





POLICY PAPER


The EU in Stormy Waters: How to Ease the Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean?

VOCAL
EUROPE

*This Policy Brief was written by **Michael Pitsounis** | 3 August 2021

 Rue de la Science 14, 1040 Brussels

 office@vocaleurope.eu

 + 32 02 588 00 14

VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



[TWITTER.COM/THEVOCALEUROPE](https://twitter.com/thevocaleurope)



[FACEBOOK.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://facebook.com/vocaleurope)



[YOUTUBE.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://youtube.com/vocaleurope)



[INSTAGRAM.COM/VOCAL EUROPE](https://instagram.com/vocaleurope)

Disclaimer and Copyright

This document is prepared for, and addressed to Vocal Europe and its audience. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of Vocal Europe. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged.

THE EU IN STORMY WATERS: HOW TO EASE THE TENSIONS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN?

Background

Recently, Mevlut Cavusoglu raised a few eyebrows in both Athens and Brussels. Following a few tensionless months in Eastern Mediterranean, the Turkish foreign minister threatened to use all available means, unless Cyprus's resources were fairly distributed among its ethnic communities [1]. For someone unfamiliar with the Cyprus dispute, this seems like a reasonable request with a straightforward solution. However, modern day Cyprus is much more complicated than that.

We are nearing the semi-centennial anniversary of the Turkish invasion and the subsequent partition of the island into two states. In the south, the Republic of Cyprus has been a member of the European Union since 2004 and constitutes the sole legitimate state entity on the island. In the north, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is a legally invalid de-facto state and is technically considered as an occupied part of Cyprus by the international community.[2]

In this already complex deadlock, another variable has recently come into play. Emboldened by the prosperous findings of Israel's deep-sea explorations in Eastern Mediterranean [3], the Republic of Cyprus awarded international oil companies with offshore exploration licenses in the sea subsoil of its Exclusive Economic Zone. These explorations took place despite Turkish objections and have yielded promising results.[4]

In contrast to the R.o.C., existing maritime legislation limits Turkey to a disproportionately small sea area in Eastern Mediterranean [5]. Thus, in an attempt to alter the maritime status quo and in defiance of international norms, Turkey has repeatedly conducted exploratory operations in sea areas that legally fall within Greece and Cyprus's waters. [6]

In March 2021, the European Council set stability and peace in East Med as prerequisites for the economic and regional cooperation with Turkey [8] It goes without saying that more maritime breaches could potentially torpedo the ongoing Customs Union talks and become a hindrance to long term partnership between Turkey and the European Union. In light of these circumstances, this policy brief will assess E.U. 's approach towards Turkey in recent months and elaborate on how the Union can help build an environment of security and peace in Eastern Mediterranean region.

Current State of Play

The European Union has been closely monitoring the developments in Eastern Mediterranean. If one could summarize Brussels' stance on the matter, he/she would only need to use two words: moderation and appeasement. In regards to Greece, the E.U. has repeatedly taken the side of its member state in the maritime dispute and has unequivocally condemned Turkish provocations [10]. On the other hand, the E.U. has recurrently declined to impose punitive sanctions, with the hope that Erdogan's Administration will be gradually appeased and tone down his claims in the region.

This moderate E.U. approach has also illustrated the vast differences of opinion in regard to how Turkey should be dealt with. While some within the Union have been advocating for a more mellow approach, other members like Greece, Cyprus and France have been vocal supporters of a harder line.[11] To the dismay of those countries, the E.U. has only gone as far as to blacklist two executives of the state-owned Turkish Petroleum Corporation back in February of 2020.[12] Later that same

THE EU IN STORMY WATERS: HOW TO EASE THE TENSIONS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN?

year, at December's European Council meeting, Turkey's "*unilateral and provocative activities*" were acknowledged but no sanctions were issued. [13] At the same time, Greece and Turkey have been encouraged to engage in bilateral diplomatic talks to settle their multiple disputes. These include the Cyprus partition, the refugee crisis and of course their conflicting maritime claims.[9]

Advantages of the EU's Approach

Evidently, it is still too early to draw certain conclusions about the long-term impactfulness of this sanction-less approach. Nonetheless, Turkey's Foreign Minister Cavusoglu has openly proclaimed that facing punitive measures by the international community would not prohibit his country from pursuing its goals [14]. Sanctions could also cause further disaffection between all actors involved and become a hindrance in future negotiations.

On the contrary, following the European Council meeting in December 2020, in which no sanctions were issued, there was some improvement on the Greek-Turkish front. First and foremost, there have been no recent sightings of Turkish vessels in Greek or Greek Cypriot waters, as of yet [15]. This was a particularly pleasant outcome that stands in stark difference with the pre-2020 Eastern Mediterranean situation [16].

Even President Erdogan altered his tone considerably for a while, emphasizing on his wish to "*turn a new page*" and signalling a new era for E.U.-Turkey and Greece-Turkey diplomacy.[17] Indeed, as illustrated by the resumption of Greek-Turkish exploratory talks in January 2021[18], there have been some attempts at reconciliation for the first time since 2016. At least for the first half of the current year, appeasing Turkey seemed to be bearing fruit.

Disadvantages of the EU's Approach

For an optimist, decreasing tensions in Eastern Mediterranean would imply that we could potentially see the light at the end of the tunnel, if all actors involved continued their paths towards reconciliation. Regarding Turkey however, that is a big "if".

While the E.U.'s policy of appeasement has undoubtedly contributed to a short-term de-escalation of the East Med crisis during these past few months, it should not be seen as a long-term tool capable of containing Turkey's behaviour. In fact, there are signs that this appeasement approach may already be faltering. At the beginning of July 2021, President Erdogan publicly reiterated his intentions to conduct drillings once again in Cyprus' waters. [19] A few weeks later, his visit in Northern Cyprus was marked by the announcement that the area of Varosha is scheduled to be partially resettled, in defiance to existing U.N. Security Council Resolutions. [20] In this context, it is difficult to imagine how bilateral talks between Greece and Turkey can progress.

Turkey's behaviour once again appears to be turning unpredictable and erratic and threatens to undermine the progress made. It also illustrates that Turkey's commitment to comply with international norms might have been overestimated, while the importance of domestic factors and ideas in shaping its foreign policy has been overlooked. The "Blue Homeland" doctrine, which has become increasingly popular in Turkish military circles, advocates the adoption of an expansionist

THE EU IN STORMY WATERS: HOW TO EASE THE TENSIONS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN?

strategy in the Mediterranean and beyond.[21] Thus, it contests the territorial rights of its neighbours, namely Greece and the R.o.C., disregards maritime law and threatens peace in the region.

Considering the aforementioned context, there are valid reasons for concern about the long-term effects of Turkey's appeasement. Brussel's decision to only go as far as imposing limited sanctions on Turkish individuals[21b] has already given the impression that the European Union does not have the capacity or willingness to openly oppose Turkey. Additionally, appeasement tactics towards an increasingly authoritarian state raise doubts over the E.U.'s commitment to its founding liberal principles [22]. Turkey holds an unfortunate record of violating international norms, abusing human rights, issuing inflammatory statements against prominent European leaders [23] and adopting an increasingly anti-Western rhetoric.

Judging by all of the above, it is no wonder that some E.U. member states have expressed their disagreements over the Union's moderate treatment of Turkey. If the current approach backfires and President Erdogan opts to re-enact his former volatile foreign policy agenda, the question of sanctioning could resurface and once again divide the European Union. In simple words and in conjunction with its aggressive foreign policy agenda, the question stands: How far is Turkey willing to go if the E.U. allows it to keep getting away with it?

Future Prospects

The calming of East Med waters provides the E.U. with a significant window of opportunity. From a theoretical standpoint, the E.U. is probably the most prominent success story of applied regional integration, as it has expanded its boundaries and jurisdiction on numerous occasions over the past decades. Considering the United States' decision to abstain from East Med in recent years, the E.U. can successfully fill that void and expand its regional leadership role.

Now is the time for the Union to adopt long-term strategies for the region. As illustrated in the previous section, the de-escalation in East Med might be short-lived. Thus, it is imperative that the E.U. sets out clear objectives in the region and remains committed to resolving the long-standing disputes. The following recommendations involve short-term, as well as long-term strategies.

I. Ensure that exploratory talks between Greece and Turkey continue.

Turkey has repeatedly accused the Union of advocating the maximalist positions of its member states regarding their E.E.Z[24]. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect that President Erdogan will accept an inclusion of E.U. representatives in his bilateral negotiations with Greece.

As there are many areas of friction that exist between the two neighbouring countries, reaching a sufficient level of trust requires long talks. This implies that existing military pacts and maritime law provisions must be duly adhered in the following months. Establishing red lines and closely monitoring the behaviour of either side must be prioritized by the E.U.

II. Use the Customs Union talks as leverage.

With Turkey seeming eager to enter the preliminary phases of the upcoming Customs Union modernization [25], a significant opportunity is presented for the E.U. These talks can preserve the

positive momentum of the past few months and boost the economic and political cooperation between Europe and Turkey. They will also allow the E.U. to gradually set out conditions that Turkey needs to meet in order for the talks to advance. This gives the E.U. a significant leverage in regards to ensuring that President Erdogan refrains from pursuing expansionist strategies in East Med in the short and medium term.

III. Motivate all relevant parties to find a solution for the Cyprus problem.

Finally, a sustainable E.U.-led solution on the Cyprus problem, overambitious as it might appear at the moment, must be the long-term policy aim for Brussels. The partitioned island has a tendency to generate more and more areas of friction as time goes by. This is evident by the illegal Turkish drilling activities, which were made on behalf of Northern Cyprus.[26]

In order for this long-term plan to bear fruit, the E.U. must provide incentives to both the R.o.C. and the TRNC, to compromise. Ensuring that the Turkish Cypriot community gets its fair share of revenue from the island's energy resources is vital. In return, Turkey must refrain from provocations that alienate the two communities and diminish the chances of a settlement.

Before the energy competition crisis, reunification was a pragmatic scenario, as evident by the U.N.-led negotiations back in 2017[27]. With tensions decreased, Greek and Turkish Cypriots may achieve what previously appeared as elusive, under the guidance of the E.U. At the very least, the groundwork can be laid for future administrations.

IV. If all else fails, be prepared to take a tougher stance

Given Turkey's volatile economic and political circumstances and its constant pursuit of a higher international status, it is difficult to make predictions about its next moves in Eastern Mediterranean. Aggressive foreign policies have been very well received by the Turkish public [28]. With President Erdogan's Administration facing elections in 2023, it stands to be seen whether he will once again opt for similar tactics to boost his popularity.

If this occurs, the European Union must not make any more concessions. Evading sanctions, as well as entering Customs Union talks, has already been perceived as a huge diplomatic victory for Turkey. In order for tensions in the region to remain low in the following years, it must be made abundantly clear that the E.U. is willing to take punitive measures.

VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



[TWITTER.COM/THEVOCALEUROPE](https://twitter.com/thevocaleurope)



[FACEBOOK.COM/VOCALEUROPE](https://facebook.com/vocaleurope)



[YOUTUBE.COM/VOCALEUROPE](https://youtube.com/vocaleurope)



[INSTAGRAM.COM/VOCALEUROPE](https://instagram.com/vocaleurope)

Disclaimer and Copyright

This document is prepared for, and addressed to Vocal Europe and its audience. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of Vocal Europe. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged.

THE EU IN STORMY WATERS: HOW TO EASE THE TENSIONS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN?

References

- [1] “We disregard perception of Turkish Cypriots as minority: FM Çavuşoğlu”, *Daily Sabah*, July 1, 2021. <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/eu-affairs/we-disregard-perception-of-turkish-cypriots-as-minority-fm-cavusoglu>
- [2] United Nations Security Council Resolution 550, May 11, 1984. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/550\(1984\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/550(1984))
- [3] Tova Cohen and Dan Williams, “Leviathan gas field to start up after Israel court lifts injunction”, *Reuters*, December 19, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-natgas-leviathan-idUSKBN1YN0VV>
- [4] Helena Smith, “Huge gas discovery off Cyprus could boost EU energy security”, *The Guardian*, February 28, 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/28/huge-gas-discovery-off-cyprus-could-boost-eu-energy-security>
- For a detailed look at the provisions regarding Exclusive Economic Zones, see Articles 55-59 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf
- [5] Ayla Guler, Fiona Mullen, Harry Tzimitras, “The Cyprus Hydrocarbons Issue: Context, Positions and Future Scenarios”, *Peace Research Institute Oslo*, PCC Report 1/2013, 2-4
- Mathew Bryza, “Solving the Eastern Mediterranean crisis requires compromise”, *Atlantic Council*, September 23, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysourcesolving-the-eastern-mediterranean-crisis-requires-compromise/>
- [6] “Timeline: Turkey's gas exploration off Cyprus raises tensions”, *Reuters*, October 14, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyprus-turkey-ship-timeline-idUSKBN1WT20L>
- [7] Aurélien Denizeau, Mavi Vatan, the “Blue Homeland” The Origins, Influences and Limits of an Ambitious Doctrine for Turkey, , *Études de l’Ifri*, April 2021, 13
- [8] “Statement of the members of the European Council”, 25 March 2021. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48976/250321-vtc-euco-statement-en.pdf>
- [9] “Turkey-Greece: From Maritime Brinkmanship to Dialogue”, *International Crisis Group*, Europe Report: No 263, 31 May 2021 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/263-turkey-greece-maritime-brinkmanship-dialogue>
- [10] “Statement of the EU Foreign Minister on the situation in Eastern Mediterranean”, *Council of the European Union*, 15 May 2020. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/05/15/statement-of-the-eu-foreign-ministers-on-the-situation-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>
- [11] Robin Emmott, John Chalmers, Tuvan Gumrukcu, “Exclusive: E.U. halts sanctions on Turkey oil executives as ties improve”, *Reuters*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-eu-exclusive-idUSKBN2BA1KP>
- [12] Council of the European Union, Outcome of the 3726th Council Meeting, November 11, 2019. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/41323/st13976-en19.pdf>
- [13] European Council meeting- Conclusions, Brussels, December 11, 2020. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/47296/1011-12-20-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>
- [14] “Turkey says it won't abandon East Med rights over EU sanctions threat”, *Reuters*, December 14, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-eu-turkey-minister-idUSKBN28O2TF>
- [15] “EU welcomes Turkish ship's return to port from near Cyprus”, *Reuters*, October 5, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyprus-turkey-idUSKBN26Q1PA>
- [16] “Timeline: Turkey's gas exploration off Cyprus raises tensions”, *Reuters*, October 14, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyprus-turkey-ship-timeline-idUSKBN1WT20L>
- [17] “Turkey hopes to turn new page with U.S. and EU in 2021, Erdogan says”, *Reuters*, December 21, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-turkey-sanctions-erdogan-int-idUSKBN28X16C>
- “Erdogan hopes new Turkey-Greece talks will herald new era”, *Reuters*, January 12, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-greece-erdogan-int-idUSKBN29H1NL>
- [18] Republic of Turkey: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Press Release Regarding the Exploratory Talks Between Turkey and Greece”, No:13, January 11, 2021. https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-13_-turkiye-ile-yunanistan-arasinda-istiksafi-gorusemeler-hk.en.mfa
- [19] Tuvan Gumrukcu, “Erdogan says Turkey will carry on searching for gas in Mediterranean”, *Reuters*, July 2, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-says-turkey-will-carry-searching-gas-mediterranean-2021-07-02/>
- [20] Security Council 8824th meeting, July 23, 2021. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14586.doc.htm>
- [21] Aurélien Denizeau, “Mavi Vatan, the “Blue Homeland” The Origins, Influences and Limits of an Ambitious Doctrine for Turkey”, , *Études de l’Ifri*, April 2021, 8-11
- [21b] Council of the E.U., “Turkey's illegal drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean: EU puts two persons on sanctions list”, Press Release, February 27, 2020. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/02/27/turkey-s-illegal-drilling-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-eu-puts-two-persons-on-sanctions-list/>
- [22] Mehmet Ugur, “Deconstructing European appeasement of dictatorship in Turkey: Policy change is required urgently”, PB21-2018, University of Greenwich
- [23] Gul Tuysuz, Martin Goillandau and Zamira Rahim, “France condemns 'unacceptable' comments from Turkey's Erdogan and recalls ambassador”, *CNN*, October 26, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/25/europe/erdogan-macron-france-muslims-intl/index.html>

THE EU IN STORMY WATERS: HOW TO EASE THE TENSIONS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN?

[24] “Turkey expresses annoyance with EU after Berlin statement”, Kathimerini, August 28, 2020.

<https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/256351/turkey-expresses-annoyance-with-eu-after-berlin-statements/>

[25] European Council Conclusions on External Relations, June 24, 2021.

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/06/25/european-council-conclusions-on-external-relations-24-june-2021/>

[26] “Statement by Prime Minister Erdogan following the signing of continental shelf delimitation agreement between Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus”, Republic of Turkey: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 21, 2011. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/statement-by-prime-minister-erdogan-following-the-signing-of-continental-shelf-delimitation-agreement-between-turkey-and-the-tur.en.mfa>

[27] Vincent L. Morelli, “Cyprus: Reunification Proving Elusive”, *Congressional Research Service*, Updated April 15, 2019

[28] Mustafa Kutluay and Ziya Öniş, “Turkish foreign policy in a post-western order: strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence?” *International Affairs*, Volume 97, Issue 4, July 2021, 1099 <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab094>