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Geopolitics and energy security in the Eastern Mediterranean

EVENT REPORT



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The issue of energy security in the Eastern Mediterranean region was discussed by two expert speakers during an event hosted by Friends of Europe on 22 March against the backdrop of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The Eastern Mediterranean presents us with a complex security environment. Energy has become central to regional dynamics as sizeable gas reserves have been discovered in the region in recent years, and there is a need to find other energy sources outside Russia.

The event was held with two central questions. Considering the recent Russian invasion and its impact on the Black Sea, how has the geopolitical role of the Eastern Mediterranean changed, and how have recent trends transformed the human security landscape in the region, especially for women?

Interconnections between regions

Much of our attention is on the catastrophe and implications of the current war in Ukraine, said the first expert, and as Europeans we cannot but pay close attention.

At the same time, it is important to remember other regions that encircle Europe, particularly those that have experienced a series of crises over the years. These crises have not gone away; they remain with us and even run the risk of worsening because of the Ukraine crisis.

The geopolitical role of the Eastern Mediterranean is one issue that could become more important over the coming months because of the interconnections that exist between Ukraine, the Black Sea region and the wider Mediterranean, explained the first expert.

We need to have a clear map of what is going on, she asserted, but the media coverage in Europe often does not account for these connections. This is a problem because there is a direct link between Crimea, the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles and the Eastern Mediterranean.

There are a number of significant players involved in this region, and any miscalculation could result in additional tensions.

We should also not forget that we are talking about closed seas and straits. Russia's strategic interests are very present in the Eastern Mediterranean, but this is nothing new. Access to the Mediterranean has remained a strategic fixture for Russia and part of its grand plan. This is something we have seen clearly when it comes to the situations in Syria and Libya.

We also note the important role of Turkey and the way it has tried to insulate the Eastern Mediterranean from the potential implications of the ongoing war by controlling the two straits.

Turkey has tried to communicate that there is a link between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, and now Europeans need to look at the Ukraine crisis as part of a much longer-term set of wars and conflicts that involve regional and external players.

This could open up avenues for mediation and dialogue in the coming weeks and months, which is where Turkey has already expressed its desire to play a role.

Food security and food dependency

Food security is one of the key risks, said the expert. Countries in the Eastern Mediterranean region are disproportionately dependent on cereal imports from Russia and Ukraine. Over 40% of Lebanon and Libya's wheat comes from Ukraine, and Egypt is also heavily reliant.

Indeed, due to the war these imports are already being affected, so countries have had to turn elsewhere, and prices are already 10 times higher than they were 10 years ago.

Additionally, all our eyes are on the displacement of Ukrainians and the resulting migrant crisis, stated the expert, and this puts a considerable strain on both transit and recipient countries.

With reference to migration from other regions, the expert said that we “cannot discount the fact that migration will be affected by what is happening in Ukraine”.

Unity of European governments on Ukraine

The war is definitely a gamechanger for Europe's security, said another expert.

Politicians are feeling the pressure from civil society on the migrant issue, and economists are trying to find ways out of the financial crisis.

“Energy experts are between a rock and a hard place,” he said, adding that it “took just a month to show how fragile the world is”.

Vladimir Putin has managed what Western leaders failed to do, according to the speaker.

He has united European governments and enabled Europe to regain its “geostrategic stability”. The day before the event, ministers had approved the EU's Strategic Compass, which takes the form of a “standalone decisive defence doctrine for Europe” and is “a cradle to a European army”.

“This will transfer Europe from being Russia's hostage to being a self-standing entity,” stated the speaker.

President Putin has also succeeded in convincing the United States to return to Europe and has “revealed the fact that Russia wants to restore its geopolitical influence at any cost, with ensuing disrespect for democratic values, including for its own people”.

Having ruined his country's reputation, the Russian leader has proven that authoritarian regimes are the worst threat to peace.

Need to diverge away from Russia

Europe's independence from oil and gas will be a “necessary correction to the paradox” that its growth has largely been due to energy from Russia, which has in turn presented the biggest threat.

Moscow is still enjoying the energy payments from the EU, which are “keeping Europe and the Russian army warm”. Europe must now develop a new plan away from unreliable actors, whilst Russia will try to keep Europe as its “prisoner”.

The expert highlighted that 40% of energy used by EU member states comes from Russia.

Although this should not slow down the energy transition up to 2050, “at least the first half of this period cannot only be based on gas and nuclear”.

Currently Europe uses 400bcm of gas, and considering that 40% comes from Russia, the Eastern Mediterranean is now “a pivotal factor for Europe’s energy security” where new gas sources appear to be prevalent.

NATO as a means to project power

NATO could also play a role, together with the UN and the EU, in helping terminate the delimitation of maritime zones between Greece, Turkey and other littoral countries. The speaker said there is now a “window of opportunity to solve some of these disagreements”.

The delimitation of maritime zones affects natural energy challenges, with the speaker saying that Ankara promotes a “maximalist agenda” that increases the risk of conflict. However, Greek and Turkish heads of state met a week ago, and hence there is the potential to solve some problems related to the exploration of natural gas.

The speaker also proposed that the EU and NATO should have a “standing naval force” to maintain situational awareness in the region and “project power”.

Two trillion cubic metres of gas lie in the seas of western Greece, which would require between two to three years to extract. This would cover Europe’s total energy needs for four years.

The expert also stated that Europe is now a “tech leader” and can transform itself from a user to a producer in the renewables market, and the “immense offshore wind parks” in the Eastern Mediterranean could play a role.

For NATO, the greatest security challenge is Cyprus, said the expert. “Without reaching a solution here, no further problems could be solved.” NATO should undertake to reignite the UN on the island and restart negotiations. Indeed, Cyprus is the “first important key” to unlock the whole area.

Pragmatism in the Arab world

There are many nuances and differences within the Arab world towards the Russian invasion. At the beginning of the war there was “a lot of dithering”, said the first expert, since these countries are more aware of the geographic and historic connections between the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean and the broader Mediterranean region.

Some are close allies of the US, but there is also a large Russian presence in the region, both militarily and in terms of investment. Egypt, for example, has a strong partnership with Russia, but most Arab countries have decided to adopt a “pragmatic

and conservative view”, putting their “bets on the West and on the need to avoid spill over”.

Civil society in the region wants to contribute to the relief effort, but they are also criticising the West for double standards when it comes to welcoming migrants.

“Need for speed”

“There is a need for speed,” said the second expert. “What is speeding up the process is that the Russian invasion has woken us from our comfort zone, and whatever we have to do, we have to do it quickly.”

He said that discussions with Turkey need to start now in order to find ways to resolve these differences, and Europe also needs to speed up its energy independence from Russia.

For Europe, 2027 is a critical date, said the expert, because only then will we start having more gas. The next three years will be very difficult because we will have to compromise and continue imports from Russia.

The priority is to address the security and humanitarian problems in Ukraine, and then continue to explore the implications of conflict, said the first expert.

“We need to keep a light on in this region and hear from interlocutors in the Middle East,” she said, adding that there have been many discussions about Europe’s strategic autonomy, but the steps taken so far “have been too modest – and not just on energy”.

According to her, the EU “hasn’t been able to follow up on nice documents”.

Europe can only move if the member states are united – but now they are.

Recommendations

- Capitalise on opportunities in the Eastern Mediterranean as a means to diversify away from Russia
- Continue with the energy transition but admit that gas and nuclear will have a role to play in the initial period
- The EU and NATO should have a “standing naval force” to maintain situational awareness in the region and “project power”
- The EU should transform itself from a user to a producer in the renewables market
- The EU should accelerate talks with Turkey
- Do not forget about the Eastern Mediterranean region more generally

