



## EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN March 2018

### **The Europeanization of the Turkish-Greek Issue**

For the first time since the worsening of the diplomatic rift between Turkey and Greece, the European Council's final statement unanimously "strongly condemned," on March 23, "Turkey's continuous illegal actions in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea", declaring "full solidarity with Cyprus and Greece".

The European Council "urgently calls on Turkey to cease these actions and respect the sovereign rights of Cyprus to explore and exploit its natural resources", in accordance to EU and international law. The European leaders common draft also expressed "grave concern" for the detention of EU citizens in Turkey, included the two Greek soldiers [*European Council Meeting, Conclusions, 22 March 2018*] arrested at Evros on March 1 after crossing the border into Turkey in bad weather [*Reuters, "Greek PM says count on EU support over Greek soldiers detained in Turkey, 23 March 2018*].

After the failed coup in Ankara, political tension has constantly risen between Turkey and Greece, not only with regard to the unresolved Cyprus issue, but also in the Aegean: since 2013, Athens denounces a constant increase in Turkey's territorial violations (regarding national air space and international air traffic regulations - ATHINAI FIR - plus territorial waters), achieving record numbers from 2016 on.

Thus these months saw the opening of multiple, contemporary fronts of potential crisis among Turkey, Greece and Cyprus. On February 2018, a Turkish warship prevented Italian Energy Company ENI's drilling platform from reaching a site in Block 3 of Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Calypso in Block 6 is also a promising field: according to ENI, drills confirmed the presence of hydrocarbons formations in carbonate layers similar to Egypt's massive Zohr field [*Rachael Gillet, "ENI-Total might extend gas search in blocks 6 and 11", Cyprus Mail, 21 March 2018*]. Ankara rejects Nicosia's exploitation of off shore gas resources without its consent and shared revenues for the self-proclaimed "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (TRNC).

While ENI was attempting to start drillings in Cyprus' waters, a Greek Coast Guard patrol boat was rammed by a Turkish Coast Guard patrol boat off the Greek isle of Imia (Kardak for the Turks) on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February. Turkey's detention of two Greek soldiers was further complicated by the issue of the eight Turkish soldiers who fled in Greece in July 2016, accused by Ankara of a direct role in the attempted coup. A Greek court denied, for the third time, the Turkish demand of extradition for the eight soldiers, stating that they would not have a fair trial in Turkey [Constantinos Georgizas, "Greek Court rejects extradition of Turkish coup fugitives", *Reuters*, 16 March 2018].

As long as tension escalates among Ankara, Athens and Nicosia, the absence of a Western "dialogue-broker" in Eastern Mediterranean becomes more and more evident: this could soon turn into another problem for the EU and the United States.

As a matter of fact, the EU still depends on Turkey to contain migration at its borders: Brussels and Washington do not have sufficient leverage to spin Ankara's regional politics, as emphasized by the Turkish military operation in Afrin, Syria.

On the contrary, Russia is the main regional ally of Turkey (selling also S-300 air defence systems) and it can also rely on good ties with the Greek and the Cypriot governments. It would not be a surprise if Moscow engaged its political weight to defuse tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, in order to pursue its own geopolitical strategy in such a critical area.

**Eleonora Ardemagni**