city of Almaty where the Nazarbayev's clan has its greatest influence through the omnipresent family members in the public sector. They are in key-positions where can managing and entrust the execution of public contracts to companies related to them.

The project is also related to the reduction of presidential power, which will have to be accompanied by a strengthening of the role of parliament. In this way, the formation process of the Senate will change. Currently 2 senators from 17 circuits are elected to the office and the remaining 15 are appointed by the president. The change consists in bringing the latter group to 10, of which half will be presented by the People's Assembly of Kazakhstan (a body composed of 382 representatives of national minorities in the republic and ethno-cultural organizations, which operates under the president). In addition, the limit of 9 deputies to the Majilis (lower house of parliament) appointed by the Assembly will be lifted, which will reduce the total number of seats for deputies.

Another important proposal is to deprive the Senate of the right to approve and reject the bills proposed by the Majilis. The new mechanism consists in limiting the operation of the upper chamber to only consulting the contents of the documents with the lower chamber. This would strengthen the legislative role of the Majilis, which is currently unable to overrule the Senate veto.

The current government has a sufficient parliamentary majority to enforce the required changes and President Tokayev has also proposed to strengthen parliamentary control over budget implementation. To this end, the current Board of Auditors will be replaced by the Supreme Chamber of Auditors, whose president will be required to submit financial reports to the lower house twice a year. It is not clear whether and what consequences and to whom will be collected in the event of a discrepancy between the expenditure assumed in the budget and those resulting from the report.

Over 68% of the population (about 8 million people) voted in the referendum and about 77% (6.1 million people) voted in favor of the amendments while 19% (just under half a million people)

⁷ Talant B., *Kazakhstan's longtime "leader" is out, but the regime he built remains*. 14.02.2022 (last access 10.06.2022) <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/kazakhstan-s-longtime-leader-out-but-regime-he-built-remains>

voted against⁸, 2.58% of the ballots were declared invalid. Consequently, the amendments have already been adopted.

Final remarks

The “New Kazakhstan” project was born with the aim of launching a new phase in the process of building the state of Kazakhstan and represents an attempt to democratize the country. Although not all requests made by protesters in January 2022 have been accommodated, the changes in the socio-political sphere are - at least on paper - up to social expectations. Theoretically, some of the new solutions have the potential to alleviate social tensions, contribute to the weakening of “informal” local economic and political structures or fight corruption and improve the republic's image in the eyes of the (Western) international community. In this sense, the direction of changes undertaken by the Kazakh authorities will probably not meet the favor of some leaders of neighboring countries such as, for example, Russia, Tajikistan or Turkmenistan, which will perceive them as a step toward the West. However, Kazakhstan could benefit from it, not only in terms of an improvement in internal political dynamics but also through the projection of a positive image of the country, quite different from the previous one and closer to Western standards.

⁸ Alkhabaev Sh., *Obyavleny itogi referenduma v Kazakhstane*. Tengrinews.kz, 07.06.2022 (last access 12.06.2022) https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/obyavlenyi-itogi-referenduma-v-kazahstane-470419/

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The irrelevant succession in the increasingly relevant United Arab Emirates

Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Abu Dhabi' Emir and UAE' president, disappeared from the political scene since 2014 due to ill health and his half-brother Mohammed bin Zayed, MbZ, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Deputy Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, has since then firmly took over the reins of the federation¹. Thus, the election held in May - following the death of the emir - by the Supreme Federal Council that brings together the representatives of the seven emirates - Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain and Fujairah - ratified a factual situation.

In these years of Mohammed bin Zayed's reign, very decisive strategic choices have been made in matters of foreign and defense policy that have earned the Emirates a solid position of prominence, while Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Dubai' Emir, prime minister and vice president of the UAE, dealt with internal politics.

However, Khalifa bin Zayed had the merit of starting in 2005 the enlargement of citizen participation in political life: half of the members of the Federal National Council, an advisory body, is elected every four years (the first election was held in 2006). Moreover, he was the one that supervised the building up of the Emirati armed forces. It is under his government that the emirate of Abu Dhabi' hegemony - which holds 90% of the federation's oil fields - was recognized, also exploiting Dubai's financial problems resulting from the 2008 housing crisis.

Since 2014, the regional and international rise of the Emirates has followed a parallel trajectory with the activism of the regent who launched the "Vision 2071". The program includes projecting the government into the future, providing excellent education by focusing on advanced technology, strengthening the country's reputation by diversifying imports and exports by reducing dependence on oil, a cohesive society, building the values and ethics of the Emirates for future generations and increase the productivity of the national economy². In this period, several projects have been completed: the Louvre Abu Dhabi in 2017, the first nuclear power plant in the Arabian Peninsula³ in 2018, the launch of the Emirati probe to Mars⁴ in 2020, Expo Dubai 2022, although delayed due to the pandemic and the dialogue on inter-religious tolerance⁵.

Regional politics has been strongly affected by the Emirati foreign policy choices: the tough opposition to extremism⁶ - for which MbZ uses the term "Muslim Brotherhood" extensively⁷, the embargo against Qatar⁸ (2017-2021), the decision to reconnect with Turkey and Iran⁹, the

¹ E. Ardemagni, "Emirati Arabi Uniti: la non-successione di Khalifa bin Zayed", ISPI, 15 maggio 2022; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/emirati-arabi-uniti-la-non-successione-di-khalifa-bin-zayed-35022>.

² United Arab Emirates government, "UAE Centennial 2071", 17 May 2022; <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/federal-governments-strategies-and-plans/uae-centennial-2071>.

³ Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation; <https://www.enec.gov.ae/>.

⁴ France24, "UAE sends rocket to Mars in Arab world's first space mission", 20/07/2020; <https://www.france24.com/en/20200720-united-arab-emirates-launches-historic-mars-space-mission-from-japan>.

⁵ D. H. Warren, "Interfaith Dialogue in the United Arab Emirates: Where International Relations Meets State-Branding", Georgetown University, 12 July 2021; <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/interfaith-dialogue-in-the-united-arab-emirates-where-international-relations-meets-state-branding>.

⁶ C. Mondloch, "The UAE Campaign Against Islamist Extremism Is a Royal Pain For Qatar", Vice, 3 April 2015; <https://www.vice.com/en/article/nem8wb/the-uae-campaign-against-islamist-extremism-is-a-royal-pain-for-qatar>.

⁷ A. Chappelle, "Abu Dhabi's problem with the Muslim Brotherhood", Aljazeera, 26 May 2018; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/5/26/abu-dhabis-problem-with-the-muslim-brotherhood>.

⁸ BBC News, "Qatar row: Saudi and Egypt among countries to cut Doha links", 5 June 2017; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40155829>.

⁹ Reuters, "UAE official says time to manage rivalry with Iran and Turkey", October 3, 2021; <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-official-says-time-manage-rivalry-with-iran-turkey-2021-10-03/>.

intervention (and then the withdrawal of the troops in 2019¹⁰) from Yemen to fight the Houthi rebels, the support for Khalifa Haftar in Libya¹¹ and the signing of the Abraham Accords with Israel together with Bahrain¹² in 2020.

Following the pandemic first - with a very effective vaccination campaign and humanitarian diplomacy using IHC, International Humanitarian City in Dubai, the largest logistics centre in the Middle East for the storage and distribution of humanitarian aid - and the Ukrainian crisis then, the Emirates managed to proceed with a geopolitical repositioning, anticipating the evolving economic dynamics and combining commercial and strategic interests¹³.

The Emirates are one of China's main economic partners in the region - 50 billion Euros is the amount of trade between the two countries in 2021 and more than 60% of Chinese trade in the Middle East goes through the Emirates - and Abu Dhabi is an essential hub for the Belt and Road Initiative.

With careful balancing in the sessions of the United Nations Security Council¹⁴, the Emirates remain a reliable Moscow' ally even with the ongoing crisis in Ukraine: foreign policy remains flexible with a good dose of opportunism without ideological conditioning.

¹⁰ AlJazeera, "UAE withdraws troops from Yemen's southern port city of Aden", 30 October 2019; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/30/uae-withdraws-troops-from-yemens-southern-port-city-of-aden>.

¹¹ G. Cafiero, D. Wagner, "How the Gulf Arab Rivalry Tore Libya Apart", The National Interest, December 11, 2015; <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-the-gulf-arab-rivalry-tore-libya-apart-14580?nopaging=1>.

¹² UAE government, "The Abraham Accords: a warm peace transforming the Middle East"; <https://www.uae-embassy.org/discover-uae/foreign-policy/abraham-accords-warm-peace-transforming-middle-east>.

¹³ L. Fruganti, M. Serra; "Abu Dhabi: snodo globale sempre più strategico", ISPI, 10 giugno 2022; <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/abu-dhabi-snod-globale-sempre-piu-strategico-35350>.

¹⁴ A. Ibrahim, "UAE stance on Ukraine war reflects 'strong alliance' with Russia", AlJazeera, 3 March 2022; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/3/uae-stance-on-ukraine-war-reflects-strong-alliance-with-russia>.

“Rally 'round the flag” no more? The Ukraine war and its impact on the Biden administration’s popularity

The Ukraine crisis exploded at a delicate moment in the Biden administration’s political trajectory. After a peak on the same days of the President’s swearing-in (partly due to the effects of the Capitol riots of 6 January), Joe Biden’s approval rate constantly declined through 2021, at a faster pace in summer, in the same weeks of the end of the US military presence in Afghanistan¹. There are several reasons behind this dynamic. Despite a positive economic trend, the stimulus packages that the administration adopted have had only part of the expected impact. It took painful mediation to pass the bills in Congress, which partially watered down their original ambitions. On the Democratic front, the cuts that the President had to accept to social security measures revived the doubts already raised about his ability to carry out a really transformative agenda.

Environmental policy decisions (another administration’s battle horse) raised similar doubts. Finally, the return of inflation to early-1980s levels (one-year estimates are now 8.6%, the highest figure since 1981) (Smith, 2022) negatively impacted consumer confidence and pushed on the background the positive results gained in terms of growth and job creation. The role that consumer goods, foodstuff and energy have had in driving the consumer price index upwards (gasoline price increased 50% compared to 2021) made the problem more deeply felt. In turn, this affected the thin majority that the Democratic Party has in Congress, deepening the cleavages that – during the 2020 electoral campaign – had been put aside to focus on the shared task of defeating Donald Trump.

Foreign policy, too, has proved a troublesome field. As already mentioned, in the summer of 2021, the weeks of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan saw the President’s approval rate decline for the first time below his disapproval rate, albeit the criticism referred more to the forms of the withdrawal than to the decision in itself (Pastori, 2021). In the following months, the deteriorating of Ukraine’s situation allowed the President to hold the line. However, one year after the inauguration, a Gallup poll (1-17 February 2022) highlighted that the President’s foreign policy approval rate was a mere 40% (36% on the dealings with Russia), compared to 41% of the general index (Jones, 2022). In the following weeks, the RealClearPolitics aggregate index showed a further slight decline, reaching 39% in late May/early June, compared to 39.4% of the general index². Even if figures broadly vary according to the respondents’ political alignment, with the Republican voters predictably more critical than the Democrats, the common element that emerges is a growing mistrust toward the administration.

According to RealClearPolitics, the President’s disapproval rate is around 54.9%; according to FiveThirtyEight.com, it is around 53.6%, compared to an approval rate of 40.2%. Other polls also highlighted a relevant decline in the President’s favour among several electoral groups that have been important in the 2020 elections, such as independents, suburban voters, and women (Montanaro, 2022). Moreover, the favour that Democratic voters express toward the President’s action seems less robust than the criticism that the Republican voters express. It is another proof of the Party’s cleavages and of the fact that – despite the victory in the 2020 elections – Joe Biden still enjoys only limited support from the Party’s electoral basis.

It is a potentially dangerous situation, especially in light of the midterm elections scheduled on 8 November 2022. Almost all observers take the defeat of the Democratic Party for granted due to

¹ <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/biden-approval-rating> (accessed: 10 June 2022).

² https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/president_biden_job_approval_foreign_policy-7322.html#polls (accessed: 10 June 2022).

the rule of thumb that the President's party is usually defeated after two years in the White House. The problem concerns this defeat's magnitude and possible political effects (Shepard, 2022). The results of the 2020 legislative elections and the following events have given the Democratic Party a twelve-seat majority in the House of Representatives (220 vs 208, and seven vacant seats on 25 May 2022). The Senate is tied, with 48 Democratic and two independent Senators vs fifty Republicans and no vacant seats³. The last time a Democratic president faced his first midterm vote (Barack Obama in 2010), the Republican Party flipped 63 seats in the House and six in the Senate in an already heavily polarized political environment.

Today, such a result would be enough to paralyze the administration, heavily jeopardizing the Democratic candidate's possibility of being elected in the 2024 presidential vote. Several elements support this kind of scenario. Since November 2021, the Republican Party constantly leads the 2022 generic congressional vote polls with a +3.5% margin according to the last RealClearPolitics aggregate figure⁴. Moreover, since President Biden's inauguration, the Republican candidates have consistently scored better than their Democratic counterparts in several local and special elections (Enten, 2021). This result also had the additional benefit of consolidating the Party's position in the different states and enhancing its ability to work "from within" to shape their electoral systems and redesign the boundaries of the electoral districts.

Final remarks

Opposite to what happened to his predecessors, the outbreak of the Ukraine war did not trigger the expected "rally 'round the flag" effect in favour of President Biden. This "anomaly" has already been pointed out (Knox, 2022) and is becoming more evident over time. The overwhelming weight of the economic situation (especially the consumer price index growth) in the eyes of public opinion goes a long way in explaining the White House's problems. On the other hand, in the current highly polarized political environment, the more or less disguised criticisms that some key Republican figures raised negatively influenced the perception of how the President is dealing with the issue (Enns and Kriner, 2022). Finally, as already mentioned, the President's support from what should be his "natural" political basis is limited in both Congress and public opinion.

It has already been noted that formerly unifying moments are increasingly becoming a source of political animosity, as happened after the 26 August 2021 attack in Kabul, when thirteen US servicemen were killed (Gonzales, 2021). However, less than six months before the midterm vote, the point has a special relevance: in the short term, because of the Republican pressures pushing the administration to adopt a more rigid posture in the Ukraine conflict, in the long run, due to the possible impact that growing domestic polarization can have on the future of US political life. From this perspective, the November vote could offer some helpful indications both on what the Biden administration will be able to do in the second part of its mandate and a possible realignment in the two main parties' political positions. In the background, there is the possibility that the Ukraine conflict will evolve into a "long war", as the situation on the field seems to suggest.

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³ In this case, the Vice president's vote breaks the tie since the Vice president also serves ex officio as President of the Senate.

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The potential role of nuclear power in the European energy transition

The energy crisis triggered by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has reopened the debate in Europe on the use of nuclear energy, about the potential contribution that this energy source could offer both to reduce dependence on natural gas imports from Russia - replacing these with an increase in production from European reactors - and to promote the decarbonization process and the green energy transition, ending polluting emissions. As a matter of fact, nuclear power is increasingly considered a clean, non-polluting energy source (because it produces very low greenhouse gas emissions), thus becoming a strategically relevant option for gradually replacing fossil fuels, in particular coal-fired power plants for electricity production, at the same time meeting the growth of the global electricity demand. This approach has been reinforced with the awareness that the achievement of the climate neutrality in 2050 will imply a substantial increase in the contribution of nuclear and other non-polluting sources (natural gas and renewables) - which combined currently represent over 50% of the energy mix used for the production of electricity - so allowing the EU to completely eliminate zero polluting emissions by 28 years.

According to Eurostat (2022), nuclear power accounts for 24.6% to the production of electricity in the EU, where however the picture is not homogeneous: in fact the 103 reactors operating in Europe are located in 13 of the 27 member states, and France alone produces over 50% of the total electricity produced by nuclear power, followed by Germany (9.4%), Spain (8.5%) and Sweden (7.2%).

Country	Number of reactors	Capacity in GW	% on the production of electricity
Belgium	7	5,9 GW	39,1%
Bulgaria	2	2 GW	40,8%
Czech Republic	3	6,9 GW	37,3%
Finland	5	4,4 GW	33,9%
France	56	61,4 GW	70,6%
Germany	3	4,1 GW	11,3%
Hungary	4	1,9 GW	48%
The Netherlands	1	0,5 GW	3,9%
Romania	2	1,3 GW	19,9%
Slovak	4	1,8 GW	51,3%
Slovenia	1	0,7 GW	37,8%
Spain	7	7,1 GW	22,2%
Sweden	6	6,9 GW	29,8%

Tab 1. Nuclear production in the EU and its share on the electricity energy production
(Source: World Nuclear Association 2022b)

The French leadership in the production of electricity mainly from nuclear strengthens national energy security's condition, making it less vulnerable towards threats of interruption of Russian supplies: moreover, thanks to a high production, France is able to export electricity to Italy and other

European countries. In February 2022, French President Macron announced a plan for the construction of 6 new reactors, while another 8 would be under discussion: France appears therefore oriented to postpone to 2035 one of the key target included in 2015-energy policy, which aimed to reduce the contribution of nuclear power from 70% to 50% by 2025, also due to the difficulty of finding substitute and less polluting sources (World Nuclear Association 2022a). Furthermore, from a temporal point of view this announcement was made before the worsening of the gas crisis between the EU and Russia, also because it responded to another purpose, namely the reduction of the oil and gas consumption and especially imports, through the production of the energy necessary for internal consumption in a clean way and reducing emissions.

The case of Germany appears differently: this country has significantly reduced its capacity to produce electricity from nuclear power, from 17 reactors in 2011 to the three currently operational, which cover 11.3% of the electricity production: on this political choice contributed the “emotional wave” provoked by the disaster at the Fukushima power plant (Japan) in 2011. The Berlin government recently confirmed its intention to phase out nuclear power by the end of 2022, with the closure of the three remaining reactors, despite the changing energy scenario: in fact, the capacity of these three reactors and the possible reactivation of the three shutdown plants in 2021 would guarantee greater security for the nation in terms of energy availability, given the vulnerability linked to an excessive dependence on Russian gas imports, especially with the Nord Stream 1 gas pipeline (with a capacity of 55 billion cubic meters per year), which directly connects the Russian producer to the German demand (Kurmayer 2022).

The European Commission seems to have an ambivalent approach on the nuclear issue: on the one hand, in February 2022 the EU Commission proposed that natural gas and nuclear power should be considered as clean energy sources, a condition that would facilitate the achievement of the 2050 climate neutrality objectives, successfully completing the energy transition. Several EU member states oppose to this proposal, certifying the existence of a strong polarization within political parties and public opinion regarding the development of nuclear energy, between open supporters (France and Finland) and opponents (Germany and Sweden): in Italy, for example, the option of producing nuclear energy is not feasible at the moment, due to the results of a popular referendum which rejected this choice. On the other hand, in the REPowerEU strategy - a political initiative aimed at identifying and promoting alternative energy sources to replace gas imports from Russia - there is no reference to nuclear energy, unlike the document of the International Energy Agency (2022) which expressly suggests to increase nuclear energy production to reduce dependence on Russian gas: according to the IEA, delaying the closure of the five reactors scheduled between 2022 and 2023 would lead to a reduction in European gas demand equal to 1 billion cubic meters of gas per month.

However, considering that the construction of new reactors takes a very long time, the unsolved security issues (for example the storage of radioactive waste or the fear of accidents), the opposition of a large part of European public opinion, these are all elements that effectively nullify a potential contribution of the nuclear power to increase the European availability of energy: at present, only France (Flamanville reactor) and Slovakia are engaged in the construction of new plants which must also deal with delays in the different phases of construction, increasing costs and the need to create technologically advanced plants with high safety criteria, therefore developing and promoting the so-called next-generation of nuclear power plants. Indeed, after 15 years of works, the French nuclear reactor in Flamanville has not been completed yet, while the EPR plant of Olkiluoto in Finland has started to produce energy only in March 2022 after 17 years of works (Thomas 2022).

In general, with the exception of some particular cases such as China, Russia or the United Arab Emirates, the global trend indicates that nuclear energy is considered a non-strategic

option as alternative source, covering only 10% of world electricity production. thanks to 440 operational reactors. Furthermore, since 2020 the production of nuclear energy has decreased (previously it covered 15% of global electricity production)¹, even if nations such as China, Russia, India follow an inverse trend: for example, China is a leader in the production of nuclear energy, with 54 reactors operating and 18 under construction (out of 57 commissioned worldwide), even if their impact on electricity production is small (4.3%) considering the large extent of the domestic demand (World Nuclear Association 2022b).

Nevertheless, there are interesting perspective of growth and development, especially in relation to the energy transition: the International Energy Agency (2021) has elaborated an ambitious sustainable development scenario which assumes the possibility to implement - in consideration of the need to achieve the climate goals aimed at reducing polluting emissions - a decarbonisation scenario with an increase in the nuclear energy production by 75% by 2050, which would mean an annual increase in production capacity of 22 GW with the construction of new plants and reactors.

With regard to the European decisions on the role of nuclear power in strengthening energy security, the supplies of uranium are another issue to be carefully considered, as a fundamental mineral for the production of nuclear energy. Although uranium is highly distributed in five continents, a global convergence on the nuclear energy as best option for producing "clean" electricity could trigger a geopolitical competition to grab existing resources: moreover, if we have to consider the geographical origin of uranium supplies for the EU, because Russia is the second supplier (20%) - behind Niger (which mainly supplies France) but ahead of Kazakhstan (19.2%), Canada (18.4%) and Australia (13.3%) (Eurostat 2022) - a condition that highlights another dimension of the European energy dependence on Moscow. Moreover, Russia is also a global leader in the nuclear energy market, as it supplies 35% of the enriched uranium needed for reactors located around the world: the Rosatom company has built numerous reactors that have come into operation in the last period. (China, India, Iran) as well as participating in other projects including the construction of a reactor (Paks2) in Hungary (Maizland 2022)

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¹ For example, the United States has 92 reactors in operation (compared to 104 in 2012, while two of the four projects for the construction of new reactors have been canceled) which make it possible to produce 20% of electricity: one of the reasons for the gradual lack of interest in the promotion of the nuclear option is linked to the success of the so-called shale gas revolution – namely the increase in the production of unconventional oil (tight oil) and natural gas (shale gas) that allow the United States to have additional volumes of energy for domestic demand and for exports.

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Cyber-attacks against Italian targets in the context of the war in Ukraine

Hybrid warfare and the cyber domain

After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, public and private entities of NATO Member States have been victims of cyber-attacks attributed to Russian or pro-Russian actors.

In general terms, as is well known, the Russian Federation has devoted a lot of energy to the field of «hybrid warfare» (see, among others, Dominioni and Tafuro Ambrosetti 2020), including precisely the so-called «fifth dimension» of the conflict, namely the cyber domain (cf. Maurer and Hinck 2018; Beccaro 2021). Such efforts by Moscow have had further expansion with the war in Ukraine.

DDoS cyber-attacks against Italian targets

In this context, even Italy, that in March 2022 was included by Moscow in the list of unfriendly States for its support for Ukraine, suffered cyber attacks attributed to pro-Russian groups. In particular, from 11 May 2022, a few websites of Italian institutions as well as private actors came under attack; among these websites there would have been those of the Senate of the Republic, the National Institute of Health (*Istituto Superiore di Sanità*, ISS) and the national Automobile Association (*Automobile Club d'Italia*, ACI) (Santarpia 2022).

The cyber-attacks carried out on May 11 and in the following days were DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) attacks: this expression indicates a malfunction due to a cyber-attack that causes the deliberate saturation of the resources of a computer system, such as a website on a web server, until it is no longer able to provide the service; unlike the simple DoS (Denial of Service) attack, in the case of a DDoS attack, the incoming traffic that affects the victim comes from multiple sources.

In particular, as officially confirmed by the Italian CSIRT (Computer Security Incident Response Team), established within the National Cybersecurity Agency (*Agenzia per la cybersicurezza nazionale*, ACN) (cf. Marrone et al. 2021), these attacks «were conducted using techniques that differ from the most common volumetric DDOS attacks, thus going unnoticed by the protection systems commonly used on the market against this type of attacks, since they occur using a limited bandwidth. These DDOS techniques, defined as application layer attacks, aim to saturate the resources of the systems that provide services including web servers. In the specific case, the use of the technique called «Slow HTTP» was detected; as a rule, it uses HTTP GET requests to saturate the available connections of a web server» (CSIRT 2022, p. 1).

The Killnet collective

The 11 May 2022 cyber-attacks were claimed online by a hacker collective called Killnet. This group had also been mentioned a few weeks earlier in an alert from the US federal agency CISA (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency), along with other «Russian-aligned cybercrime groups», judged to be a threat to critical infrastructure organizations. According to the same document, in March 2022 Killnet had also carried out a DDoS attack on a US airport (Bradley International Airport, the busiest airport in Connecticut) (CISA 2022).

The Killnet collective displayed its intentions and threats on the internet. In particular, its main channel on the Telegram platform opened in January 2022. Nevertheless, until the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Killnet appeared to be a cybercriminal group, specialized in DDoS attacks.

Only from the day after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the group has openly highlighted its pro-Moscow sympathies, initially with hostile messages towards the actions carried out against Russia by Anonymous, the notorious hacktivist (hacker+activist) movement, which has sided in support of Ukraine. The pro-Russian collective has then invited other hackers to join its mission. Under the name Killnet, several sub-groups are now active, such as Legion, Mirai, and Jacky (De Lucia 2022; Frediani 2022).

The extent of Killnet's cyber-attacks

In recent months, cyber-attacks by the Killnet collective have grown considerably. According to currently available information, the targets of these hostile activities would have included targets from Romania, the Czech Republic, Poland, Estonia and Latvia. A few days before the attacks on Italian targets, websites of German institutions were also reportedly targeted (Gebauer et al. 2022).

As has been noted, the attacks suffered by Italian institutional actors did not have very severe consequences; these attacks suspended the availability of the affected websites for a limited temporary period, without jeopardising the provision of essential services for citizens. Moreover, the attacks did not compromise any critical infrastructure (Rigoni and Filippone 2022).

Conclusions

The cyber attacks against Italian targets claimed by the Killnet collective after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine aimed at producing a significant impact on a symbolic level, in practice unintentionally increased by the media coverage of these facts but they did not result in substantial economic damage or a real military advantage (Rigoni and Filippone 2022).

Nevertheless, the potential threat posed by cyber-attacks deserves attention, especially in this period marked by the war in Ukraine.

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Acronyms list

ACI	Automobile Club d'Italia
ACN	Agenzia per la cybersicurezza nazionale
AI	Ansaroul Islam
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BCM	Billion cubic metres
CARD	Coordinated Annual Review on Defence
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CISA	Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSIRT	Computer Security Incident Response Team – Italia
DAESH	Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham
DDoS	Distributed Denial of Service
DoS	Denial of Service
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EDA	European Defence Agency
EDAP	European Defence Action Plan
EDC	European Defence Community
EDF	European Defence Fund
ESDP	European Security and Defence Policy
FAB	Forces Armées du Bénin
FLM	Macina Liberation Front
FLNG	Floating Liquefied Natural Gas
FSRU	Floating Storage and Regasification Unit
GW	Gigawatt
HTTP	Hypertext Transfer Protocol
IS	Islamic State
IS-GS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISS	Istituto Superiore di Sanità
JNIM	Jamaat Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimin
LNG	Liquified Natural Gas
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
RES	Renewable Energy Sources
TEU	Treaty on European Union
UE	European Union
UN	United Nations
WAP	W-Arly-Pendjari



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Within the Ministry of Defense, the Defense Research and Analysis Institute (IRAD) is responsible for carrying out and coordinating research, advanced training and strategic analysis on various issues of political, economic, social, cultural and military nature and on the effects of the introduction of new technologies that determine significant changes in the defense and security scenario. IRAD contributes to the development of culture and knowledge for the general public and the national interest.

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- Persian Gulf;
- Euro/Atlantic (USA-NATO-Partners);
- Energy policies: interests, challenges and opportunities;
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The heart of the “Osservatorio Strategico” consists of the scripts regarding the individual areas, divided into critical analyses and forecasts.

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