

THE EVOLUTION OF TURKIYE'S AMBITIONS IN THE WIDER MEDITERRANEAN AND ITS POSSIBLE EFFECTS ON ITALY

Project Report

Aurora Ianni, Nisa Mammadova,
Aylin Ünver Noi and
Valeria Giannotta (Coordinator)

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THE EVOLUTION OF TÜRKİYE'S AMBITIONS IN THE WIDER MEDITERRANEAN AND ITS POSSIBLE EFFECTS ON ITALY

Türkiye's agenda in the wider Mediterranean has been experiencing unprecedented de-escalation with historical competitors since 2021. Recently, from the MENA to the Caucasus, from Israel and Greece to the Arab Gulf, Ankara's strategic and national interest has been matching with rapprochement processes and regional stability. Its role as mediator in the war in Ukraine has also helped Türkiye regaining credibility at the Western eyes, undermined in recent years by several issues linked to both Ankara's domestic governance and foreign policy. Meanwhile Türkiye has retained close relations with Moscow. Although it is unclear whether this balancing act can be sustainable in the longer term, Ankara's normalization stance is overall aimed at paying off in terms of diplomacy, trade, and economy. This could mark a new course both for the country strained by internal economic crisis and the whole region, opening for new margins of opportunities also to the EU and Italy.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2021, key players in the wider Mediterranean have shown new regional and foreign policy dynamics. After the announced U.S. disengagement from the MENA region, negotiations, rapprochement, de-escalation have become determining factors in bilateral and regional relations. Furthermore, Türkiye has entered a new phase of normalization with its historical competitors. In the wake of the al-Ula agreement and after years of intense hostility with some Gulf countries, Ankara has normalized relations first with the UAE and then with Saudi Arabia. Recently, following the Arab League member states' decision to welcome Syria back into the organization and the increasing pressure of the refugee issue in Türkiye, a road map for normalization of relations between Türkiye and Syria has come to the agenda. Also, after years of crises in the Eastern Mediterranean, Türkiye has started negotiations with Israel, as well as it engaged in a constructive dialogue with Egypt. The twin earthquakes that hit the southeastern part of Türkiye last February, labeled as 'the disaster of the Century', led to the 'earthquake diplomacy' between Türkiye and Greece by easing tension between two countries as well as by accomplishing a full diplomatic rapprochement with Tel Aviv. Besides, as spillover of the Azeri-Turkish victory in Nagorno Karabakh, talks have resumed with Armenia.

In these *look-for-stability* dynamics, there is also the more recent role played by Ankara in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. While condemning the Russian offensive toward Ukraine and granting defense support to Kiev, Ankara has been acting as a mediator, attempting to preserve its strategic interests. Although Türkiye, as a NATO member, has traditionally performed the function of containing Russia in the Alliance's southeastern flank to maintain regional balances, Turkish-Russian diplomatic and economic relations have increased in the last decades. Indeed, Türkiye and Russia have been working to transform their century long political disputes into a geo-economic partnership. From the 2000s onwards, there have been improvements in the diplomatic relations aiming at expanding trade volume; high level visits between leaders of both countries; energy cooperation agreements, also in the nuclear field. More recently, in situations of conflict and conflicting interests, such as in the Syrian, Libyan, and Caucasian chessboards, the cooperation between Ankara and

Moscow has shown itself to be compartmentalized, proving a sort of diplomatic flexibility aimed at avoiding a direct confrontation while preserving the own legitimate interests.

Indeed, Türkiye's close relations with Moscow as well as the strategic alliance - despite its ups and downs with the US - pivot on the assumption of national interests' protection with bilateral connotation and specific regional effects. Hence, they must be read in a proportionally inverse logic: the closer Türkiye gets to Russia, the more the tensions with the West and Washington increase.

Ankara's autonomy and its 'free rider' stance within the Atlantic alliance and in the Western design, has created pockets of tensions mainly regarding the credibility of Türkiye as strategic ally and partner. Overall, along the Western sanctions on Russia, Türkiye has opted for their circumvention in the scope of maintaining open the channels of dialogue with Moscow while protecting its own national interests. That has inevitably led to a crisis of confidence from and towards the West, tied to Türkiye also by multilateral principles and scopes mainly pivoting on defense and collective security. However, despite the harsh nationalist rhetoric adopted as well for electoral purposes, more recently along the visit of the Ukrainian leader Zelensky to Istanbul, President Erdoğan hinted at a certain change of trend, reiterating his support for Kiev also in the perspective of Ukraine NATO accession. Furthermore, in a sort of surprise move, Türkiye has freed and handed back some Ukrainian soldiers captured during the hostilities and held in custody upon Russia's request. A gesture which, in addition to the strong symbolic connotation, raises some questions regarding a possible change of gear in the Turkish relations with Russia and consequently towards the West.

Therefore, the current regional dynamics, from the war in the Black Sea, to the normalization processes in the MENA and the pending energy issues in the Mediterranean, prompt due reflection on the current and future role of Ankara within the West and European architecture, also concerning Italy's interest.

This research paper is mainly the result of a series of roundtables, which gathered prominent institution representatives, scholars and area experts aiming at discussing Turkish role in the current Russia-Ukraine War, by entangling the recent evolution of the Turkish ambitions in the wider Mediterranean and its impact on Ankara's relations with the main international players. A special focus has been dedicated to the crucial energy issue, as Türkiye aims at arising as an energy hub. Also, a session deeply analyzes Türkiye's normalization process in the region. The events had been held regularly behind closed doors during the first semester of year 2023, thanks to the support of the Analysis, Programming, Statistics and Historical Documentation Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International cooperation. The round tables took place under the roof of the project *The evolution of Turkish ambitions in the wider Mediterranean, between normalization processes, energy issues and the relations with Moscow. What are the impacts in the strategic partnership with Italy?* carried out by CeSPI and the Department of Political Science and International Relations of the Haliç University of Istanbul.

1 A PLANE WITH TWO WINGS: TÜRKIYE'S APPROACH TO THE WAR IN UKRAINE

1.1 Türkiye's interests and balancing diplomacy

In the last year and a half of Russia-Ukraine conflict, Türkiye has been playing a delicate balancing act. Since the very beginning, Ankara classified the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a war, activating Article 19 of the Montreux Convention¹, hence closing the passage through the straits to both Russian and Ukrainian warships. Furthermore, Ankara urged non-coastal countries - including NATO members - not to send warships to the Black Sea, putting into effect the restrictions outlined in Article 21 of the Convention.²

After these developments, and almost throughout 2022, Ankara, based on its NATO membership and its bilateral relations with Moscow, adopted a facilitator discourse and approach. While Türkiye refrained in adopting the Western sanctions against Moscow and kept its air-space open to carrying passengers from and to Russia as well as for evacuating diplomatic and humanitarian crew from Ukraine, the contacts with both warring parties have never interrupted, also thanks to the personal relations of President Erdoğan's with his counterparts.

Erdogan's regular meetings and calls with Putin and Zelensky aimed at keeping the dialogue open as well as protecting Turkish interests and easing the mediations. These diplomatic efforts include both the initiatives and deals for the opening of humanitarian corridors and the prisoner swaps between Moscow and Kyiv. Moreover, bringing together Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kuleba and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov within the framework of the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in 2022, as well as the meeting of Russian and Ukrainian delegations in Istanbul on March 29th, are the direct results of Türkiye's active mediation policy. Furthermore, the Grain Deal signed in July 2022, which agreed to open a safe maritime humanitarian corridor in the Black Sea,³ was a step acknowledged by UN as an international success made possible thanks to Ankara's leverage.⁴ Thus, so far Ankara has managed to pursue a balancing diplomacy regarding its relations with Russia and its Western allies.

However, Türkiye's mediator role lies on specific reasons. Indeed, Türkiye's support to Ukraine dates back to years before the conflict. Ankara has been supporting the cause of Ukraine's territorial integrity and independence since the occupation and annexation of Crimea in 2014. Those occupied lands are of great importance to Türkiye, both historically and symbolically, and still evoke a vivid memory in the social psychology of the country. Ever since the Ottoman Empire extended to the modern southern Ukraine, including the port city of Odessa, then known as Hacibey, there is evidence of great tensions that culminated in the conquest by Imperial Russian forces in the Russo-Turkish War of 1787-1791. Although Crimea had already been conquered by the Russians in 1783, the defeat ushered in gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire. Historically, the Black Sea represents

¹ To the Convention in full see <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/1936-Convention-Regarding-the-Regime-of-the-Straits-1.pdf>

² Art, 21: "Should Turkey consider herself to be threatened with imminent danger of war she shall have the right to apply the provisions of Article 20 [In time of war, Turkey being belligerent, the provisions of Articles 10 to 18 shall not be applicable; the passage of warships shall be left entirely to the discretion of the Turkish Government]. of the present Convention. *Ibid.*

³ To go into depth see UN News, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1126811>

⁴ DAILY SABAH, *Turkey, UN-brokered landmark grain deal sealed to ease food crisis*, July 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkey-un-brokered-landmark-grain-deal-sealed-to-ease-food-crisis>

the scenario of the great rivalry between Türkiye and Russia and in this context the strong bond of Ankara with the Tatar community of Crimea is inserted. In other words, this needs to be intended as a crucial factor in the support granted to Ukraine in the repeated crises with Russia. Indeed, the Tatars are a Sunni Muslim community who speak a Turkish dialect and which over the centuries, due to repression and mass expulsions, have been reduced to a minority. Türkiye, therefore, stands as guarantor of the Tatars and it has sheltered many of them from the eruption of hostilities.

Moreover, the ties between Kiev and Ankara strengthened over the past years, especially in terms of security and military cooperation. Already in 2019 Ukraine became the second customer of Turkish drones (following Qatar) and in 2020 Türkiye and Ukraine signed military cooperation agreements in Istanbul⁵. In a time when the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was putting a strain on Türkiye's relations with Russia, the moves came as an effort to counterbalance Russia's dominance in the Black Sea region. Then, shortly before the war in Ukraine, along Erdoğan's visit to Kiev in early February 2022, Türkiye and Ukraine signed several agreements including the establishment of a factory and production facility in Ukraine aiming at transferring technology for the manufacturing of Bayraktar TB2 arm drones and incorporating it into Ukrainian industry. Hence, both Ukrainian army and navy used Turkish drones. Based on the statements of the Turkish Bayraktar officials, the company is still providing support to the existing TB2 fleet of Ukrainian forces making updates to the softwares and providing operational support. Both in terms of defense industry, foreign policy and at the psychological level, TB2 has become indeed a symbol of Turkish-Ukrainian cooperation.

At the same time, Türkiye has maintained working relations with Russia. Türkiye and Russia have been working to transform their century long political disputes into a geo-economic partnership. From the 2000s onwards there have been improvements in the diplomatic relations including expanding trade volume, high level visits between leaders of both countries, cooperation agreement in the nuclear fields. Over time, relations between the parts have been based on sectorial understandings that aim to protect mutual economic and strategic interests, without excluding competition or direct confrontation. Indeed, the political and security dimensions of bilateral relations have become inseparable from issues concerning Syria, Libya, the Black Sea, and, of course, the Caucasus. These developments, which directly affects Türkiye's relations with Ukraine and Russia, as well as Türkiye's concerns regarding the Black Sea and energy security, has prompted Ankara to respond by condemning Moscow's actions and emphasizing Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. However, Türkiye did not participate in the economic/trade sanctions imposed on Russia by EU countries and the United States. This move reflects Türkiye's strategic approach, which considered, along with its deepening relations with Russia in various fields and the regional dynamics, its own national interest. It is also a cordial relation entangling different complementarities as well as some points of friction, which Moscow and Ankara have managed to bypass diplomatically when necessary. President Erdoğan's more recent decision to release and hand to Zelensky five Ukrainian soldiers held in custody upon Russian request might also cause a stir, although it has to be considered as part of the balancing diplomacy characterizing the Turkish administration, which is well aware of the consequences that Türkiye could suffer from cooling off the relations with Moscow, as it happened in the past. Hence, behind this highly symbolic and cosmetic move may lie a silent agreement concerning other scenarios, where the interests of Russia and Türkiye overlap albeit with competitive logics, such as Syria.

⁵ See VOA news, *Turkey, Ukraine Sign Military Cooperation Agreements*, October 2020. https://www.voanews.com/a/europe_turkey-ukraine-sign-military-cooperation-agreements/6197240.html

A notable topic in Türkiye-Russia bilateral relations is the trade volume between the two countries that has nearly increased by 50 percent recently. And the energy imports from Russia play a significant role in this growth. The quantity of petroleum products imported by Ankara from Russia has doubled⁶ since Ankara was not involved in the sanctions imposed by Western countries. This increase signifies Türkiye becoming an alternative market and supplier for Russia, which has faced significant limitations in trade with the West. While this is considered a success and a positive outcome for the Turkish economy, the potential political challenges it may create in relations with the West should also be considered. On the one hand, since Türkiye is not a member of the European Union, it claims not to be obliged to transpose EU sanctions into its local law as well as to impose them on Russia.⁷ On the other, the fatigue in advancing the accession negotiation to the EU, while directly affecting the EU influence on Türkiye's decisions, lessens the European leverage on Ankara.

1.2 Türkiye, Sweden & Finland's NATO accession

With the outbreak of the war in the Black Sea, Sweden, together with Finland, decided to abandon the non-alignment stance and apply for NATO membership. As a member of NATO for 71 years, Türkiye has always supported NATO's open-door policy and its enlargement with new members. Ankara has traditionally supported countries that now comprise the eastern flank of NATO, from Poland and Hungary to Albania and North Macedonia to enter the organization. Türkiye supports the NATO membership prospects of Ukraine, Georgia and Balkan countries and has also developed strong military partnership with some of these countries. However, this time Türkiye expressed its reservation, conditioning its green light, among the other things, to a firmer line to be taken by Scandinavian countries against PKK and other groups⁸ identified by Türkiye as major threats to its own security. In June 2022, Finland and Sweden signed a memorandum⁹ with Türkiye to address Ankara's security concerns, and from that time on various meetings have been held between officials and diplomats to discuss its implementation. In March 2023, Türkiye lifted its veto on Finland access to NATO, but the way was not as paved for Sweden's membership. Indeed, although considering Sweden anti-terrorism law adopted in June 2023, Erdoğan has repeatedly blamed Sweden for not countering PKK activities and for sheltering members of FETÖ, the group associated with Fetullah Gülen, and considered by Ankara as terrorist organisation after the coup attempt of July 15, 2016. Nevertheless, in unexpected move, Erdoğan gave green light on Sweden accession on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Vilnius, upon the creation of a bilateral security mechanism. This happens after intense negotiations with the United States, and most recently after a phone call followed by a meeting with President Biden.

⁶ See Euronews, *Türkiye'nin Rusya'dan Petrol İthalatı Geçen Yıla göre İkiye Katlandı*, August 2022, <https://tr.euronews.com/2022/08/22/turkiyenin-rusyadan-petrol-ithalati-gecen-yila-gore-ikiye-katlandi>.

⁷ Türkiye's accession negotiation to the EU was officially launched in 2005. However, the process is de facto frozen since 2016. To go into depth in EU-Turkey relations see Giannotta V. Ianni A., Açıkgöz M, *The refugee issue in Turkey's relations with the EU*, CeSPI Research Report, May 2021, https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/osservatori/allegati/the_refugee_issue_in_turkeys_relations_with_the_eu_-_may_2021.pdf

⁸ The Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the associated People's Defense Units (YPG), along with FETÖ.

⁹ To go into depth on the topic see G. Wilson, P. Dost, *How to close the gap between Turkey and Sweden on NATO enlargement*, Atlantic Council, April 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/how-to-close-the-gap-between-turkey-and-sweden-on-nato-enlargement/>

Beyond security, the issue of NATO enlargement to Sweden is indeed of outmost importance also for USA-Türkiye relations. Türkiye might have a way to get beyond the S-400/F35 crisis and potentially obtain the purchasing of F-16 from the USA. Indeed, in October 2021 Türkiye requested to buy \$20 billion of Lockheed Martin Corp F-16 fighters and nearly 80 modernization kits for its existing warplanes.¹⁰ Moreover, one of the conditions added to the trilateral memorandum signed between Türkiye, Sweden and Finland at NATO Madrid Summit in 2022 was to lift direct and indirect arms embargo they imposed on Türkiye.¹¹ Both Finland and Sweden fulfilled this condition and made necessary regulatory amendments not to impose arms embargo on Türkiye. However, part of the US Congress linked the F16 sale to Türkiye with NATO accession bids of Sweden and Finland.¹² Despite Biden administration supports to the F-16 sale to Türkiye and Türkiye's greenlighting the Swedish membership, it is to be seen if the Congress will ease its former opposition due to disagreements between Türkiye and the US over Russia and Northern Syria, pending issues between Türkiye and Greece and US concern on Turkish domestic sphere.¹³

That said, the negotiation with Sweden, has also led to an increase in the stakes by Ankara which has expressly asked for further support from Stockholm in re-energizing relations between Türkiye and the European Union with specific reference to the resumption of negotiations and above all to the liberalization of entry visas for Turkish citizens, a dossier that was discussed in Vilnius as well with EU chief Michel.

1.3 Two-chairs approach

Türkiye *sitting in the two chairs* has paid off but some questions on the sustainability of this approach arise not only regarding Türkiye's policy and international stance, but also considering the internal political developments both in Russia and US, the frictions between the two countries and the bilateral relations between Türkiye and both the US and Russia.

On the one hand, Türkiye is counterbalancing Russian regional power; also, Türkiye's role in Ukraine's defense, Ankara's rapprochement with Israel and de-escalation with Greece and its greenlighting on Sweden's NATO enlargement, are signs that US can rely on Türkiye, if this positive attitude remains on track. Besides, Türkiye is a NATO member and a candidate country to the European Union. Türkiye's mediation efforts in many regions from the Balkans to the Black Sea and Caucasus also means a greater consolidation of the Euro Atlantic community in these areas and a contribution to stability in the whole region. In turn, Ankara looks for security guarantees particularly concerning its southern border. While considering the thaw between Ankara and Damascus, marked by the high-level talks held in Moscow last April and May at the presence of Iran, Syria, Russia and Türkiye defense and foreign ministers, many matters of concern remain open for Türkiye. The refugee issue, the military bases of Russia and Iran in Syria, and the PKK presence in both Northern Syria and Iraq are hot topics in Turkish neighboring agenda.

¹⁰ See Patricia Zengerle, *Senior US lawmaker wants change from Turkey before F-16 sale approval*, Reuters, May 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/senior-us-lawmaker-wants-change-turkey-before-f-16-sale-approval-2023-05-31/>

¹¹ According to trilateral memorandum, "defence exports from Finland and Sweden will be conducted in line with Alliance solidarity".

¹² To go into depth, see Zanotti J., Clayton T., Parrish P., *Turkey (Türkiye): Possible U.S. Sale of F-16 Aircraft*, Congressional Research Service, June 2023. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47493>

¹³ *Ibid.*

On the other hand, Ankara has maintained strong diplomatic, trade, tourism, and other relations with Russia, that go beyond mutual sympathy between the two heads of state and their national-populist rhetoric in politics. During last year, Russians opened more than 1,300 new companies in Türkiye.¹⁴ In addition, Russia is Türkiye's major energy supplier. With the operationalization of TurkStream in 2022, Türkiye's natural gas imports from Russia have continued to increase. Despite some delays in the construction of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, which is one of the main symbols of energy cooperation between the two, the commissioning of the first unit of the plant is expected to take place in 2023. Nowadays, Erdoğan needs to ailing Türkiye's economy and the deepening of economic and energy ties with Russia is part of this effort. Thus, while considering the existence of different strategic interests and areas of competition, until now the two leaders have opted to find sectorial agreements in what can be defined as a compartmentalized relation. Although considering the latest tensions triggered by Türkiye's decision to allow Ukrainian commanders to return home and the results of Vilnius NATO summit, Moscow seems to remain committed in maintaining mutually beneficial relations with Ankara, despite disagreements.¹⁵

That said, Ankara's autonomy, and its 'free rider' stance may risk creating pockets of tension in the longer term, in one direction or the other, also when it comes to its future into the European architecture. Indeed, while according to the latest developments, the Vilnius NATO summit has apparently brought Türkiye closer to the West potentially opening momentum for re-energizing EU-Türkiye relations, the EU membership is still a long way to go.

2 ENERGY ISSUES, AIMS AND POLICIES

2.1 Türkiye, the EU, and the issue of energy cooperation

Suddenly after the war in Ukraine the issue of energy security has become prominent not just for EU's needs, but also for Türkiye's aspiration to become a leading actor in the sector. EU's commitment to diversification from Russian fossil fuels, and the efforts to rely on other energy suppliers, as the United States, Norway, Azerbaijan, Algeria among the others, have strengthened Türkiye's stance and pride on its potential future role as energy trade center.

First in October 2022, Minister Çavuşoğlu declared Ankara's readiness and capacity to be an energy hub for natural gas headed to Europe,¹⁶ which came as a response to Russian President's proposal for creating a gas base in Türkiye to redirect supplies and export them to the European market. Two months later, in December, Energy and Natural Resources Minister Fatih Dönmez said Türkiye aims to shape the project of making the country an energy hub within one year.¹⁷ In this framework lie several moves including the agreement between Türkiye and Bulgaria for the

¹⁴ See Stefanie Glinski, *Turkey's Balancing Act Between Putin and the West*, Foreign Policy, March 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/06/turkey-elections-russia-erdogan-putin-nato/>

¹⁵ See G. Jones, *Kremlin says Turkey should have no illusions over its EU bid*, REUTERS, July 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/kremlin-says-turkey-should-have-no-illusions-over-its-eu-bid-2023-07-11/>

¹⁶ ANADOLU AGENCY, *Türkiye already has capacity to become natural gas hub: FM*, October 2022 <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkiye-already-has-capacity-to-become-natural-gas-hub-fm-12783533>

¹⁷ ÖZER D. A., *Türkiye aims to shape energy hub project within a year: Minister*, Daily Sabah, December 2022. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/energy/turkiye-aims-to-shape-energy-hub-project-within-a-year-minister>

transmission of up to 1.5 billion cubic meters of natural gas a year within the next 13-year period, signed in January 2023,¹⁸ and the resumed talks with Turkmenistan to develop infrastructure for supplying Turkmenistan's gas to Europe.¹⁹

With its geographical position at the juncture of Europe, Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Türkiye is already a transit country for the energy market, but transforming into an energy hub needs a lot of work, including “diversification of routes and suppliers; independence in decision-making through an independent institution; market demand and supply that determine prices; and political will of potential partners to get involved in the projects”²⁰. These pillars imply a high degree of liberal approach that seem far to be reached, as of today. Apart from the technical aspects, there are also two major issues to be dealt with, while considering the potential expansion of Türkiye's role in the energy market, namely its energy relations with the EU, and EU's pushing for diversification.

Energy has always been part of EU-Türkiye relations, especially considering the EU energy dependency on Russia's gas and Türkiye's dream of becoming a corridor or energy hub. However, over the years, the Turkish-European cooperation on energy did not develop beyond TANAP. Before the war in Ukraine, indeed, the main possible investment from the EU side would have been the opening of the energy chapter in the accession process and, possibly, closing it. The move would have facilitated the process of reforms in Türkiye and anchored Ankara to Brussels, with a potential long-term impact. However, things went other way as tensions between the parts arose especially due to internal developments in Türkiye and the issues in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is worth mentioning that the last ministerial meeting under the EU-Türkiye High-Level Energy Dialogue took place in January 2016²¹. Now, after the Russian aggression and the regained importance of Türkiye for the stability of the region, dialogues could be resumed between Ankara and Brussels, bearing in mind, however, that despite the existing Türkiye-Russia cooperation on the TürkStream pipeline project, it is unlikely that Europe will waive its commitment to end its dependency from Russia's energy. In addition, while considering the relevance of the Southern Gas Corridor, it seems that the diversification of supply routes through a pipeline via Türkiye is no longer on the EU's agenda, when looking at the long-term. The EU continue to implement the 55 package and it is still on its way to reach climate neutrality by implementing the Green Deal.

2.2 Prospects for energy relations in the long-term

Both the EU and Türkiye, although for different reasons, are working on two levels, namely diversifying energy partners while continuing their transition into green energy. While in the short-term there will be a huge need for fossil fuels still playing a strong role in the energy mix worldwide, relations between EU and Türkiye on energy should invest in the long-term perspective.

¹⁸ Hurriyet Daily News, *Türkiye on its way to become energy hub: Minister*, January 2023. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkiye-on-its-way-to-become-energy-hub-minister-179922>

¹⁹ Museyibova N. A., *Turkmenistan Considers Sending Natural Gas Supplies to Europe*, The Jamestown Foundation, May 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/turkmenistan-considers-sending-natural-gas-supplies-to-europe/>

²⁰ Yevgeniya Gaber, *Turkey can become an energy hub—but not by going all-in on Russian gas*, Atlantic Council, December 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/turkey-can-become-an-energy-hub-but-not-by-going-all-in-on-russian-gas/>

²¹ *Ibid.*

Thus, even considering that energy transition is not done overnight and that the capacity of TANAP could hypothetically be increased, energy cooperation based on fossil fuels is going to lose its importance. And that could open new prospects in Türkiye -EU energy cooperation, by investing on renewables. To achieve decarbonization, energy services currently based on fossil fuels must be replaced by climate-neutral alternatives, and electricity powered by renewables and hydrogen may be essential for this process. For the energy transition to be successful the EU need to meet increased demand for green energy and to do so it needs to rely on its neighbors, including Türkiye. On its side, Türkiye must expand the cooperation focusing on future energy, such as renewable energy and green hydrogen also because decarbonization would be an economic and strategic requirement for Türkiye in terms of trade relations with the EU. The introduction of the CBAM put the Turkish government in kind of urgency to implement the Green Deal Action Plan²², a roadmap to support the green transformation in all relevant policy areas.

Also, Türkiye has excellent resources including above average sunlight hours and one of the best wind corridors in Europe, second to Scotland. In this regard, it might turn into the leading growth area for renewables in Europe and contribute cooperation in the development of renewable energies. Agreements that started with German firm Siemens Gamesa's consortium with Turkish partners that won the first 1GW capacity wind tender in Türkiye in 2017 is a good example of political will to develop renewables with European partners and a potential for new FDI or joint projects for European partners.

Indeed, energy transition creates economic opportunities not only for operators, but also for the prosperity and development of the region. The Mediterranean, especially the Eastern Mediterranean, has great potential for green energy, such as wind and solar power, and can become a potential basin for green hydrogen. Moreover, the Mediterranean is a strategic route for cable data and electricity, together with natural gas. Although there have been many developments on the infrastructure side in recent years, there is still much potential for collaboration and cooperation between different countries and stakeholders to invest in green energy infrastructure projects that would benefit the whole region, but existing challenges need to be addressed for that to come.

²² The Green Deal Action Plan of Türkiye published in the Official Gazette dated 16 July 2021, was developed to comply with the policies of combating global climate change and to support green transformation designed in alignment with the European Green Deal. See <https://www.trade.gov.tr/exports/green-action-plan>

3 TÜRKIYE'S REGIONAL NORMALIZATION: THE CONTINUITY OF AN AMBITIOUS PATH?

3.1 *Normalization: the golden line of Turkish agenda*

Erdoğan's re-election in May 2023 leads to questions about the future roadmap of Türkiye, especially in terms of foreign policy. Since the main contours of Türkiye's agenda in both the regional and international landscape have been based on Turkish national interests, strategic autonomy and balancing stance between the main international powers, it has to be seen what will become of Türkiye's regional normalization process in the near future, by bearing in mind that also the regional policy of the main international players, including USA, Russia, and Iran, can shape this path.

Starting from the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 the Middle East have witnessed unprecedented de-escalation among key regional rivals. Türkiye has been gradually reapproaching with several regional actors including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt after years of tensions on many issues, including Ankara's backing political Islam in the region and its strengthened relations with Qatar during the Gulf crisis.

Also, in the last years, Türkiye's advocating for regime change in Syria tightened its relations with Damascus and its defense of the Palestinian cause froze relations with Israel. Türkiye had also long-time dispute with Armenia due to Yerevan genocide claims and its occupation of Nagorno Karabakh. Relations with Greece, traditionally very tense due to a lot of issues, including disagreements on delimitation of territorial waters; the continental shelf and airspace; Cyprus; the hydrocarbon exploration activities in contested waters between Athens, Nicosia and Ankara; the militarization of Aegean Islands; and the mutual accusation of airspace violations, further worsened in the last decade. Moreover, the bilateral agreements signed between Greece and the Mediterranean countries at odds with Türkiye (i.e., Egypt and Israel), resulted in Ankara's isolation from the region and its exclusion from the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum.

However, more recently, a combination of domestic, regional, and international factors has facilitated unexpected "Mediterranean" rapprochement. The Abraham accords; the change in the US administration in 2020; the Al-Ula agreement ending the 2017 Gulf crisis; the economic impact of Covid19, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the two earthquakes hitting southeastern Türkiye are among the many factors that have changed Ankara's foreign policy approach by facilitating the rapprochement with neighboring countries.

Therefore, Türkiye did not fall behind the new trend, which is normalization process in the MENA region, as we have witnessed the final version of it when the decades old hostile states - Saudi Arabia and Iran – signed a China brokered deal to repair ties. In this, economic and geopolitical issues have played a crucial role as Türkiye seeks to diversify its economy and exploring new economic partnerships in both regional and international landscapes to ail its economy, to rehabilitate in the eyes of Washington and to improve its position in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the whole region.

3.2 Türkiye- Israel

Türkiye's rapprochement to **Israel**, started during Bennet-Lapid governments, should be read in this framework. Indeed, whether Türkiye-Israel relations have known numerous ups and downs during Erdoğan's power due but not limited to Israeli policies towards Palestinians, within the last two years dialogue was reopened, full diplomatic ties were restored and a boost in security, economic and energy cooperation is underway. Türkiye is important to Israel's security for allowing closer Israeli intelligence monitoring of Iran.²³ In addition, while energy cooperation still needs to be explored, including the chance for the setting of a natural gas pipeline carrying Israeli gas to Türkiye, Israel has proven to be a profitable partner in terms of economic cooperation. Indeed, according to the United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade, Türkiye export to Israel was US\$7.03 Billion during 2022, compared to US\$4.7 of 2020.²⁴ Furthermore, with regard to tourism, there has been a boost in exchanges with 632,000 Israelis visiting Türkiye in the period between January and September 2022, an increase of 448% compared to the previous year, according to Al-Monitor.²⁵ In this framework, it is of utmost importance the 2022 aviation agreement between the two countries, paving the way for Israeli airlines to resume flights to Türkiye.²⁶

While considering the future of Türkiye-Israeli normalization path with due caution under Netanyahu's leadership, the moves close to and after Erdoğan re-election suggest the process is still underway. By now and even after the Israeli operations in Gaza and the tensions around the holy places in Jerusalem during the last few months, relations have not deteriorated²⁷ and both President Herzog and PM Netanyahu were among the first leaders to congratulate Erdoğan's victory, expressing their hope for further deepening relations between the two countries.²⁸

3.3 Türkiye- Gulf Monarchies

With interdependence and stability becoming the basis of regional rapprochement, Türkiye has also nurtured relationships with other actors of the Middle East and Gulf chessboard.

As of the UAE, the two parties have been exchanging high level bilateral visits since 2021, soon after the resolution of the Gulf crisis. It is no coincidence that this happened not long after the UAE-Tel Aviv rapprochement, namely with the US-backed Abraham Accords, that also opened the UAE a window for potential opportunities in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the edge of US 'disengagement' from the region the bilateral agenda between UAE and Türkiye has thus been centered on the need to diversify partners and allies, and on the mutual advantages on trade, investments, and business relations. Both countries have signed a lot of agreements on defense and security, but most importantly cooperation strengthened on the economic ground. In 2022, trade

²³ See Steven A. Cook, *How Israel and Turkey Benefit From Restoring Relations*, August 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-israel-and-turkey-benefit-restoring-relations>

²⁴ See <https://comtradeplus.un.org/>

²⁵ See Rina Bassist, *Israel quick to congratulate Turkey's Erdogan, expects boost in ties*, Al Monitor, May 2023. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/05/israel-quick-congratulate-turkeys-erdogan-expects-boost-ties>

²⁶ DAILY SABAH, *Israel ratifies aviation deal with Türkiye in 'strategic step'*, September 2022. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/transportation/israel-ratifies-aviation-deal-with-turkiye-in-strategic-step>

²⁷ See Amos Yadlin, Pazit Ravina, Nimrod Goren, *Turkey-Israel Relations on the Upswing*, The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune, June 2023, <https://jstribune.com/turkey-israel-relations-on-the-upswing/>

²⁸ See Rina Bassist, op cit.

between the two countries reached \$19 billion²⁹. In March 2023, Türkiye and the UAE agreed on a trade deal aiming to increase their mutual trade volume³⁰. A commitment that was confirmed after Türkiye presidential election. At the beginning of June, the two governments ratified the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, with the goal of increasing bilateral non-oil trade to exceed \$40 billion annually over the next five years.³¹

The al Ula Accords as well as the full re-engagement between Türkiye and the UAE also paved the way to easing relations between Ankara and Riyadh, heavily worsened after the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the kingdom's Istanbul consulate in October 2018. After the halt of the trial in absentia of Saudi suspects accused of playing a role in the journalist's murder and the case transfer to the Kingdom³², Erdoğan visited Saudi Arabia for a landmark visit in April 2022, seeking financial support during a domestic crisis fueled by the collapse of its currency and soaring inflation³³. Then, in June 2022 Mohammad Bin Salman visited Türkiye to fully restore ties. The volume of bilateral trade between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia jumped from SR17 billion (\$4.52 billion) in 2017 to SR23 billion in 2022,³⁴ with key sectors demanding more attention such as trade, business, investment, tourism, energy, infrastructure, technology, and defense. Indeed, relations could be facilitated with Türkiye economic recovery and shared investments, also in the light of Saudi's diversification agenda 'Vision 2030'. Türkiye can thus play an important role for GCC economies across many sectors, from entertainment to tourism, food production and construction and for the transition from hydrocarbons.³⁵

Following these premises, in March 2023 the Saudi Fund for Development announced to deposit \$5 billion in the Central Bank of Türkiye to support Türkiye's efforts in boosting economy³⁶. Also, to cement ties, oil giant Saudi ARAMCO met with around 80 Turkish contractors to discuss \$50 billion worth of potential projects in the kingdom including planning refinery, pipeline, management buildings and other infrastructure construction.³⁷

²⁹ İbrahim Karataş, *The Gulf's Spirit of Rapprochement Grips Turkey and the UAE*, The Gulf International Forum, <https://gulffif.org/the-gulfs-spirit-of-rapprochement-grips-turkey-and-the-uae/>

³⁰ AL MONITOR, *Turkey, UAE ink free trade deal in latest thaw*, March 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/turkey-uae-ink-free-trade-deal-latest-thaw>

³¹ Khitam Al Amir, *UAE, Turkey sign comprehensive economic partnership agreement*, Gulf News, June 2023, <https://gulfnnews.com/business/economy/uae-turkey-sign-comprehensive-economic-partnership-agreement-1.1685564108191>

³² Giorgio Cafiero, *The Significance of Mohammed bin Salman's Trip to Turkey*, American Security Project, June 2022 <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/the-significance-of-mohammed-bin-salmans-trip-to-turkey/>

³³ AL JAZEERA, *Erdogan meets Saudi leaders in first visit since Khashoggi murder*, April 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/28/turkeys-erdogan-to-visit-saudi-arabia-relations-warn>

³⁴ ARAB NEWS, *Saudi-Turkiye trade volume to reach \$10bn in coming years, says Turkish minister*, March 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2271536/business-economy>

³⁵ See Emily Milliken and Giorgio Cafiero, *What does Erdogan's re-election mean for Turkey-Gulf relations?*, Al-Jazeera, June 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/6/what-does-erdogans-re-election-mean-for-turkey-gulf-relations>

³⁶ AL SHARQ STRATEGIC RESEARCH, *A Saudi Deposit and an Emirati Economic Agreement: Turkey Strengthens its Partnership with the Gulf States*, March 2023, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2023/03/14/a-saudi-deposit-and-an-emirati-economic-agreement-turkey-strengthens-its-partnership-with-the-gulf-states/>

³⁷ Jack Dutton, *With Saudi Aramco's \$50 billion deal, Turkey seeks less dependency on West*, June 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/06/saudi-aramcos-50-billion-deal-turkey-seeks-less-dependency-west>

3.4 *Türkiye – Egypt*

When it comes to **Egypt**, at odds with Türkiye since Sisi's raise to power in 2013, and for a variety of reasons from the Libyan dossier to the competition on the Eastern Mediterranean, recent high level bilateral visits have signed the path for rapprochement. In July, Türkiye and Egypt have appointed ambassadors to each other's capitals for the first time in a decade reflecting "the mutual will to develop bilateral relations in line with the interests of the Turkish and Egyptian peoples".³⁸ On the one hand, Egypt is in deep need of economic support and Türkiye can play a role in rehabilitating its state budget considering Ankara's role as top importer of Egyptian gas. The trade exchange between Türkiye and Egypt stands at around \$9.2bn with concrete prospect for growing.³⁹ On the other, the normalization with Egypt might unlock challenges in Libya and, according to some, Türkiye's positioning in the Eastern Mediterranean.

3.5 *Türkiye – Greece – Cyprus*

Some optimism for a kind of development in the traditional Eastern Mediterranean dynamics that isolated Türkiye into *a one against all* competition, has spread out following the regional response to the earthquake that hit Türkiye last February. So thus, in the so-called earthquake diplomacy, rivals extended their hand to Türkiye, including **Greece**, which was among the first to send aid, opening some hope for cooperation between the two. In his visit to Hatay in February, the then Greek Defense Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos announced that Greece and Türkiye agreed to develop an agenda based on good neighborly relations⁴⁰ and this positive stance was confirmed by the decision to cancel their scheduled military exercises in the Aegean Sea to hold small-scale training instead. With earthquake diplomacy undoubtedly warming ties between the two traditional competitors and facilitating de-escalation, the issues troubling the Aegean, including but not limited to the Cyprus issue, the disagreements on delimitation of maritime waters, and the status of the Dodecanese islands, among the others, remain still pending and a matter of concern for both the EU, which have two member States involved vis a vis a candidate country, and the USA who is NATO ally to both. For them to be solved indeed, together with the Parties' willingness, the issues around the Greece-Cyprus-Türkiye disputes need more than a bi/or/trilateral effort.

³⁸ See A. Samson, H. Saleh, *Turkey and Egypt upgrade diplomatic ties as relations thaw*, Financial Times, July, 2023 <https://www.ft.com/content/f8146ff3-e20c-459b-9915-8aeb4fbee32>

³⁹ See Mohamed Samir, *Turkey-Egypt trade exchange can rise to \$20bln within 10 years: Turkish Charge d'Affaires in Cairo*, Zawya, April 2023. <https://www.zawya.com/en/economy/north-africa/turkey-egypt-trade-exchange-can-rise-to-20bln-within-10-years-turkish-charge-daffaires-in-cairo-bv2ay5ct>

⁴⁰ Tasos Kokkinidis, *Greece and Turkey Cancel Military Exercises in the Aegean*, Greek reporter, May 2023 <https://greekreporter.com/2023/05/30/greece-turkey-cancel-military-exercises-aegean/>

3.6 *Türkiye - Armenia*

With Türkiye's role in the Eastern Mediterranean remaining an open scenario, Ankara's positioning in the Caucasus, the other energy-rich area of the region, is improving. **Armenian** Prime minister Pashinyan attended President Erdogan inauguration ceremony is the latest sign of a thaw between the two. Already in December 2021, a year after Armenia's defeat in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, the two countries appointed special envoys to help normalize relations.⁴¹ Moreover, in 2022, Türkiye and Armenia resumed their first commercial flights in two years.⁴² Reasons facilitating this rapprochement are many, including the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, which resulted into the collapse of any deterrence potential on the Russian side and in the deepest crisis between Yerevan and Moscow. The wider regional context might now be favorable and provide better chances of success for the normalization process as a win-win solution for all, with Türkiye deepening its regional influence and securing stability at its borders.

3.7 *Türkiye - Syria*

Last 22 June in Astana, it was declared that the main goal of the Astana group, which in 2017 brought together Russia, Iran and Türkiye to find a solution to the long-standing Syrian war, can be considered achieved for what concerns the creation of de-escalation zones and the end to the bloodshed. A declaration which, albeit surprisingly, placed the emphasis on the importance of the stabilization process, on the constructive spirit of the parties and on the need for a road map for full restoration of Türkiye-Syrian relations⁴³. However, nowadays not only divergent interests remain in Syria, but new pockets of tension are emerging. Although Damascus supports the need for Türkiye to produce a road map for its withdrawal from Syrian territories, there are many open challenges. Indeed, despite the rehabilitation of Syria in the Arab League and the recognition of Syrian territory sovereignty, the presence of Türkiye and the United States in the North and Northeast of the country make normalization process a slipper terrain, also for the much-debated issue of the voluntary returns. While considering that Türkiye is a hosting country, with 3,7 million Syrians in its territory, in recent years the fragile economic situation and the growing problems of social inclusion increased intolerance episodes and tensions against refugees. That was a highly debated topic in the recent Turkish presidential elections, which brought to light not only the nationalist spirit of the country but also the willingness to repatriate Syrians as a way for appeasing internal tensions. According to estimates, Türkiye has already repatriated around 553,000 Syrians⁴⁴ but the plan for voluntary returns

⁴¹ See AL-ARABYA NEWS, *Armenian PM to attend Erdogan's inauguration: Armenian government*, 2 June, 2023, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2023/06/02/Armenian-PM-to-attend-Erdogan-s-inauguration-Armenian-government>

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ B. Eruygur, *Astana meeting on Syria stresses importance of Türkiye-Syria normalization*, Anadol Agency, June 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/astana-meeting-on-syria-stresses-importance-of-turkiye-syria-normalization/2927879>

⁴⁴ See E. Basaran, *More than 550,000 Syrians returned to areas cleared of terrorism: Türkiye*, Anadol Agency, May 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/more-than-550-000-syrians-returned-to-areas-cleared-of-terrorism-turkiye/2906905>

is unfeasible without Syria's commitment for security guarantees to the returnees and without the building of a secure environment. By now, many doubts arise regarding the full stabilization of the country and normalization of relations. Russia is still controlling Syrian aerospace and there are still many Iran backed groups supporting Damascus military operations against the opponents. According to the Syrian Observatory on Human Rights (SOHR) escalations have been recently recorded in Idlib canton, where Russia and Türkiye created a buffer zone, along 2018 Sochi agreements⁴⁵. In other words, it seems that the hostilities have gained a new momentum with Russian air operations against some groups supported by Ankara against Damascus. Moreover, the Iranian militias are reinforcing their post around Deir az-Zor, where also US, that in Syria grants support to the YPG, considered by Ankara as a sister organization of the PKK and so a threat to its own security, moved some patrollings. Syrian is therefore a chessboard with very fragile balances where the potential of conflict is still present.

4 SOME CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EU AND ITALY

4.1 *Rome, natural and necessary interlocutor*

Despite Türkiye-EU accession process seems at a deadlock, mainly due to the pending Cyprus issue and to the increasing concerns over Turkish governance and rule of law, there are several areas of cooperation. Some of these, such as the liberalization of entry visas for Turkish citizens in the European area and the modernization of the Customs Union, are well-known issues as they have already been set as conditions of the so-called 'Refugee Agreement' signed in 2016 and yet not satisfied. Indeed, it was that agreement which has opened the doors for transactional relations between Ankara and Brussels, as they concern very specific sectors.

Furthermore, re-energizing the relations with the European Union was also discussed on the sidelines of the Vilnius summit, finding scope for agreement and collaboration both at a bilateral, regional, and transnational level. Both EU chief Michel and President Biden have accepted the Turkish request on easing the ties with Europe, a file which will be followed up by Sweden as part of the negotiation aiming at its NATO accession.

The knot to untie is the nature of the future relationship between Türkiye and the European Union in the light of the military and technical support granted to Ukraine, above all through the supply of Turkish drones. On the other hand, the diplomatic action launched by Ankara aiming at mediating in the conflict should not be underestimated. In the light of a future European defensive architecture, the inclusion of Türkiye, which has already been EU candidate and NATO member, would therefore look appropriate. Although following the release of Ukrainian soldiers in custody in Türkiye and the green light given to Sweden towards NATO, a more marked pro-Ukrainian approach is denoted in line with Western requests. However, Ankara's stances are influenced by its crucial geographical location and therefore mainly by the protection of Turkish interests. Certainly, at a time

⁴⁵ V. Giannotta, 'L'accordo Erdoğan Putin dopo la crisi di Idlib', Osservatorio Turchia, CeSPI, March 2020, https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/osservatori/allegati/brief_6_turchia-russia_idlib.pdf

when Erdoğan has emerged victorious from a difficult electoral competition whose rhetoric is increasingly nationalist, regaining credibility and trust in Western eyes is an obligatory step also and above all in the face of the economic crisis experienced in the country. The European Union, in fact, is Türkiye's main commercial partner and the economic complementarities encompassing many sectors.

In this regard, remains unknown how sustainable Türkiye's *Two-Chairs* approach will be. On one hand, although it is justified by the defense of Turkish national interest, it does not always look compatible with multilateral logics and constraints. On the other, much enthusiasm on EU and US reenergized ties would affect the relations with Moscow.

Hence, due to the longstanding mistrust and sense of frustration affecting Ankara-Brussels relations, for a genuine dialogue and a healthy mutual understanding, Italy can play a crucial role. Italy-Türkiye ties are strategic as they pivot not only on a deep sense of friendship, but also on many complementarities. Over time Italy and Türkiye have always maintained good bilateral relations, not only in economic terms (Türkiye is the Italian main trade economic partner in the Mediterranean region), but also at political level. The contacts have been very frequent, and they have never been interrupted, despite the changes occurred in the Italian government in the past three years.

Furthermore, Italy has appreciated Türkiye's mediation role between Russia and Ukraine and its important diplomatic action in the Grain deal that aimed to prevent food crisis following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in the last year and a half. In this regard, Rome arises as a natural and necessary interlocutor in facilitating the EU leverage on Türkiye as well as in channeling some of Türkiye's demands to the EU.

For Italy it is indeed important to keep the dialogue open and strong with Türkiye not only at bilateral level, but also in the European frame since the full potential of bilateral relations between Rome and Ankara also lies into EU- Türkiye rapprochement. Encouraging visa liberalization could be an opportunity for dialogue and exchanges, supporting mutual knowledge and understanding as well as business and trading affairs.

Also, encouraging Türkiye and the other regional countries in the path for normalization is seen as beneficial for the stability of the entire region. This is not just matter of security concern, but it also entangles the need for sustainable and resilient global supply chains where Türkiye stands as a valuable actor in the logistic reshaping.

4.2 *A concrete positive agenda*

On its side, the European Union is called to engage with Türkiye in a Positive Agenda with concrete options that could be beneficial for all sides. Apart from keeping on track and strengthen bilateral relations, Italy can play a constructive role within the EU and for the improvement of EU- Türkiye relations.

It should be noted that the 2021 commitments to re-engage a “positive agenda” between Türkiye and the EU have had limited impact. From time to time, efforts to revitalize the relations between the EU and Türkiye with a positive agenda on certain issues resulted in not achieving the desired level of progress in this process where there was no full membership perspective.

Briefly, Positive agenda might pave the way for improvement of stagnated relations between Türkiye and the EU, but the full membership perspective has a greater motivational effect. Besides entangling

the issues of visa liberalization, updating the Customs Union, and adopting shared and sustainable approach on migration, Italy may also propose the resuming of the negotiation process. This may pivot on the opening of some chapters of crucial importance, such as the ones related to the rule of law and democratic maturity of Türkiye (Chp.23;24), as well as Energy (Chp.15). This might encourage and stimulate the reform process in Türkiye and pave the way for improvement of the EU and Türkiye relations, which has positive impact on Türkiye and Italy relations as well as on Türkiye relations with the region, where the margin of cooperation rather than friction with the EU are still many.

4.3 Green energy cooperation

Considering that “the EU cooperates with Türkiye to enable the integration of the Turkish gas and electricity markets into its internal energy market and to support the country in reaching its 2053 net zero emission targets”⁴⁶, the EU should support the decarbonization process of the energy sector in Türkiye. Moreover, solid political relations between the two and an ambitious environmental policy for Türkiye will be necessary to achieve this. The distrust between Türkiye and the EU unfortunately is an important factor in affecting relations, especially when it comes to long-term projects and cooperation that create significant dependency.

Establishing long-term political trust between the EU and Türkiye is, indeed, crucial before deepening relations and cooperation, also in the energy and environmental sectors. The Green Deal is an area in which the future relations between the EU and Türkiye could strengthen with decarbonization potentially become the central element of the debate on the EU-Türkiye Customs union and its potential and much needed modernization. Moreover, as Italy particularly welcomed Türkiye's decision to join the Paris Agreement, this opens margin for strenghtening the cooperation at any level, including through the resumption of High-level dialogue on energy.

4.4 Promoting negotiations and issue-based cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean

When it comes to Greece, Cyprus and Türkiye, obstacles are many and the efforts to encourage cooperation and to make it sustainable needs a lot of work and commitment. Building up trust among the Parties is one of the main commitment the EU can take for easing relations and avoid new escalations. Also, as the Cyprus issue is one of the major Eastern Mediterranean disputes, investing constant efforts to resume negotiation talks seems necessary for the improvement of EU-Türkiye relations as well as for developing the full potential of an area which is of interest of all the actors involved, both in terms of energy security and regional stability.

However, being understood that after the failed attempt of the Annan Plan for the reunification of Cyprus no concrete progress has been reached on the matter and that by now relations between Türkiye and Greece are not going beyond de-escalation, issue-based cooperation could be explored to opening channels between the Parties. This could imply encouraging high-level dialogues reuniting

⁴⁶ See https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/international-cooperation/key-partner-countries-and-regions/turkiye_en

all the littoral States of the Eastern Mediterranean to build up trust as well as encouraging Mediterranean cooperation mechanisms to explore possibilities for joint use of resources and revenue sharing, especially in terms of renewables. For that to come, however, a multilateral effort supported by the EU and the USA, is needed.

4.5 *The role of business*

Italy-Türkiye economic and business complementarities are very strong. As has been shown by the surveys conducted by CeSPI Osservatorio Turchia on the degree of satisfaction of Italian investors in Türkiye, relations are cemented on a deep trust in the business sector⁴⁷. Türkiye is indeed no longer perceived just as a market to simply invest in, but as a strategic partner. This factor could act as a driving force for further coordinated actions in third countries as well. The mutual bilateral trade exchange, thus, seems destined to grow further hence to improve synergies between the two countries. Moreover, the role of Italy as of the 5th most important trade country for Türkiye, after big actors such as United States and China, proves that the already strong synergies might be further materialized pivoting on Türkiye's geographic position, intended as a strategic for entering in neighboring countries.

In this regard, the world of business and finance, who offered their testimony during a panel organized by CeSPI Osservatorio Turchia, clearly illustrates that along the projects implemented in the Country, Italy and Türkiye increasingly find ways to exchange of expertise. Eventually in the next future this might bring to achieve even greater results, in strategic sectors such as security, defense, infrastructure and energy.⁴⁸ While many complementarities have been already recorded in Africa, in Caucasus and Middle East, it is here worth mentioning that Italian companies are playing an important role in the Black Sea gas field project of Türkiye. This energy cooperation between Türkiye and Italy can be extended other areas such as renewables. It is worth noting that Türkiye has maintained a strong relationship with Italy in the energy sector, not only in terms of hydrocarbons but also in forward-looking renewable energies, new technologies, and innovation. Italy has specific expertise in renewable energy that could share; it may bring not only economic benefits but also political advantages for both countries. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Türkiye competitive resources including above average sunlight hours and one of the best wind corridors in Europe. It means Ankara has potential to develop joint projects with Italy and Europe on renewable energy. Therefore, there is huge potential for developing more interdependencies by serving the needs of each market.

⁴⁷ IXE, *Indagine sulle imprese italiane che operano sul mercato turco*, CeSPI-Turkey Observatory, December 2021, https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/osservatori/allegati/ixe_cespi_turchia_dic21_def.pdf

⁴⁸ To the event see <https://www.cespi.it/it/ricerche/osservatori/osservatorio-turchia/focus/partnership-italia-turchia-come-driver-verso-paesi-0>

4.6 *Risks and opportunities*

Although in terms of realpolitik the interests of the states are the main elements marking the foreign policy agendas, the serious setback in matters of the rule of law and democratic maturity experienced by Türkiye should not be underestimated. Already, recently the EU progress reports have signaled 'serious backsliding' in this regard, bringing to light the great urgency of revision of the law on terrorism and alerting on the progressive restrictions on freedom of expression.⁴⁹ In the Turkish presidential system, where there is a very fragile check and balance, critical issues arise on the independence of judiciary system as well as regarding the independent expression of civil society and the state of the political opposition. In fact, the general political and social representation is based on a monolithic vision and interpretation that hinges on a growing conservative and nationalist spirit. In the end, these factors could invalidate a genuine bilateral and international dialogue, opening to drifts of mutual frustration and cooling down any cooperative spirit.

Nonetheless, EU is called to maintain a consistent approach towards Türkiye, investing as much as possible in the elements of cooperation in a pragmatic logic with immediate effects. The exercise of European soft power, applied to facilitate both the entry visas and to positive working tables on the Customs Union, would be seen by Ankara as a positive exercise for confidence building and so an opportunity for further cooperation. In addition, constantly investing in projects related to youth and civil society would be appropriate in terms of raising awareness on EU principles. Considering Turkish diplomatic pragmatism and balancing act, maximizing the enthusiasm and possible positive momentum of EU-Türkiye relations is a necessary step to avoid continuous confidence crises.

⁴⁹ See Türkiye report 2022, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkiye-report-2022_en

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