

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS CYPRUS: A Comprehensive Analysis of Contemporary Relations

Evaghoras L. Evaghorou

Associate Professor

University of Piraeus, Department of International and European Studies

ORCID 0000-0002-9677-5980

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Abstract

Cyprus is an important area for Russian foreign policy, as developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, where the island is located, affect Moscow's strategic interests. This article analyzes and interprets the diplomatic, political, economic, energy, and geostrategic aspects of Russian foreign policy towards Cyprus. It identifies the motives behind Russian behavior towards the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) and concludes that, despite generally good diplomatic and friendly relations, the two states have differing geostrategic interests. Given that the defense of Russia's national interests, in relation to Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean, is a priority for Moscow, the article concludes with assessments of future trends, including the developments in the Russian-Ukrainian war and its consequences, which have negatively affected the relations between the two states.

Keywords: *Russia, Russian foreign policy, Republic of Cyprus, Eastern Mediterranean, energy issues, geostrategic issues*

Introduction

The foreign policy of the Russian Federation towards the Republic of Cyprus (hereinafter referred to as RoC or Cyprus) is driven by national interests, which have long been interested in the political, geostrategic, economic, and energy developments in the Eastern Mediterranean (Litsas, 2019; Maslova et. al., 2020). Although the two countries have traditionally maintained friendly relations on many levels and shared diplomatic views on several international issues, at least until the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, their geostrategic interests and aspirations are not identical. This is important for understanding Russia's foreign policy towards Cyprus, especially at times when relations among the two states become conflictual due to the Russian rivalry with Western states and alliances.

The shaping of Russian foreign policy in relation to Cyprus concerns several areas, including diplomacy, trade and economy, tourism, banking, energy, defense,

and security (Melakopides, 2016, p. 6; Kontos, 2019, p. 17). As a result, Russia's foreign policy towards Cyprus, has complex and multilayered strategic implications. Considering the interactions in the above-mentioned areas, this article focuses on analyzing and explaining the Russian foreign policy and strategy regarding Cyprus on the following themes: diplomatic relations, political-strategic interactions, and economic activities, including energy issues. These specific aspects of Russian foreign policy are developed and interpreted in terms of their historical complexity and contemporary evolution. Additionally, this article presents and analyses the main political aspects of Russia's particular positions on issues related to Russian-Cypriot relations, as well as their consequences, especially after the recent geostrategic developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, where Moscow's power appeared to play a new role (Kozhanov, 2018; Mallinson et. al., 2020; Hunter, 2022). Finally, assessments are discussed for the future patterns of Russian foreign policy in Cyprus, as well as for the broader geostrategic frameworks.

Against this background, this article seeks to answer the following research questions: First, how and to what degree does the Russian foreign policy and strategy over Cyprus serve Moscow's geostrategic objectives in the Eastern Mediterranean? Second, how does Cyprus, as a member state of the EU and a part of the Western world, affect Russian aspirations in the Eastern Mediterranean, and to what extent does Moscow seek to control geostrategic developments on the island? Based on these research questions, this article provides a historical overview of the main factors shaping Russian foreign policy and strategy towards Cyprus, identifies the problems and limitations Moscow faces on the island, and assesses the future trends of bilateral relations.

Theoretical and empirical review

Although foreign policy towards the RoC plays a crucial role for Russia's national interests and holds significance for both Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean, the academic literature on this topic appears to be limited (Christou, 2011: p. 225; Krasnov et. al., 2019: p. 245). The fact that the main issues of Russian foreign and security policy are not focused on Cyprus leads to a partial, if not extremely limited, discussion on the outline and analysis of issues related to Russian behavior towards Cyprus. Nevertheless, there are a few notable studies of the bilateral relations that focus on Russian foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, and, to a lesser extent, in Cyprus, while also examining critical aspects, such as economic, geostrategic, and energy developments (Melakopides 2012 and 2016; Maslova et. al., 2019). Building on these sources, this paper expands the analysis of bilateral and regional issues.

The theoretical background used to examine the selected case studies focuses on the relationship between a great power (Russia) and a weak state (RoC), where the former seeks to control and influence the decisions of the latter (Lamoreaux, 2014)

and the latter seeks to ensure its survival due to the security threat of another powerful state (Turkey) (Pedi & Kouskouvelis, 2019). In particular, great power behavior has standard characteristics related to its attempt to influence a region or a weaker state. These characteristics include the pursuit of diplomatic and economic influence in a region or an individual state, the involvement in the decision-making process to affect domestic developments, the procurement of regional allies, and the strategic preservation of national interests as a great power (Taliaferro, 2004). In addition, great powers follow specific patterns of behavior towards small states, characterized by political and economic influence. Due to these systemic pressures, small states, particularly those not affiliated with strong military alliances, tend to modify their actions in response to the influence exerted by great powers (Navari, 2016; Thorhallsson & Bailes, 2016). Small state theories, by identifying the general characteristics of these states, argue that such states develop strategies to protect themselves from the actions of great powers – especially from expansive ones – focusing on their survival by adopting strategies such as hedging or bandwagoning, in the context of having an alliance or good relations with them (Archer et. al., 2014; Thorhallsson 2019). Reinforcing this theoretical argument, Russia, as an emerging power, is attempting to gain a foothold in Cyprus in order to influence developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, as the RoC represents the Western sphere of influence in this volatile region. Similarly, as a small state, the RoC seeks to protect itself from Russian influence by bandwagoning with the Western alliance, while at the same time trying to maintain the benefits, especially the economic ones, gained from its relationship with Russia.

In addition, the theoretical framework for understanding Russia's foreign policy involves the new determinations of its international political directions and goals after the collapse of the USSR. In particular, Russia's foreign policy seeks to represent a great power role (Tsygankov, 2005; Oldberg, 2007; Garcia, 2018, p. 105), primarily aimed at obstructing Western expansionist aspirations, especially against the threat of NATO (Charap & Shapiro, 2016). While Russia pursues to maintain constructive relations with individual European states, such as Germany and France, Moscow is opposed to the West as a whole, primarily but not solely due to the Ukrainian crisis (Melville & Shakleina, 2005; Hunter, 2022). This approach corresponds to Russia's Eurasianism as a geostrategic view, which argues that due to its geographical expanse and location, the prosperity and progress of the Russian state can be achieved through cooperation and close political and economic ties with its neighboring states, both in the West (namely the Euro-Atlantic community) and in the East (namely those of Asia and the Pacific) (Kerr, 1995; Morozova, 2009; Garcia, 2018). Thus, this article interprets how Russia, through its foreign policy, seeks to influence a state that belongs mainly to the Western sphere of influence, the RoC, while ensuring that its relations with other Western states are not disturbed. Moreover, the existence of geostrategic triangles between Cyprus-Russia-EU,

Cyprus-Russia-Turkey, Cyprus-Russia-US and Cyprus-Russia-Greece confirms how Russian foreign policy deals with confronting the West.

Diplomatic aspects of Russian foreign policy towards Cyprus

Russia's foreign policy, with regard to its diplomatic aspect, seeks and succeeds, at a bilateral level, to have a solid and timely good relationship with the RoC (Maslova et. al., 2020). Bilateral diplomatic relations between the two states date back to 1960. On August 18, the former USSR concluded diplomatic relations with the new independent RoC and recognized it shortly after its establishment (Delanoë, 2013, p. 84-85). Diplomatic cooperation between the two states intensified in the early 1990s. Following the collapse of the USSR, the RoC recognized the Russian Federation as the successor state to the former Soviet Union.

The two states also share strong spiritual ties, mainly due to their common Byzantine heritage, which still rests on solid historical foundations (Melakopides, 2012: 75). The main historical feature of the Russian-Cypriot ties is the relative friendship between the two governments and their peoples, as these relations are based on devotion, common values, religion, and culture. The traditionally friendly relations between the governments – although sometimes disrupted by Russia's rivalry with the West – are also underpinned by the fact that the two countries' positions on the most urgent international issues coincide, and by Moscow's diplomatic commitment to achieving a fair and comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem (Janda et. al., 2017, p. 31). Another important factor linking the two countries, and affecting the cultural ties between the two peoples, is the fact that large numbers of Russians have migrated to the island over the last two decades. Due to a share of Russian immigrants who have settled Cyprus moving their businesses in the island (because of the favorable tax and banking regime) and to the attractive climate and cultural affinity, approximately 50,000 citizens have chosen to become residents of Cyprus. Many of them are Russians of 'Pontic' descent from the Black Sea region who grew up in the former USSR and immigrated to Cyprus in the 1990s (Delanoë, 2013, p. 85 & 91).

The productive diplomatic relations between the two countries have been confirmed over time by official visits of state and other officials and expressed inter alia by statements from both sides. Moreover, the development of Russian-Cypriot relations is encouraged and strengthened at the highest level by regular contacts between the Presidents of the two states, while their relations are intensified and strengthened by several bilateral agreements. Since the establishment of the RoC, these bilateral agreements have covered various areas including economic, trade, cultural, travel and other matters (Delanoë, 2013, p. 84-87). An example of the intensity of bilateral agreements is the frequent signing of cooperation protocols between the two states. The growing cooperation between ministries and other state

agencies of the two countries constitutes another effort to strengthen interstate relations.

In conclusion, after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Russia and Cyprus cultivated and strengthened diplomatic relations. This has been confirmed by frequent meetings between officials of the two states, and numerous agreements and protocols that have been signed. Particularly, in the first decade of the 21st century, there has been a strong interest among the two states in commercial and financial transactions, as presented below. Good diplomatic relations favor Russian foreign policy's attempt to influence the decisions of the RoC for the benefit of Russian interests, while promoting its national interests in the wider Eastern Mediterranean region. Consequently, regardless of the strategic links between Russia and the West, although the relations between Russia and the RoC are somewhat compromised, good diplomatic relations provide opportunities for Russia to increase its strategic influence over Cyprus.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that relations between the two countries deteriorated after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The change can be explained by Cyprus bandwagoning behavior following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, after which the RoC, as a member of the EU, followed Western decisions and policies to impose sanctions on Russia, thereby triggering condemnation from Moscow (Stamouli, 2022; Sakkas & Mavrigiannakis, 2024).

The economic impact of Russian foreign policy on Cyprus

A strong pillar that substantiates the very good diplomatic relations between Russia and Cyprus is their active economic cooperation, despite the Western economic sanctions on Russia, which have been imposed several times over the last two decades. The two states' economic relations are sealed by the signing of protocols on economic cooperation, the intensification of trade and direct foreign investments between them, and discussions on economic cooperation on energy-related affairs (Janda et. al., 2017). Since the energy projects of the RoC are competitive with Russia, the energy issues are particularly critical, as they also reflect the geostrategic aspects of Russian-Cypriot relations and directly influence the formulation of Russian foreign policy in the region. This can be easily verified after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the consequences for the supply of Russian hydrocarbons to the West. Consequently, good economic relations are another tool of the Russian foreign policy and strategy to approach the RoC for the benefit of Russian national interests. This remains true despite Cyprus membership of the EU, whose economic relations can be affected by Western economic sanctions against Russia.

Economic ties were also linked to the business interests of Russian oligarchs on the island. In the last two decades, there has been an increase in the presence of Russian citizens in Cyprus as permanent residents, who are engaged in a variety of

business activities. These activities have declined recently, when in a circular sent to the Money Laundering Compliance Officers of all Credit, Payment and E-Money Institutions, the Central Bank of Cyprus provided a new definition of shell companies and urged the interested parties to avoid business relationships with such entities (Kontos, 2019, p. 21). Nevertheless, Cyprus is a vital financial center for the Russian economy, with tens of thousands of Russian companies, individuals and state institutions using the financial and legal services offered on the island (Fabry & Zeghni, 2002; Tokarski & Turkowski, 2013, Kontos, 2019). Russian businessmen, in addition to economic benefits, choose Cyprus for bureaucratic reasons and mainly for legal facilities. Cyprus provides the benefits of English customary law, which companies often find more flexible when preparing contracts. Furthermore, a Reuters news agency survey showed that Cyprus is the most popular tax haven for Russian venture capital (Gray et al., 2013; Ledyeva et. al., 2013; Felgenhauer, 2013).

Regarding Russia's economic and business interconnection with the RoC, it should be noted that the European factor is also crucial, especially the role played by Germany in the EU. In relation to the EU-Russia-Cyprus triangle, German-Russian relations influence the development of the Russian strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Moscow's perceptions on Russian-Cypriot links. This is linked to the fact that, within the EU, Germany imposes strict fiscal policies and economic discipline on the Cypriot economy, which affects Russian funds and provokes strong reactions. Thus, in its own interests, Moscow has tried to balance its relations with the Europeans and its need to develop a strategy to secure economic and political influence in Cyprus.

The financial crisis of March 2013

A typical example that illustrates the strong interaction between Russian and European economic actors in relation to the RoC, and how Russian foreign policy instrumentally uses bilateral economic relations, is the financial crisis that erupted in Cyprus in 2013. On 16 March 2013, the EU imposed a €5.8 billion withdrawal of deposits from Cypriot banks through a European tax plan to refinance troubled banks and rescue the Cypriot economy at the request of the RoC, which reached an agreement after negotiations to join the European support mechanism (Felgenhauer, 2013). This development also affected the capital of Russian banks, prompting them to react strongly (Kalotay, 2013). In particular, the Kremlin seemed especially distressed by the EU's unilateral decision to impose contributions from deposits on Cypriot bank accounts, financing the rescue fund of the Cypriot economy, as it was considered an aggressive action against Russian interests that could even freeze the EU-Russian relations (Tokarski & Turkowski, 2013, p. 2). Indeed, the Russian president attacked the European tax plan, arguing that it was "unfair and dangerous",

while other officials had pointed out that it was an attack on Russian capitals in Cyprus (Cohen & Tigay, 2013).

In addition, the RoC requested financial assistance from Russia in March 2013 during a period of severe financial crisis (Kalotay, 2013). The request was linked to a €2.5 billion loan from Moscow to Nicosia in 2011, which encouraged RoC officials to seek further possible financial assistance from Russia to prevent the bankruptcy of the Cypriot economy. However, the negotiations failed as the Russians ultimately refused to lend to the Cypriot economy, which temporarily hampered the good relations between the two states (Kalotay, 2013). The negative outcome of the negotiations was the result of deep Russian loyalty, firstly to defend national interests, both in relation to the RoC and the EU, and secondly due to Cyprus's late appeal for help from Russia, which also provoked suspicion among Russian officials over the Cypriot intentions. It is also noted that Russian officials did not initially have a negative attitude toward lending to Cyprus. Two key factors confirm this claim. Firstly, Russia provided a pre-crisis loan to the RoC, offering exceptionally favorable terms including a very low interest rate. Secondly, when Cypriot banks were on the brink of collapse, the Russians did not withhold additional funding for their recapitalization. Despite these positive initial developments, the loan negotiations remained unsuccessful, which also affected Russia's ability to enter the Cypriot hydrocarbon energy market. In this area, although Moscow offered to meet Cypriot demands in exchange for a share in Cypriot gas exploration, Nicosia rejected the offer (Fisher, 2013).

The Cyprus financial crisis, marked by a deposit bailout that strained Russian-Cypriot relations, and Russia's subsequent unwillingness to renegotiate the €2.5 billion loan to Cyprus the following year, presented Moscow with a significant strategic opportunity (Kalotay, 2013). The situation allowed the Kremlin to pursue diplomatic channels to secure military advantages in Cyprus, such as access to Cypriot ports for Russian naval vessels. However, if Russia had succeeded in fulfilling its demands for military benefits in exchange for Russian financial aid to the RoC, it would have been perceived by the Europeans as their own defeat, resulting in the EU insisting on its positions in the negotiations with the RoC, especially on loan restructuring. Thus, the conditions set by Moscow were extremely difficult to accept, as they were completely incompatible with Cyprus' geopolitical orientation. Although it was expected by the EU and the RoC that Russia would extend its five-year €2.5 billion loan agreement with Cyprus to ease the island's economic difficulties, the tax arrangements related to the bailout of deposits in Cypriot banks, which also targeted Russian capital in Cyprus, negatively affected Moscow's willingness to restructure its loan to the RoC (Kelly & Anishchuk, 2013). Eventually, Vladimir Putin agreed to restructure the loan to Cyprus in March 2013, postponing the deadline for repayment of the principal debt from 2016 to the period 2018-2021 (Kremlin.ru, 2015). Despite initial reactions, the agreement has also helped to restore Russian trust in

Cypriot banks (Repousis et. al, 2019). Over time, financial relationships and the confidence of investors were restored, resulting in the return of Russian companies to Cyprus, which remained one of their key tax gateways (Alderman, 2014).

The analysis of the financial crisis as a case study revealed the timeless efforts of Russian foreign policy to gain political benefits for Cyprus through diplomacy and economic cooperation. These efforts have not always been successful due to interactions with other players, such as the EU. Nevertheless, they demonstrate Russian aspirations to leverage its opportunities with the RoC to advance Moscow's strategic interests. After all, the Kremlin's attitude toward the Cypriot financial crisis in March 2013 was entirely dictated by the Russian national interest, whether economic, diplomatic, or political.

The war in Ukraine and Western economic sanctions on Russia in 2022

A second example that highlights the strong economic interactions between Russian and European economic actors in relation to the RoC is the contemporary economic sanctions against Russia, adopted by the Western states, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As a consequence, these sanctions affected the Russian-Cypriot economic relations (Tirkides, 2022). There are already notable effects in Russian-RoC relations caused by the sanctions: for example, although there has been an interstate military cooperation agreement between Russia and Cyprus since 2015, the lease of the port of Limassol and the airbase in Paphos, the RoC unilaterally violated it after the invasion by refusing to allow Russian vessels to enter its ports (Krasnov et. al., 2019). Additionally, there are also sanctions against Russian citizens, some of whom are still economically active in Cyprus (Sakkas & Mavrigiannakis, 2024).

The war in Ukraine was a good reason for the EU to ask the RoC to disengage from Russian economic dependence. As a member of the EU, the RoC supported the sanctions imposed by the Western alliance against Russia. As a small state it could not afford to disagree with the EU, even if it was against its economic interests. The RoC has thus clearly sided with the EU in supporting the subsequent sanctions imposed on Russia and attempted to strengthen its relations with Brussels and Washington to counterbalance potential Russian retaliation. However, Cypriot officials have acknowledged that this support has disadvantages for the RoC's economy, which will be negatively affected by the sanctions, even if it has already begun to turn away from Russian capitals (Stamouli, 2022).

The government in Nicosia has decided to establish a special unit to detect and combat companies operating in Cyprus with the intention of evading the economic sanctions imposed on Russia (Acosta, 2024). These actions indicate that relations between Cyprus and Russia have clearly deteriorated in terms of both political and economic dimensions. The banking sector is likely to be affected, as at least five Russian businessmen on the EU's sanctions list have large deposits in Cypriot banks (Stamouli, 2022). The RoC, based on the fact that economic sanctions affect its

economy, expressed objections regarding both the exclusion of large Russian banks from the SWIFT network and the closure of its airspace to Russian aviation. Moreover, Cyprus, together with Greece and Malta, blocked the sanctions proposed by the European Commission against Russian vessels. Furthermore, the RoC has expressed reservations regarding the sanctions related to shipping, the ban on ships with the Russian flag, or the transport of Russian natural gas, while there are also issues related to the purchase of real estate in Cyprus by Russian citizens (Tirkides, 2022).

Furthermore, due to economic sanctions, many international companies have left Russia and choose not to continue their associated commercial activities in the RoC. It must be underlined that the sanctions against Russia have a negative impact on the Cypriot economy, especially on a large group of people who still rely on Russian businessmen for their professional activities, such as accounting, legal services, banking, finance, and management (Charalambous, 2022).

Additionally, some other sectors of the Cypriot economy are also affected by the sanctions:

- a) The island's tourism industry, which accounts for over 80% of the of the Cypriot economy, and which will suffer infinitely more without Russian tourists (Stamouli, 2022).
- b) The RoC offers passports to Russian citizens in exchange for investments of more than two million euros in the island (Charalambous, 2022).
- c) Real estate is another factor to be affected, as luxury apartments are likely to be unsold.

These findings demonstrate that the Cypriot economy is influenced by Russian financial capital and commercial activities conducted on the island. The Russian state, through its embassy in the RoC, seeks to demonstrate that the RoC's choice to participate in economic sanctions is not only against Moscow's interests but also has a negative impact on the Cypriot economy. Russian foreign policy has tried to take advantage of Cyprus's unique economic characteristics to mitigate the consequences of the economic sanctions imposed by the West due to the war in Ukraine. In other words, Moscow is using an EU member state to serve its national economic interests while at the same time trying to increase its dependency relationship with the RoC to achieve these objectives.

The political and geostrategic aspects of Russian foreign policy towards Cyprus

The political and the geo-strategic interplay of national interests is one of the most critical aspects of Russian foreign policy towards Cyprus. In particular, Russian geo-strategic interests in the wider area of Cyprus make the island a key hub for projecting regional aspirations. Moscow's interest in Cyprus never ceased to exist, as

the latter's geostrategic position could serve many interests in the broader Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East (Mallinson, 2020). Moreover, Russia is constantly seeking access to warm seas, and Cyprus would greatly facilitate this long-term pursuit. Consequently, Russia's interest in becoming a major regional power in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East through decisive influence on developments and maintenance of control over the region increases its interest in developing close ties with Cyprus (Lutterbeck & Engelbrecht, 2009; Litsas 2019). Furthermore, Russia's adversarial relations with NATO render Cyprus part of this competition. On the other hand, the RoC considers Russia important due to its permanent position in the UN Security Council, which Moscow attempts to exploit for its own national interests.

While the purely political aspects of Russian-Cypriot relations are characterized by common understandings on the main international political challenges, regional geostrategic issues are primarily shaped by the fulfilment of the goals and interests of the Russian state. Moscow's support for Nicosia since 1974, following the de facto division of the island by Turkey, is the cornerstone of the deepening of Russian-Cypriot bilateral relations to date (Delanoë, 2013, p. 91). However, Russia does not hesitate to cooperate with Turkey primarily with the intention of confronting and undermining NATO unity, although their cooperation is also motivated by other interests.

From a diplomatic point of view, it has long been argued that Russia will help resolve the Cyprus issue by backing the Greek Cypriot positions (Leonard & Popescu, 2007, p. 30; Hegedüs, 2010). In fact, the standard Russian approach supports the RoC in finding a viable solution, which is confirmed by its views expressed in the UN Security Council. On the same basis, the RoC, as an EU member state, equally supports the Russian position in European affairs (Janda et. al., 2017, p. 28). Therefore, it is noted that the participation of the RoC in the EU is particularly important for Russia, especially in issues where Euro-Russian relations are competitive (Leonard & Popescu, 2007, p. 27-30). The RoC, as well as Greece, have traditionally maintained a relatively pro-Russian attitude within the EU, a fact that is beneficial for Moscow's interests (Christou, 2011). However, the competition between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus has complicated relations between Russia and these three states. It is true that Russia seeks to develop the best possible relations with all three countries, but in all cases, it clearly chooses to promote relations with the state that are most favorable to its national interests. Hence, Russia seeks to retain the privilege of using Cyprus and Greece to defend its position in the EU, but at the same time it chooses to have good relations with one of its main adversaries, Turkey (Janda et. al., 2017).

It is also worth noting that in the context of Russia's attempt to reassert its power, which it has pursued vigorously over the past decade, the sale of military equipment to other states reinforces the dependency relations that Moscow seeks with other

smaller states, including Cyprus (Kandaurov, 2002; Marten, 2019). Indeed, Vladimir Putin's strong support for Russia's military-industrial complex has shaped a more dynamic and assertive policy towards regions where Western geostrategic interests compete with Russia (Inbar & Sandler, 2001, pp. 51-58; Mallinson et. al., 2020). Recent sales of military equipment to Turkey confirm these tendencies. The Russian-Cypriot arms trade has caused similar contradictions. Among the most notable deals, Russia and Cyprus signed an agreement on military-technical cooperation in March 1996, while the RoC purchased Russian military equipment worth €430.5 million between 1991 and 2011, making the RoC Russia's fifth most important trading partner in the Mediterranean (Delanoë, 2013, p. 89). These facts show that Russia's sales of military equipment to Cyprus seek to create dependency in order to undermine NATO's interests in the island.

Consequently, issues related to the sale of military equipment to the RoC, as well as Russian military needs in the Eastern Mediterranean, are influenced by broader international challenges, such as Russia's relations with NATO and its member states (Kandaurov, 2002). There are a few notable examples that illustrate these dynamics. Among them the study proceeds to elaborate on the sale of Russian S-300 missiles to the RoC, the naval facilities offered by Cyprus to Russia during the Syrian crisis, as well as Moscow's recent sale of military equipment to Turkey.

Purchase of Russian S-300 missiles by the Republic of Cyprus

A crucial case study that highlights Russia's attempt to gain influence, through the sale of military equipment, is the supply of S-300-type missiles to the RoC. In the second half of the 1990s, Russia's active involvement in the Cyprus issue was not only intense but also of particular importance as it proposed a plan for a UN vote on the basic principles for the settlement, which was closer to the Greek Cypriot positions (Evaghorou, 2018, p. 14). At the same time, Russia was involved in the Cyprus issue through the sale of military equipment to the RoC. Specifically, in January 1997, the RoC signed an agreement with the Russian public company "Rosvooruzheniye" for the sale and delivery of 40 S-300PMU-1 missiles (Gordon, 1998). The contract for missile purchases valued at US\$200m sparked strong reactions by Turkey, which threatened to blockade the island with the aim of preventing the delivery of Russian missiles, without excluding any other military actions. Amid these reactions, Russia could intensify its rivalry with Turkey by participating more directly in the Cyprus conflict, if choosing to supply the RoC with military personnel to accompany the missiles, which would further exacerbate the tensions (Kramer, 1997). Thus, the sale of Russian missiles to Cyprus in the mid-1990s rekindled Russian interest in military influence on the island and sparked reactions from NATO member Turkey, hence leading to important conclusions about the geostrategic interactions of the NATO-Russia-RoC triangle.

Additionally, the Russian strategy sought to exploit the motives of the RoC to deter Turkey, which had outperformed both Greece and Cyprus in terms of air power. In addition to the commercial benefits, the Russian incentives from the missile sales were also of strategic importance and were placed in a broader geostrategic context. Specifically, through its efforts to strengthen its relations with the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean states, including the RoC, Moscow sought to pursue a new strategic role in the region. To achieve this, Russia effectively used two key tools: military technology and arms trade (Kandaurov, 2002). Another key reason for the agreement with the RoC on missiles was the need for Russia to negotiate on NATO's eastern enlargement. Cyprus' geostrategic position at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East may determine NATO's influence in the Mediterranean, as well as energy plans for oil and gas transportation towards the West (Evaghorou, 2018). With a potential Russian military interdependence with Cyprus, Moscow aspired to gain access to all information on NATO's moves to the Mediterranean. An additional reason for selling Russian missiles to Cyprus was Russia's attempt to encourage disagreements between NATO allies, such as Greece and Turkey, to act as a lever against the alliance's expansion to the east (Stronski, 2021). This would have reinforced Russia's role in the region by showing the US that Russia's specific geostrategic interests in the broader Mediterranean could not be ignored (Barletta, 1998).

The seriousness of the situation regarding the sale and deployment of Russian missiles in Cyprus was also confirmed by the US attitude, which had warned that if the S-300s were deployed in Cyprus, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East would come under Russian control and, as a result, Moscow could threaten the Western alliance with its radar system deployed on the Cypriot territory. The Americans believed that the Russians, through their involvement in Cyprus, had clearly sought to increase their influence in the Eastern Mediterranean against NATO presence (Gordon, 1998; Evaghorou & Mertzanidis, 2018). These American positions demonstrate, first, the importance of Cyprus's geostrategic position in the international balance of power and, second, the American concern about Russia's presence on the island, which belongs to the Western sphere of influence, given the American and British involvement in Cypriot affairs.

Despite the American and British objections, Russia was determined to deliver the missiles to the RoC, insisting that these were defensive military equipment intended to pose no threat to NATO. At the same time, Russia had warned Turkey that it would react in case the latter interfered with the deployment of the missiles. Russian reactions were based on its aim to serve financial interests through arms and technology sales and to secure its national security interests. Eventually, under pressure from Western states, including Greece, and despite strong Turkish opposition, the missiles were transferred to Crete and never deployed in Cyprus. However, the

missile negotiations demonstrated Russia's strong desire to return to the island and exploit its geostrategic significance.

Even today, the case of the S-300 missile sale to the RoC reveals many important aspects of Russian interest in Cyprus, as well as the reaction of third powers, such as the US and Turkey. Cyprus constitutes a special key issue in the competition between the US and Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean, as this contest relates to their political and economic influence on the island, and thus has regional geostrategic implications. Additionally, the nature of the great power competition shows that the US-Russian conflict over influence on the island was a decisive factor in the failure to resolve the Cyprus issue (Müftüler-Bac, 1999, p. 568).

Presence of Russian troops in Cyprus and the Syrian crisis

Another case study that offers critical conclusions on the geostrategic nature of bilateral relations, with broader international dimensions, is that of the presence of Russian ships in Cypriot ports during the Syrian crisis. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, there has been an increase in diplomatic reactions between Nicosia and Moscow, as the Russian request for the military use of the Paphos airbase and the Limassol port was strongly demanded by the Kremlin (Neary, 2015; Janda et al., 2017). To meet its strategic needs, Russia wanted to establish a long-term military base in Cyprus, or at least be able to use the military airport in Paphos and the port of Limassol in case of emergencies. In this context, Russia's coveted military and naval presence in Cyprus became more urgent after the crisis in Syria. During the ongoing talks between Russian and Cypriot officials regarding the issue, Moscow focused on the use of maritime and air facilities on the island, while the Cypriot side flatly rejected the position that the negotiating agenda included the possibility of a permanent Russian military base in Cyprus.

Furthermore, during the Syrian crisis, it was observed that the ships of the Russian navy increased their visits to the Cypriot harbors, while the Russian warships sailed to the Aegean by conducting joint exercises with the Greek Navy (Neary, 2015). For more than a year, Russia used Limassol's harbor to refuel and supply its warships. Furthermore, in February 2015, an agreement was signed between the two countries allowing the Russians to use the port of Limassol and the Paphos airbase, raising concerns for the US. After the events in Ukraine in 2014 and security concerns over Syria, the deal was important for Moscow to demonstrate its ability to undermine Western unity and prove the resilience of its influence in the eastern part of the Euro-Mediterranean region (Talukdar, 2015). The deal can also be seen as a strong response to Western demands for Russia's military withdrawal from Syria, which has been the main staging ground for Moscow's presence in the Eastern Mediterranean through its military bases in Tartus and Latakia and its political alliance with the Assad regime. This fact confirms the belief that Moscow has been pursuing an active foreign policy to maintain its access to the Mediterranean region and

highlights the great importance of acquiring permanent military presence in Cyprus as an alternative if Russia loses its influence in Syria (Evaghorou & Mertzanidis, 2018).

The prospect of a Russian base on EU territory through Cyprus – even under emergency use – has been of particular concern to the Euro-Atlantic alliance. Although the permanent status of a Russian military presence in Cyprus was never seriously considered, discussions between the two states raised great concerns among EU partners (Morley, 2013). In response to these concerns, President Nikos Anastasiadis reassured Western partners of Cyprus's Euro-Atlantic intentions, initially through membership in the Partnership for Peace Program and then with a possible full membership in NATO. Additionally, the RoC categorically rejected speculation that there was a link between military and economic issues in the talks between Russia and Cyprus, arguing that the services provided to Russian ships anchored in Cypriot ports were no different from those guaranteed to other countries under international conventions (Chamberlain, 2013). Nevertheless, it is certain that the prospect of expanding the already close defense and security ties between Nicosia and Moscow has greatly heightened the concerns of many NATO and EU member states and has had a major impact on their positions and decisions regarding Cyprus.

The crisis in Syria confirms that the Eastern Mediterranean is a strategically important region for Russia, where its regional hegemonic interests are at stake, as formally admitted by its officials (Chamberlain & Davis, 2013). In addition, the Syrian civil war revived the issue of military cooperation between Russia and Cyprus, which was renewed by a bilateral agreement on defense cooperation, as well as a binding commitment to sign a future agreement to help Russian citizens in the case of an emergency evacuation from Syria (Morley, 2013). The above confirms the efforts made by Russia to intensify its cooperation with the RoC to increase its influence both in Cyprus and in the wider Eastern Mediterranean. This, in turn, intensifies Western allies' fears of a Russian presence in an EU member state and within the sphere of influence of the Western alliance.

The Russian rapprochement with Turkey

Russia's rapprochement with Turkey is a critical factor in understanding Russian foreign policy towards Cyprus (Kontos, 2019, p. 20). The rapprochement is characterized by the recent Russian-Turkish cooperation in the defense industry with the sale of military equipment, the emergence of energy partnership (mainly in transportation), and Turkey's mediation in the Russia-Ukraine war (Bardakçı, 2021).

The agreement on the sale of the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system to the Turkish state has highlighted Moscow's position on how it seeks to serve its national interests, regardless of its good diplomatic and friendly relations with Cyprus. Despite the fact that Turkey is the main threat to the security of the RoC, with which Russia has diplomatic and economic ties, Moscow chose to sell military equipment

and deepen its cooperation with Ankara, expecting economic and geostrategic benefits (Garcia, 2018, p. 111). The \$2.5 billion deal for the purchase of S-400 missiles also alarmed the US, which announced sanctions against Turkey. However, both Turkey and Russia implemented the agreement, which, in terms of the Russian foreign policy, demonstrates Moscow's persistence and determination to gain influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, regardless of their Western attachment (Lutterbeck & Engelbrecht, 2009).

Another aspect of the Russian-Turkish rapprochement is energy. Russia seeks to establish a relationship with Turkey to promote its energy interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. By investing in Gazprom's "TurkStream" program, which delivers gas to Europe through Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary, Moscow seeks to circumvent Western energy interests and counterbalance Western aspirations in Eastern Mediterranean energy issues, which also involve Cyprus (Neary, 2015). Despite Russia's diplomatic reactions criticizing Turkey's activities in Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), where Turkish actions deny the RoC's right to explore and exploit natural resources, Moscow continues to deepen its relations with Ankara and views with suspicion the cooperation of Cyprus, Egypt, Greece and Israel in transporting gas to Europe, overtaking Turkey and competing with Russian pipelines. Thus, while acknowledging the diplomatic criticism voiced by Moscow, Turkey adheres to a controversial attitude driven by Russian needs and interests. These interests are dictated by the desire to protect Russia's political and economic benefits as a major energy supplier to European states. Consequently, when Cypriot energy interests compete and Turkish priorities coincide with Russia's, Moscow naturally cooperates with Ankara. This proves that when it comes to strategic aspects, Russia ignores positive and friendly diplomatic relations with small state partners.

The recent cooperation between the two states in dealing with the Syrian crisis is another aspect of Russian-Turkish relations. From this perspective, the partnership between the two is deepening, while Russian intentions to use Cyprus in the management of the Syrian crisis are diminishing. During the early stages of the Syrian crisis, Russia's interests conflicted with those of Turkey, and Moscow sought to use military facilities in the RoC. However, now that Russian-Turkish interests concur, Moscow's orientation toward the military exploitation of Cyprus is changing. Consequently, the Russian strategy is regularly adjusted in terms of how power correlation is changing, especially against weaker states such as Cyprus.

Lastly, Ankara's role in the Russia-Ukraine war strengthened the Russian-Turkish relations, a fact that affected the Kremlin's stance on Cyprus. In addition to diplomatic contacts due to Turkey's mediation in the Russo-Ukrainian war, relations between Moscow and Ankara continue to develop on political, military, economic, and cultural levels. There are several examples of this change. Besides continued cooperation on natural gas, Russian companies are currently building Turkey's first nuclear power plant at Akkuyu, while Ankara is also planning to buy

a second array of S-400 missiles. Taking advantage of this relationship, Russia seeks to gain benefits by using Turkey as a key state, which brings Moscow closer to the Turkish position on the Cyprus issue. New developments confirm this conclusion, such as the rare Russian diplomatic references to the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (Le Gall, 2024). Thus, the Russian strategy in Cyprus is evidently adjusted to Moscow’s regional interests and the needs of its partners.

Another important implication of the Russian-Ukrainian war is that the conflict in Cyprus bears a striking resemblance to Moscow’s actions in Ukraine. The RoC is facing a similar situation due to the Turkish invasion in 1974 and the illegal Turkish occupation of the northern part of the island until today (Hadar, 2023). The government of the RoC has described the invasion of Ukraine as illegal and compared it to the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. Thus, Russian foreign policy may change its political position on the Cyprus issue and move closer to Turkey’s positions. Finally, the fact that the RoC sent symbolic military aid to Ukraine officially shows that it stands against Russia and sides with its EU allies. This is a strong diplomatic aspect that could affect how Russian foreign policy and strategy will deal with the RoC. At the same time, it should be noted that Turkey also supplies weapons to Ukraine, such as Bayraktar drones, which can also negatively affect Russian foreign policy toward Turkey. In any case, Ankara has more to offer to Moscow than Nicosia, and thus the impact of these Turkish arms sales may be contained. Nevertheless, Ankara is not siding with Moscow, but rather taking advantage of both sides of the war, which would make Russia suspicious not only of Cyprus but also of Turkey.

Russian positions on energy issues related to Cyprus

An area where Russian foreign policy and strategy have recently shown strong interest is the development of energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly in light of the exploration and discovery of hydrocarbon deposits in the EEZ of the RoC, making it a small Eastern Mediterranean state with large energy potential (Stergiou, 2017). In addition to Moscow’s pursuit of cooperation between the RoC and its energy companies, Russian foreign policy seeks to link energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean with its own strategic benefits, such as limiting the dynamic promotion of regional gas resources on the European continent.

One of Russia’s main objectives is to promote Russian oil and gas companies to operate in the Cypriot EEZ. As the Cypriot government intends to turn the country into a regional energy hub due to the discovery of exploitable hydrocarbon sources, Russian oil and gas companies, with the support of the Kremlin, are closely monitoring exploitation developments in the Cypriot EEZ, anticipating their involvement in the business plan. Russia has also indicated its intention to assist its companies in declaring their energy interests in the Eastern Mediterranean region (Ibid.). To date, no Russian company has cooperated with the RoC on oil and gas

exploration, as this would run counter to the promotion of the interests of Western energy corporations. In this context, the RoC argues that Russian companies are encouraged to participate in the bids for hydrocarbon discovery, while Moscow continues to express its interest in the exploration and extraction of natural gas deposits in the Cypriot EEZ. This contradiction demonstrates that while Russia has considerable leverage in the Cyprus conflict, it is unable to influence Western energy interests (Cropsey & Brown, 2014). While energy giants linked to Western states secured important shares in the currently developing Cypriot gas industry, Russia is notably absent as a beneficiary. This absence is particularly noteworthy, as Russia has developed significant energy deals with other regional actors and exerts extensive economic influence over the RoC (Kacziba, 2021, p. 3).

Another aspect of the Russian foreign policy in relation to energy issues in Cyprus is the linkage of energy issues with geostrategic parameters concerning the wider region of the Eastern Mediterranean, but also with the resulting competition for Russian energy exports, especially to Europe (Stronski, 2021). Russia's foreign policy has supported the Israel-Cyprus-Turkey partnership for hydrocarbon exploitation, instead of the Israel-Greece-Cyprus cooperative axis. This is because Turkey is a pivotal hub for Russian energy transportation, and thus Moscow's interests would be better served by an Israel-Cyprus-Turkey hydrocarbons partnership (Ellinas, 2016, p. 19-23). Moreover, by observing Turkey's strong reaction to the RoC's attempt to unilaterally exploit the hydrocarbons in the Cypriot EEZ, as well as the Cypriot concerns due to these reactions, Russia could take advantage of any diplomatic assistance it might be asked to provide to the RoC. Thus, the exploitation of hydrocarbons in the Cypriot EEZ, due to their huge geostrategic and economic value, may disrupt traditional Western alliances, affecting, to a large extent, relations between Russia and Cyprus. In addition, Cyprus, like Greece, defends Russian positions in the EU on energy issues, while allowing other member states to hide behind these positions to serve their own interests, which, in conjunction with the Cypriot hydrocarbons, encourages further cooperation between Moscow and Nicosia (Leonard & Popescu, 2007, p. 30; Christou, 2011, p. 230-231).

Against this background, the role of the US in the region and Cyprus' commitments to its Western partners in the EU on energy issues should not be overlooked. Despite the fact that the US supports the right of Cyprus to explore and develop its energy resources, it will definitely attempt to secure its hegemonic interests in the region while aiming to limit or even prevent the intensification of Russian-Cypriot relations on energy issues (Chamberlain, 2013). In this regard, the US has welcomed occasional statements by Cypriot officials about Cyprus' commitment to strengthening its ties with NATO, noting that the Washington has a consistent policy on the development of the island's offshore resources (Chamberlain & Davis, 2013). Moreover, the new American geostrategic features, expressed in the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act, recognize the vital importance of

Cyprus to American interests in the Eastern Mediterranean region (Tziampiris, 2021).

Lastly, regarding the issues of the existing Russian-Cypriot cooperation in the energy sector, Russia remains one of the main fuel suppliers on the island, while there is a legal framework for further development of bilateral relations in this field (Janda et. al., 2017, p. 9). In particular, the Russian companies “Itera” and “Lukoil” operate commercially on the island. Additionally, the company “Tekhnopromexport” is keen to cooperate with Cyprus in the field of modernization and construction of electric power facilities, as well as the supply of spare parts for power generation plants.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is reasonable to argue that the current situation regarding Russia’s behavior towards Cyprus will not change dramatically in the near future. Friendly relations between the governments will be maintained, despite any disturbances caused by the influence of third parties, such as the EU, the US, NATO or Turkey. Likewise, Russia will give precedence to its own geostrategic interests in Cyprus, irrespective of whether these comport or not with the Cypriot ones, such as the recent rapprochement between Russia and Turkey. Thus, the main conclusion of this analysis is that Russia’s foreign policy towards Cyprus is articulated on the basis of specific national interests, allowing cooperation in certain areas (e.g. diplomacy and economy) while hindering partnership in others (e.g. military and energy).

Russia will continue to seek at least a partial deployment of military services on the island; this will be further intensified as its regional power and its desire to have a stronger political role in the Eastern Mediterranean and the wider Middle East grow. This is also demonstrated by the recent crisis in Syria, which indicates that Russia will seek to gain the benefits of military dependence of the RoC. This, however, has a direct impact on the relations of the RoC with its Western allies and should constantly be balanced between the obligations arising from its participation in EU institutions and any cooperation with Russia. Such dilemmas faced by small states can be exploited by major powers, including Russia, to serve their national interests.

Furthermore, Moscow will continue to support bilateral trade, which will remain at the same pace or may intensify unless there is a dramatic change in the power relations of the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition, as long as the financial and legal facilities provided by the RoC, through its legal framework, and the privileged financial and tax arrangements exist, Russian capital will continue to flow to Cyprus and operate through offshore companies. This continues to hold true despite the fact that Cyprus is no longer considered an offshore jurisdiction as it once was.

With regard to efforts to resolve the Cyprus conflict, reaching an agreement may not benefit Russian national interests aimed at maintaining influence on the island. Despite Moscow's commitment to a sustainable settlement of the Cyprus problem as soon as possible, its resolution would lead to a state completely dependent on the Western alliance and would limit Russian penetration. While the RoC continues to invest in Russia's support in the UN Security Council and diplomatic summits, for a viable and functional solution to the Cyprus conflict, it should be noted that the Russian diplomatic position seeks to achieve greater influence on the island and maintain the benefits of the RoC's support within the EU.

Finally, any significant developments in Russia's foreign policy and strategy regarding energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean will have a variety of impacts on the geostrategic cluster of relations of all the states involved. As the exploration of hydrocarbons in the EEZ of the RoC increases, so does the geostrategic interest in controlling the region. Consequently, competition for the political and economic benefits of exploiting these resources is likely to intensify, trapping Cyprus and other small states in the region between competing great power interests.

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