

ENERGY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION AND GEOSTRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS ON THE CYPRUS ISSUE

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The Eastern Mediterranean energy issues have geostrategic implications for the states in the wider region. The states' goals to ensure strategic and economic benefits in the energy field intensify competition between them, while the following tension directly affected the efforts to resolve the Cyprus problem. This article focuses on the region's geostrategic and energy developments in order to analyse the strategic behaviour of states involved as well as their impact on the efforts of solving the Cyprus problem.

Key words: Cyprus issue, Eastern Mediterranean region, energy issues, Republic of Cyprus

INTRODUCTION

The Cyprus problem has always been a crucial international policy issue both affecting and being affected by the Eastern Mediterranean political developments (Ker-Lindsay 2008; Evaghorou 2014). The discovery of hydrocarbon deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), and the efforts for the extraction of hydrocarbons, altered the region's geopolitics putting the balance of power within it at risk along with any possible developments of the Cyprus issue¹. At the same time,

1 For the total oil and gas reserves in the Mediterranean Sea which in the near future will completely change the gas market in the region, see at Kostianoy and Carpenter (2018).



despite the long periods of their interruptions, the negotiation efforts between the Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots in order to find a viable solution are still ongoing. Moreover, the negotiations are significantly affected by the other states' interventionist role and their specific interests in the region.

All in all, this article examines the geostrategic changes in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially under the hydrocarbon discovery prism and the competition of the states with interests in the region. Furthermore, it analyses the political positions and the strategic choices of the states involved in the Cyprus problem and the energy issues developments. Our purpose is to present and interpret the issues arising with regards to the strategy and security of states that are directly or indirectly involved in the Cyprus question and the hydrocarbons discovery in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The case study analysis is based on the international relations' theory and more specifically employs the theory that has at its core the interstate competition to ensure national interest (Waltz 1979; Morgenthau 1993; Mearsheimer 2001). The main theoretical argument is that states in a competitive international environment, seek to secure their national interests through struggle for power and profits (Gilpin 1981). Taking for granted that the international system is anarchic and that self-help rules (Waltz 1979, 105–107; 111–112), the study examines how powerful and powerless states try to realize their strategic objectives. Additionally, this analysis accepts a priori that the relations among states have a strong competitive character and states' strategy, either for alliance or for cooperation, is the result of their rational behaviour to protect their national interests (Glaser 2010). The fields of interstate competition vary, while states compete for economic, political, geostrategic and energy gains. More specifically, regarding the Cyprus issue, states compete for control of territories, control of sea lanes and exploitation of resources. In addition, based on the fact that in



regions with rich hydrocarbon reserves there is an intense competition between states for hydrocarbons control, as well as an intense intervention by the great powers in order to serve their energy interests, the analytical concept of energy security is a critical and important theoretical basis for the analysis of this case study (Bashir 2017, 288–290; Vivoda 2017, 87–89).

Methodologically, the article tests an empirical hypothesis using a specific theory. In this context, as it has already mentioned at the introduction and the theoretical background section, this article examines the assumption if the existence of hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Cypriot EEZ affects the developments in resolving the Cyprus problem, and if so, to what extent. The contribution of this article lies on the examination of the new political circumstances that have arisen in the Eastern Mediterranean due to the discovery of hydrocarbons and the explanation of the states' involved in the region strategic positions.

THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER IN EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

A number of states are involved in the competition for profits in the Eastern Mediterranean², which is intensified by the hydrocarbon's discovery in the region (Bornstein 2018, 1; Prontera and Ruszel 2017, 145). Although the natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean are not likely to advance peace among actors in the region, gas trade between states that are already at peace with each other, can contribute to domestic prosperity, promote regional stability and strengthen the peaceful relations that already exist (Shaffer 2018, 90; Adamides and Christou 2016, 87). Meanwhile, finding a solution to the Cyprus problem constitutes a part of this mosaic. The RoC is located at the heart of this chaotic competition between large, medium

2 For the struggle for power in Eastern Mediterranean region see Evaghorou (2018).



and small regional powers³. The strategic positions and prospects of these states are therefore explored very carefully.

Due to its weakness, the RoC endeavours to survive through alliances with other powerful states or through participation in regional organizations like the European Union (EU) (Nugent, 2006). Moreover, the RoC currently seeks benefits from the hydrocarbon's exploitation in the Cypriot EEZ that has been discovered recently. The expected benefits from the extraction of hydrocarbons will strengthen the political and economic power of the RoC, reinforcing its credibility in the international system, a development that might contribute to the resolution of the Cyprus problem. The leadership of the RoC strongly believes that the strategy of making alliances with more powerful states than RoC regarding energy issues (like those with Greece, Israel, Egypt, and the US) can effectively contribute to the defence of its national interests (Tziarras and Mitchell 2015). Consequently, the RoC seeks to ensure its interests by equating them with the strategic interests of states that, unlike Turkey, respect the International Law, especially the Law of the Sea (Kariotis 2011, 47–49).

Since 1974, Turkish military occupies the northern part of the RoC's territory and constantly attempt to establish illegally an entity representing the Turkish-Cypriot community, which is not recognized as a sovereign "state" by the international community. Moreover, Turkey does not officially recognize the RoC. As a result, Turkey constitutes the main threat to the RoC's national security. Turkey is a powerful military state with hegemonic aspirations in the region of the Eastern Mediterranean (Erickson 2004; Evaghorou 2009). It also maintains strong relations with the Western states as, by virtue of its strategic position, it can best serve their national interests and particularly those of the US, besides the significant problems that have been emerged during the last years between the two sides (Kirisçi 2017, 7–8). These relations are mostly observed through its NATO membership. Consequently, Turkey continues to receive

3 For the Cyprus problem see Kontos, (2014) and Warner, (2016).



special treatment by the Western allies with regards to the Cyprus problem as well as the arising energy issues, although sometimes Turkish-Western relations are characterized by tension.

However, during the last decade, the relations of Turkey with some countries in the West have deteriorated, among others, because of its hostility towards Israel and its primarily attitude towards the so-called Islamic state (ISIS). Particularly, Turkey was accused by westerns of supporting ISIS (Krauthammer, 2015). Although Turkey after the accusations participated in the coalition against ISIS, western countries continued to face it with distrust. Additionally, the last years Turkey seeks to develop its strategic relations with Russia, mainly through the purchase of military equipment, which creates concerns and reactions by the US. This conjuncture could negatively affect Turkey in a possible settlement regarding the Cyprus question. Turkey insists on a solution which would allow it to establish a satellite-state, ensuring its permanent and legitimate presence in Cyprus. In this scenario, it could also exploit the mineral wealth in the Cypriot EEZ for its benefit. Turkey seeks to maintain its strong presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is interpreted into aggressive policy towards Cyprus and efforts to control the exploitation of hydrocarbon deposits in the Cypriot EEZ⁴. Hence, the strategic control of Cyprus by Turkey is directly linked to the state's security and the Turkish strategic aspirations for hegemony in the Eastern Mediterranean region, as well.

Apart from the unresolved Cyprus problem, it should be noted that Turkey faces a plethora of other foreign policy issues. A number of states, particularly the great powers that have a military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, do not accept the Turkish aggression, while they are suspicious of the Turkey's policy in the Syrian crisis (Kanat 2010). For these two reasons, many EU countries are sceptical towards Turkey. Due to the fact that Turkish foreign policy is often against the Western interests, the great powers may limit their support for Turkey's

4 For Turkey's offensive policy against Cyprus see Evaghorou (2009).



position regarding the solution of the Cyprus problem and energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Greece is another state that is traditionally involved in the Eastern Mediterranean competition and in the process of resolving the Cyprus problem due to their historical and ethnic ties with the RoC. Nevertheless, due to its financial problems during the last decade, Greece's influence is somewhat limited (Tziampiris 2013). It is true that Greece's economic problems and its borrowing from Western financial institutions together with its long-established strategic position of absence from the Cyprus problem negotiations, do not allow Greece to play an important role in the Cyprus problem settlement. This deprives Greece of future strategic advantages in Cyprus, especially in relation to the Greek-Turkish competition and the exploitation of hydrocarbons. Simultaneously, Greece does not have any specific strong strategic plan regarding the exploitation of hydrocarbons that could possibly be found in the Greek EEZ.

Despite its economic decline, Greece tries to strengthen its relations with Cyprus and Israel in an attempt to develop a new strategic framework with the neighbouring countries on both security and defense and energy issues (Stergiou 2013; Tziarras 2016). The Greek policy involves joint military exercises with both Cyprus and Israel and most probably with Egypt in the future (Damiras 2014), in order to empower its political and strategic presence in the region despite its economic problems. Moreover, Greece proceeds with the establishment of agreements with other states in the region, such as Israel, Egypt and RoC, for the energy transportation from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe through pipelines, such as the case of EastMed (Ruble 2017). Greece aims to promote issues relating to energy so as to intensify efforts in hydrocarbon exploitation in the Greek EEZ in the future. Regarding the Greek-Turkish relations, where Turkey is the main rival of Greece, the latter generally claims that Turkey systematically violates the international law in order to strike the Greek sovereign rights arising from it (Mazis and Sgouros 2012). Specifically, Greece argues that the Turkish state is still provocative towards the RoC, not only with the occupation and the presence of Turkish military



troops on the island but also using other practices that challenge the sovereignty of the RoC such as the presence of Turkish research vessels in the Cypriot EEZ.

The US is nowadays the only superpower in the international system and because of its primacy in international affairs as well as its ability to project its power around the world, plays a crucial role in the Eastern Mediterranean region (Chopsey and Brown 2014, 18–19). The US currently seeks to secure its hegemonic national interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, that concerns both the commitments of the NATO's member states and the economic benefits of the US companies involved in the region's oil and natural gas resources (El-Katiri and El-Katiri 2014). The US is primarily interested in maintaining the international stability so as to protect its hegemonic position, while at the same time it prevents others forces from challenging American hegemony (Ikenberry 2002). Regarding the Eastern Mediterranean, the primary concern of the US is to maintain stability. Therefore, the US requires its allies to operate in a collaborative framework in order to ensure the US hegemonic regional interests. In this context, the US gives their political and strategic support to those states that accept to operate according to the framework mentioned, in cases of disputes with other states. The allied states' obligations towards the US include firstly the maintenance of allied axes and secondly the assistance to them when needed. Thus, the US makes great efforts during the last years in order to restore the relations between Turkey and Israel, as these states play a crucial role in their hegemonic interests (Oğuzlu 2010). Additionally, the purpose of these efforts is to maintain a regional energy alliance with the construction of an undersea gas pipeline in the region under the western control and also to stabilize the geostrategic balance in the region for the benefit of westerns interests (El-Katiri and El-Katiri 2014, 33–37). Furthermore, the US tries to limit the relations between Turkey and Russia, by exerting pressures on Turkey, while uncontrolled Turkish actions affects the American hegemonic interest in the region, as well as the interest of the western alliance. Regarding the Cyprus issue, the US is pressing for a solution to the problem that would sustain security and stability



in the region disregarding the consequences of any solution for the weaker state. By supporting positions that contribute to the achievement of the American interest, they become more compliant with the Turkish claims regarding a settlement of the Cyprus problem.

Concerning Russia, it is a powerful state that could challenge to some extent the US hegemony in the Eastern Mediterranean. Even if Russia still has less power than the US, tries to regionally compete the US by maintaining client relations with the states in Eastern Mediterranean as well as through the Russian military presence in the area. As for Cyprus, Russia's goal is to establish client relationship, both in energy issues and in military matters (Delanoe 2013; Krasnov et al. 2019). It is worth mentioning that although Russian energy companies controlled by the Russian state, had initially a particular interest to participate in the surveys and extraction of hydrocarbons in the Cypriot EEZ, they have not participated and are not involved in any schemes for the exploitation of hydrocarbons in the Cypriot EEZ till today. This is because any extraction of gas from the Cypriot EEZ, or from the Levant basin in general, is antagonistic to the Russian transport of gas to the European countries. On the other hand, sales of Russian weapons in the RoC are continued, a fact that shows that Russia seeks to play a role in Cypriot affairs (Maslova et. al. 2019, 207). Furthermore, Russia seeks to play a role in the Eastern Mediterranean, because its national interests in Syria are now at stake. A serious deterrent in this effort is the US' and its allies' leadership in the region that distrust the Russian presence there.

Another important and key player in the regional developments is Israel (Adamides and Christou 2016, 86). Israel's main national interest is to ensure its security and protect the citizens from the threats coming from the Arab world and Iran (Catignani 2005; Inbar 2012). Israel is a major military power with ensured strategic opportunities in taking initiatives in the region assisted by its strategic alliance with the US. Moreover, its position is strengthened not only by its attempt to exploit the deposits located in the EEZ, but also by participating in strategic alliances with neighbouring states in energy issues. From this



strategic perspective, Cyprus is a safe geostrategic stronghold for Israel, capable to supply it with strategic depth in both the Eastern Mediterranean and Europe (Inbar and Sandler 2001). Thus, Israel has cultivated good relations with both Cyprus and Greece in recent years.

In contrast to the very good relations with RoC, the relationship of Israel with Turkey has been recently deteriorated because of the Mavi Marmara case in 2010 (Kosebalaban 2010; Barkey 2011). Nevertheless, it is noticeable that both Turkey and Israel are powerful states in the region that, regardless of the strained diplomatic relations, still maintain very good economic and commercial trade relations (which recently have been almost doubled, reaching 5.7 billion dollars) (Cagaptay and Evans 2012; Arbell 2015). The good economic and trade relations between the two countries, could make Israel adopt strategic and political positions in favour of the Turkish interests with regards to a possible settlement of the Cyprus problem, which constitutes a Turkish ultimate goal. However, the cooperation between Israel, Greece and the RoC on energy issues can positively influence Israel's attitude towards RoC.

Moreover, regarding the Israeli strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean, it should be noted that not only the RoC and Greece but also Turkey approached Israel as a potential ally in the past concerning both energy and geostrategic issues (Nachmani 2005). This highlights the importance of Israel as a strategic ally for every state in the region, either in purely military or in energy matters. Regarding the Israeli intentions to cooperate with other countries in energy issues of the region, Israel seeks collaboration foremost with Cyprus in order to liquefy the gas and export it to third countries and then with Turkey in order to establish a channel of transportation for the natural gas. Of course, the cooperation between Israel and Turkey presupposes the improvement of their diplomatic relations, as the strained relations between them nowadays do not leave any room for collaboration on the energy level.

The emergence of neuralgic issues that the countries involved in the strategic affairs of the Eastern Mediterranean face reveals the geostrategic criticalness of the region (Prontera



and Ruszel 2017). It also reveals the high potential for conflict and the interweaving of the national interests of the states involved in the area's affairs (Stocker 2012). The degree of interstate conflict in the region becomes more intense with the recent discovery of hydrocarbons in the geographical region of the Eastern Mediterranean. Additionally, the conflict of states' interest in the region largely affects the efforts to resolve the Cyprus problem, as we will see below. Concluding, it should be mentioned that the national interest of each state depends not only on its power separately, but also on the degree of its alliances' success.

HYDROCARBONS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND THE CYPRUS PROBLEM

The discovery of hydrocarbons in Cyprus EEZ and generally in the Eastern Mediterranean altered the balance of power and facilitated formations of alliance axes in the geographical area of the Eastern Mediterranean, changing also the status quo regarding the efforts on resolving the Cyprus problem (Khadduri 2012, 111–117). Estimations from two drillings conducted in 2011, in block 12, under the cooperation of US company Noble Energy, the Israeli Delek and British-Dutch Shell, show that the “Aphrodite” deposit discovered in this plot, is expected to hold 3.6 to 6 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of natural gas (Kostianoy and Carpenter 2018, 69), while another drilling, realized by the oil companies consortium of ENI and TOTAL, in block 4, reports that the “Calypso” deposit is estimated that contains 6.4 tcf (Kambas and Zawadzki 2019). Moreover, in March 2019, ExxonMobil, together with its partner Qatar Petroleum, estimated in-place gas resources in the deposit at 5 to 8 tcf of natural gas, in plot 10 of Cyprus' EEZ (Chrysopoulos 2019). On the other hand, it is estimated that the Eastern Mediterranean region, extended from Cyprus to Lebanon and from Israel to Egypt, hosts probably more than 340 tcf of natural gas (Lo 2017; Lavinder 2018). This estimation increases the geostrategic importance of the Eastern Mediterranean but also increases the interstate competition for the control of hydrocarbon resources.



As a result, and from a geopolitical point of view, the RoC has been upgraded and now it is able to build alliances on energy issues with Israel, Greece, Egypt, and Russia (Ioannou & Emilianides, 2014: 331). At the same time, Turkey became more aggressive, seeking to ensure strategic and economic benefits from the exploitation of hydrocarbons in the Cypriot EEZ, using the Turkish-Cypriot community of the island. As the hitherto researches and estimations on hydrocarbons quantities in the Cypriot EEZ show, a large part of its hydrocarbons stock is merchantable providing the RoC with the opportunity to attract investors from third countries and further reinforce its geostrategic position. RoC's geostrategic position has been upgraded almost since 2011 through agreements signed between the RoC and the foreign energy companies. The attraction of foreign companies with hydrocarbon operation from third countries, further enhance Cyprus' geostrategic security. In particular, the third countries protect the economic interests of these companies and as a consequence protect the RoC regarding its geostrategic threats. Therefore, the RoC pursues to limit Turkey's reactions regarding the extraction of hydrocarbons, as the Turkish threats against the RoC are, simultaneously, in opposition to the foreign economic interests.

Excluding Turkey from the access and the control of the deposits in Cypriot EEZ is geo-strategically very important as it keeps the state out of the Mediterranean energy game. Insofar, as Turkey cannot change the existing status quo in Cyprus and benefit from a solution of the Cyprus problem, its exclusion from the energy reserves of the Cyprus EEZ will have negative consequences both for the relationship with its western alliance, especially the US, and the competition with other states in the region. A change on the status quo in Cyprus, favorable to Turkey, would come through a solution plan for the Cyprus problem that would address Turkish interests. Conversely, the Greek Cypriot side, which represents today the RoC, is seeking a solution that will detach Cyprus from Turkey's control and from the Turkish exploitation of hydrocarbons, too (Mullen 2014, 8). For these reasons, exploitation of hydrocarbons in Cyprus EEZ would be a catalyst to achieve a final solution in the Cyprus problem (Gramer 2014).



In the framework of juxtaposition regarding the existence of natural resources in the Cypriot EEZ, the RoC supports that exploitation constitutes its exclusive right, based on the International Maritime Law, while Turkey argues that the Turkish Cypriots have also right to the hydrocarbons exploitation⁵. According to the international law, the right of the RoC to exploit the natural wealth of its EEZ could be realized only if RoC pursued the strategic choice to delimit EEZ with other neighboring states. It should be additionally mentioned, that invoking the international law assumes that a state has also the required power to defend its international law *acquis* as Thucydides (1972, 404) observed already centuries ago. In this context, RoC faces a lot of difficulties because of its weak position compared to the position of its main rival. On the other hand, Turkey demands to participate in the hydrocarbon exploitation process of the Cypriot EEZ because of its power over the RoC, supported by its alliance with the US, and also mainly because of the fact that geography, energy markets and political developments determine Turkey's role in the geopolitics of energy at the region (Austvik and Gülmira 2017). On a diplomatic level, Turkey claims that oil and gas will be converted into symbols of peace between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots⁶. On the pretext of protecting the Turkish Cypriots, Turkey also seeks to gain political and economic benefits from the pooling of hydrocarbons in the Cypriot EEZ.

Regarding the Turkish claims in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey strongly supports that it will not back away from its policy on the issues of energy and declares ready to protect Turkish rights and interests in the region (İşeri & Bartan 2019). This practice automatically puts Turkey in an intensely competitive environment *vis-a-vis* every country in the region with a focus on the energy issues (Babali 2009). The aggressive attitude of Turkey with regards to the hydrocarbon reserves in the Cypriot

5 For Turkey's positions with regards to Cyprus EEZ see Kariotis (2015, 50–56) and Mullen (2014, 11–13).

6 See Turkey's President statements in Christou (2015).



EEZ is related to its own energy needs. In order to satisfy its needs, Turkey covers the majority of its energy demands with natural gas especially from Russia and Iran (Gramer 2014). Given that Turkey cannot have a significant political influence in these two supplier states, as they are states with strong political and economic positions and compete with Turkey, it is trying to find other energy supply channels from weaker states. Consequently, Turkey seeks to achieve a diversification of corridors for energy resources that drive or pass through its territory and also to create alternative sources of energy supply for domestic needs. Under these conditions, as Cyprus and the Cypriot EEZ are geographical areas that meet specific Turkish demands, Turkey intensifies the aggression against the Cypriots' plans for energy issues (Johnson 2019). Moreover, the Turkish stance is connected also to the Turkish regional ambitions to become regional hegemon in the Eastern Mediterranean. As the "doctrine of strategic depth" promotes, the Turkish strategic vision is Turkey to become energy hub and transit route in the region (Murinson 2006; Marketos 2009). This will help Ankara's strategic goals to gain more power through energy in the Eastern Mediterranean. This is firmly associated with the Turkish revisional stance in the Cypriot EEZ and its plans to connect the recent discoveries with a pipeline towards Turkey (Kontos 2018). Additionally, it should be noted that a Turkish-Israeli strategic alliance in energy issues, which would facilitate the Turkish aspirations, would not be possible at this particular time because of the incomplete recovery of the cold relations between the two states and the unresolved Cyprus problem (Carlson 2016, 72–73).

In conclusion, the attitude of Turkey towards the energy sources in the Cypriot EEZ could be characterized as controversial, as it is in contrast to the Western interests. Particularly, on the one hand, Turkey challenges the sovereign rights of the RoC in the Cypriot EEZ putting itself against the western economic interests which are represented by the research and mining companies, and, on the other hand, seeks to strengthen its alliance with the US and its allies in order to promote its national interests regarding energy. Therefore, the strategic choices that



Turkey has to realize partially its national interests concerning the Cyprus EEZ are either to recognize the RoC, with the hope of gaining benefits from potential partnerships with other states in energy issues (according to the Ankara Agreement of 2005 with the EU, Turkey must recognize the RoC and normalize its relations with the latter); or to continue with increasingly aggressive tactics against the RoC that will lead to full control of the island but at the same time threatens the regional security.

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Energy issues in the Cyprus EEZ influence also the strategic positions of the other states of the Eastern Mediterranean. As far as Greece is concerned, it is observed the non-decisive action of the Greek state to assert all the rights arising from the operation of the Greek EEZ. Nonetheless, Greece endeavored to define the Greek EEZ with Cyprus and Egypt, which, if implemented, will lead to a significant upgrade of Greek positions on energy issues (Mazis 2013, 56). The undetermined stance of Greece regarding energy issues and cooperation with the RoC affects also the Cyprus problem solving, because the absence of Greece from the negotiation process encourages the Turkish aspirations and eliminates any expected benefits for the Greek national interest, too.

Regarding the Russia's action on energy issues in the Middle East, it should be noted, on the one hand, the strong Russian interest for a greater involvement and, on the other hand, the US reaction to the Russian plans. Specifically, with regards to the energy issues in the Cypriot EEZ, a possible Russian participation in energy planning is crucial for the future, since the presence of a country with such a geopolitical role in the region would make Turkey revise its revisionist ambitions (Gramer 2014). The Russian presence in energy issues of the Cyprus EEZ involves the participation of Russian companies in exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons, with the support, of course, of the Russian state. As it has been seen, this fact has not materialized so far due to the RoC strategic choice to cooperate closely with Western states and the Russia's inability to be vigorously involved in the energy issues of the Eastern Mediterranean. The political positions and the stance of Russia towards Cyprus arise from the overall Russian national interests and most prominently from the benefits arising from the



energy resources exploitation in the Eastern Mediterranean. The friendly relations between Russia and the RoC do not necessarily imply Russia's full support of the Greek Cypriot positions on the Cyprus issue. Besides, Turkey remains a cooperative partner for Russia on energy issues.

Finally, another state that significantly affects the strategic relationships on energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Cyprus issue is Israel (Karagiannis 2016). The Israeli factor is really important as Israel is strategically a powerful state and as a result several states in the region seek to cooperate with it on energy issues (Inbar 2012). At the same time, Israel seeks to secure its own interests in energy issues focusing on energy self-sufficiency and maintaining high economic indicators in its national economy (Bahgat 2010). The primary energy goal of Israel was to become independent in the energy sector, a goal that achieved in 2018. This development helped the Israeli state to eliminate its dependence on energy imports from third countries and also to significantly upgrade its position on energy and transit issues. At the same time, it should be noted that if Israel wants to maintain its independence regarding the energy issues (Bahgat 2011), it will seek more strategic gas management solutions within the Israeli EEZ. The agreement concerning the delimitation of the EEZ with the RoC in 2011 and the agreement with Greece, RoC and Italy in 2018 regarding the construction of East Med (Chorev 2018), effectively laid the basis for achieving this goal. This could increase the chances of bringing the Israeli positions closer to Greek Cypriot positions regarding the solution of the Cyprus problem. A second strategic objective of Israel is to create an energy network, which would include Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Greece, and a "united" Cyprus after a solution, and to some extent Turkey. This objective may lead Israel to assist in resolving the Cyprus problem, which would conciliate the conflicts in the region and help the Israeli aspirations.

SEEKING A SOLUTION TO THE CYPRUS PROBLEM

Although the talks between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, conducted under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) in order



to achieve a solution to the Cyprus problem, still exist, they pass through long periods of absence from the negotiating table. During the periods when the negotiation process is in progress both the RoC and Turkey aim at finalizing the best possible plan to meet their national interests. The power of the two states is different and clearly affects the final outcome of the negotiations. With regards to the RoC, it should be noted that the economic crisis the Cypriot economy faced by March 2013 affected the negotiating positions of the Greek Cypriot side, as it created economic dependencies linked to its Western lenders. In 2019, the RoC recovered from the economic problems faced in the previous years and seems to have been overcome, even partially. Moreover, the existence of large hydrocarbon deposits in the Cypriot EEZ upgraded the RoC strategically and at the same time strengthened its position in the negotiations (Sitolides 2015). Due to the significant strategic advantage gained from the existence of hydrocarbons in the Cypriot EEZ, the Greek Cypriot side, representing the RoC in the talks, has the opportunity to avoid unbalanced settlement projects that would be in favor of Turkey, as the Annan Plan was in 2004. The Annan Plan would essentially abolish the sovereignty of the RoC, and Greek Cypriots would have lost all the benefits that would result from the management of hydrocarbons. Nowadays, the RoC wants and tries to avoid such a resolution scheme. Turkey remains powerful compared to the RoC and uses its military force in order to push the Greek Cypriot side accept a solution through which the Turkish aspirations will be ensured.

The RoC insists that Turkey should stop its challenging behavior, that could flagrantly violate its sovereign rights (such, as marine research by Turkish research vessels in the territorial waters and announcements of Turkish NAVTEX violating the international law), in order to facilitate a solution (Morelli 2015, 12). In addition, the RoC rejects any kind of negotiations that include the possibility and perspective of co-exploitation of its natural wealth. Furthermore, with regards to the mediating role of the UN to the problem's resolution, the RoC argues that it should be constructive for a mutually acceptable solution and not blackmailing the Greek Cypriot side. It should also be



noted that the RoC officials argue that pressure from powerful nations of the West on the RoC creates a negative environment in the whole negotiation process and does not help in finding a totally acceptable solution. According to their argument, if the unbalanced role of western forces towards Turkey will be avoided, it may be more feasible for a solution to the Cyprus problem to be found. Finally, the Greek Cypriot side calls its allies in the European Union to show their real solidarity (Morelli 2015, 17). It should also be mentioned that the RoC's choice to maintain a strategic alliance with Russia ignores the reactions of the western allies, especially those of the US. This has negative consequences for the RoC regarding the solving process of the Cyprus problem, as the West is going to strongly press the Greek Cypriot side. This fact will, in the end, benefit the Turkish positions.

Turkey's positions regarding the solution of the Cyprus problem are based on the objective of continuing military presence on the island. So, Turkey would advocate in favour of any solution plan that could secure this objective. The main Turkey's argument, regarding the military presence in Cyprus, is that it provides protection for the Turkish Cypriots. Turkey also argues that Turkish Cypriots have the right to reap the benefits from the exploitation of hydrocarbons located in the Cypriot EEZ and characterizes the actions of the RoC for exclusive exploitation of hydrocarbons as illegal (Yiangou 2014). Of course, as time shows, the real cause of the military presence of Turkey in Cyprus is the geostrategic control of the island, since it directly affects the safety of the Turkish state. Additionally, it should be noted that Turkey pursues a settlement of the Cyprus problem in order to create the appropriate conditions that will make Cyprus a satellite state. The control of Cyprus by Turkey is an important step towards the fulfilment of the Turkish hegemonic claims in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Greece is a country historically linked to the solution of the Cyprus problem. The Greek state strongly defends the positions of the RoC, but does not seek a more active participation in the formation of any solution. This, of course, reduces the chance of gaining benefits from the exploitation of hydrocarbons in the



Cypriot EEZ. Moreover, it should be noted that due to the economic problems Greece currently faces, foreign policy issues are neglected. As a result, the state's positions and role in the solution of the Cyprus problem have been significantly influenced. The non-active participation of Greece in solving the Cyprus problem in the long term will have negative strategic consequences, as this stance will benefit its main opponent, Turkey.

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In addition, the catalytic role of the US in a final solution to the Cyprus problem should be acknowledged. Because of their global power, the US interventionist role in international affairs is really important. So, in the Cyprus issue US influence is intense. Concerning the international issues, such as the Cyprus problem, the US is usually in favour of the preservation of the global stability and security in order to secure their existing hegemony (Damiras 2014). For this reason, the US provides their strategic alliance to the states that serve this purpose. On this basis, the American stance in the resolving process of the Cyprus problem will be in favour of the state that best serves the security of the American hegemony in the East Mediterranean. In this case, Turkey as the strongest part in the Cyprus problem dispute and the most important ally of the US, will receive the US support.

Finally, it should be mentioned that in the current geostrategic conditions, particularly regarding energy issues, Israel could be an important factor in solving the Cyprus problem. Israel, by its strategic choices of energy cooperation with both RoC and probably Turkey -if their relations will be improved in the future- could play the role of silent mediator in the solution of the Cyprus problem in order to ensure its interests in the energy issues. The settlement of the Cyprus problem would be a development that would later allow the pipeline cross from Israel to Turkey through the Cypriot EEZ, which ensures many Israeli national interests in energy issues (Shaffer 2018, 92).

CONCLUSION

Due to the energy issues emerged in recent years, the Cyprus problem is now more than ever at the centre of a true regional



rivalry, in an area of the world where interstate conflicts had been always existed. It is a fact that competition for the control and exploitation of hydrocarbons drive the great and regional powers to have a more decisive role in developments concerning the solution of the Cyprus problem for their own benefits (Adamides and Christou, 2015). As it is mentioned above, the struggle for power between the states involved in the Eastern Mediterranean affairs, including the Cyprus problem, promises great benefits as a result of the control of energy sources. Taking into account the overall strategic facts as they have been critically examined in this study, the initial hypothesis is verified; that is, the existence of hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Cypriot EEZ has a high degree of influence on the process of solving the Cyprus problem.

The RoC has a great opportunity to solve the Cyprus problem gaining benefits through the exploitation of the energy issues. Nevertheless, its weak position due to its limited power must not be overlooked⁷. It is well-known that the pressure towards a problem settlement is always put on the weak. Additionally, RoC has to confront Turkey's aggressive behavior both in the exploitation of hydrocarbons and in the process of resolving the Cyprus problem.

In turn, Turkey as a powerful military and economic state and a traditional US ally has a significant advantage in the Cyprus dispute. However, it still insists on a wrong strategic choice opposing Western interests, including its relations with Russia, and its attitude towards the Syrian civil war and the ISIS effect. This can negatively affect the Turkish interest in the Cyprus issue since this problem does not stand alone; it is integrated in a much wider sphere of interests and conflicts. Furthermore, it should be noted that the discovery of large hydrocarbon deposits in both the Cypriot EEZ and the wider Eastern Mediterranean region will intensify Turkish aggression

7 For the difficulties that a small, weak and occupied state, as the RoC, faces in establishing foreign policy and its efforts to solve its protracted problem see Panayiotides (2019).



for controlling the hydrocarbon deposits as a step to achieve the goal of regional hegemony.

In any case, a solution to the Cyprus problem in the near future would be hardly feasible due to the diverging views of all states involved in it, especially with regards to energy and exploitation of hydrocarbons issues. After all, the more the competition for hydrocarbons intensifies, the more states are moving away from negotiating to resolve a problem.

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To conclude, regarding the competition in the Eastern Mediterranean, all state powers -great, medium and small ones- seek to secure their interests in the region through the creation of alliances that better serve their objectives. This often leads to alterations in the states' relationships. The states that will manage to handle these changes in the best possible way will gain benefits for their national interest. The Eastern Mediterranean issues are characterized by a constant, endless power competition between nations. Stability in the region is achieved through a status quo that solely serves a minority of the states involved in the competition. Instability reigns when a state power seeks to alter the status quo in its favour, when new gain quotas suddenly appear, such as the discovery of hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean.

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