



Russia's Eastern Mediterranean Policy

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Russia treats the Eastern Mediterranean as an area of competition with the United States and the European Union. It wants to control the security of this subregion and the extraction and transport of its energy resources to Europe. To achieve this, it has increased political contact with every Mediterranean country, including Turkey, Greece, and Israel, despite some conflicting interests. Russia's activity challenges both EU and NATO influence in the region and its stability.

Russia's Goals and Motives. Since the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015, the Eastern Mediterranean has become an important element in achieving Russia's global foreign policy goals. It seeks to undermine Western countries' military and anti-crisis capabilities in Syria and the [resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#). Russia counts on weakening coherence within the North Atlantic Alliance by [loosening Turkey's ties with the U.S.](#) It aspires to the role of mediator in the Mediterranean area by representing the interests of selected states and political actors in the UN Security Council (Syria, Palestine). It is interested in maintaining a dominant position in the supply of energy resources to the EU. It does this by joining regional exploitation of resource fields and building up Russian-controlled infrastructure, weakening competitive Mediterranean projects, which it then presents as uncertain and unprofitable. Russia's goals are made more achievable by regional rivalries, [maritime delimitation disputes](#), and inconsistent U.S. and EU policies in this area. An additional reason for rebuilding Russian influence in the region is justifying President Vladimir Putin's imperial policy in the eyes of Russian society and creating access to lucrative contracts for people close to the president.

Energy Issues. [The discovery of new gas fields in the Mediterranean \(including the Leviathan and Tamar\)](#) is a challenge for Russia's energy policy. Russia is interested in the export of energy resources, whose revenues comprise up to a third of the Russian federal budget (31.8%, as of 1 May). At the same time, in accordance with the energy strategy announced as of 2 April, Russia sees falling demand for raw materials in the EU. It seeks to maintain a dominant position in gas supplies to the European market (Russia has about 35-40% of EU gas imports) and wants to ensure gas supplies to the Mediterranean. At the end of April 2019, Gazprom completed the construction of the first branch of the Turkish Stream pipeline, with a capacity of 15.75 billion m³ (bcm). The second branch with equal capacity opened in January. This allows Russia not only to switch some gas transit from Ukraine but also to undermine the profitability of competing projects, such as the gas pipeline from Israel—EastMed—and from Azerbaijan—Southern Gas Corridor (SGC). Both projects are supported by the U.S. and EU, [through the East Mediterranean Gas Forum](#), which includes Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Jordan, Italy, and the Palestinian Authority. The forum promotes the diversification of Europe's energy suppliers, which is not in Russia's interest.

To influence the extraction of local raw materials, Russia began to seek participation in regional energy projects. In 2017, the Russian state-owned Rosneft acquired [a 30% stake in the Egyptian Zohr gas field](#). Russian companies have also won land contracts for the extraction and exploration of oil and natural gas in

Libya (As Sarah) and Syria (Block 7 on the left bank of the Euphrates and the 23rd, north of Damascus) and other resources. Putin associates are responsible for implementation of these projects, including Gennady Timchenko (phosphate magnate) and Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose [paramilitary Wagner Group](#) frequently is contracted to protect installations and infrastructure. Not all of the Russian initiatives have been successful. They have failed so far to enter the Israeli energy market, despite a political agreement between Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Also, because of the Lebanon-Israel border dispute, the February 2018 contract on cooperation between Russia and Lebanon regarding off-shore hydrocarbon exploration was not implemented.

Security Issues. Russia is rebuilding its military presence in the region, diminished after the fall of the USSR, as well as influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. The support given to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad gave Russia long-term access to two bases (49 years from 2017): a naval base in Tartus and an air base in Khmeimim. The Tartus port, expanded by the Russians at a cost of \$500 million, can accommodate 11 warships and perform operational capabilities throughout the Mediterranean. By supplying weapons and military equipment (including S-300 systems), as well as controlling airspace, Russia is helping Assad regain control over Syrian territory. The Russian authorities want, among other things, for U.S. troops to withdraw from this country. The regime's military activities, backed by Russia, increase the human migration pressure on Turkey and the EU. Russia's policy in Syria also leads to tensions in Russian-Turkish relations. In February in [Idlib province, shelling \(probably Russian\) killed 36 Turkish](#) soldiers. Russia will use the escalation of hostilities in northern Syria as leverage in its relations with the EU to convince the Europeans to increase funding to rebuild Syria and to stop irregular migration and other effects of the war.

To increase its international position at the expense of the U.S. and the EU, Russia proposes mediation in negotiations regarding, among others, delimitation of borders (Israel-Lebanon, Syria-Lebanon), regulation of conflicts and crises (Syria, Libya), [as well as talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority](#). Thanks to extensive diplomatic contacts, Russia has the opportunity to talk to various political forces and Eastern Mediterranean countries. However, its activity does not lead to the resolution of the region's problems. Instead, the Russian actions are often at odds with international restrictions such as the UN embargo on the supply of arms to Libya. In that country, [Russia supports the UN-unrecognised Gen. Khalifa Haftar](#) with experienced Wagner Group fighters from Syria. Thanks to this, Russia is gaining support from Arab countries, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, but has come into conflict with Turkey, which supports Haftar's opponent, Libyan Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj and blocks European initiatives. For example, on 31 March when the EU set up a military mission to implement the resolution on the Libyan arms embargo, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called on the Union to obtain approval from the UN Security Council, where Russia has the right of veto.

Conclusions. Russia's activity in the Mediterranean is part of its global aims, rooted in the rivalry with the U.S., regaining a privileged position vis-à-vis the EU, and securing the future of the Russian power elite. Russia will continue to undermine U.S. military capabilities, including through the supply of military equipment and energy cooperation with Turkey, and to weaken NATO, which it perceives as the most important threat to its security. Russia's ability to simultaneously maintain relations with various states and political actors of the Eastern Mediterranean increases its negotiating position vis-à-vis EU countries, namely Italy and France. Through its involvement in Syria and Libya, it would like to return to international cooperation to stabilise these countries in exchange for lifting EU sanctions. Due to its own financial constraints, Russia would be keen to help the EU rebuild damaged territories. Launching talks with European countries may also be important for Putin, whose public confidence ranking has fallen to the lowest level in history (59%), and in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of Russians (61%) would like good relations with Western countries.

Russia is using the Eastern Mediterranean's instability and conflicts, as well as maritime delimitation disputes, to weaken competition from countries in the region on the European gas and oil market while engaging in some projects to increase its revenues and safeguard the interests of influential oligarchs in energy contracts. Therefore, it is in the interest of the EU in particular to increase the stability of its southern neighbourhood, to further support energy cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean (EastMed and SGC).