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THE BLACK SEA AND EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN IN TRANSITION:
ENERGY GEOPOLITICS, SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN A
CHANGING WORLD ORDER*

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Esteemed members of the academic community

Distinguished guests

Dear friends

It is a great pleasure to be addressing today the International Conference on the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean. Two regions of major geostrategic importance for world peace and stability, particularly in view of the recent developments in Ukraine which mark a transition to a new era. I would like to congratulate the organizers of this event for their initiative to launch the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean Review, a new peer reviewed journal, the first of its kind.

I am certain that the journal will promote fruitful interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research and dialogue on an array of issues, and will contribute to developing a better understanding of our world, as well as discovering sustainable solutions to common challenges.

As I said before today's Conference is focusing on two extremely significant regions. Let me elaborate on this: Why is the Black Sea of paramount importance?

As always, the answer is geography. The Euxine Sea connects Europe with Asia and plays a pivotal role in world trade. On its waves, millions of tons of merchandise are shipped to the Mediterranean, and from there to anywhere in the world. Likewise, it is crucial to energy security. Pipelines under its waters pump Russian gas to Turkey and Southeastern Europe via TurkStream. In addition, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline passes through three countries of the region. Thus,

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* The conference was the launching event of the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean Review (BSEMR), a new peer reviewed journal co-founded by the Laboratory for Black Sea and Mediterranean Studies (Faculty of Political and Economic Sciences, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) and the School of Law of the University of Nicosia. This took place on June 10, 2022.

the wider Black Sea region has become a new strategic frontier for Europe, Russia and the United States.

As far as the Eastern Mediterranean is concerned, we also had our share of conflicts. The Eastern Mediterranean is of course found at a geostrategic location, being at the crossroads of three continents, which has proved to be both a curse and a blessing. The fact that in 2019 the American Congress passed legislation reshaping U.S. policy on the eastern Mediterranean is proof of the importance attached to the region on the global stage in recent years.

In other words, both regions have always been apples of discord for a reason, or rather for a number of reasons.

The dramatic events that are currently taking place in the Black Sea have had devastating consequences and mark a turning point; a transition to a new era. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is an attempt to reestablish Russian hegemony in the Black Sea and stem the tide of US influence on its neighboring countries. For Russia, the Black Sea serves as a gateway to major markets in southern Europe and secures its access into the Mediterranean.

It is rather evident, that the war in Ukraine poses new threats and challenges for the global community, from a nightmare scenario of a WWIII and a global nuclear holocaust to energy supply shortages or a prolonged food crisis that will add strain on nations already suffering from famines. Before the war, Ukraine was one of the world's top agricultural suppliers and was on track to become the world's third-biggest exporter of wheat.

Energy security is yet another prominent issue. Under normal market conditions, the European Union imported around 90% of its natural gas consumption with the Russian Federation supplying about 40% of the EU's total gas consumption. There is no doubt that the EU is largely dependent on Russian energy. The fact that it is relying on an external supplier has clear national security and energy implications for member states.

The outbreak of the war triggered spikes in global energy prices. Ensuring alternative, affordable energy supplies and a reasonable blend of sources is urgently required.

These said, it is worth analyzing a key actor's role in our neighborhood: and that is of course Turkey. Turkey has been a destabilizing actor, a disruptive force whose revisionist and aggressive acts not only against its neighbours but also in the broader region, in blatant violation of international law, gives rise to new tensions and hinders cooperation for the mutual benefit of everyone.

Despite Turkey's continued provocations, our side remains focused in creating conducive conditions for the resumption of the negotiations the soonest possible. To this end, I have put forward a proposal consisting of win-win Confidence Building Measures to end the ongoing impasse and after a long period pave the way for peace talks to resume. Not surprisingly, Ankara's authoritarianism is also

expressed in internal affairs with an alarming backsliding on the respect of human rights, democracy and freedom of press among other during recent years.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has offered a new opportunity to Turkey to become a key regional player. The Montreux Convention gave Turkey control over access the Black Sea. Days after the invasion, on February 28, Ankara closed the straits to all warships. Commercial ships loaded with looted Ukrainian wheat travel through the straits allowing Russia to sell the cargo to non-EU countries. Although Turkey has officially condemned Russia's offensive in Ukraine, it has positioned itself as a neutral mediator and refused to join the West in implementing sanctions against Moscow pursuing once again its own agenda.

This is a paradox which creates a series of political and institutional dilemmas.

On the contrary, Cyprus has joined the consensus at the EU level in imposing a series of measures despite the economic repercussions and direct impact on our economy. However, the evasion of sanctions is the greatest threat to our unified response.

We should be vigilant of the attempt by some countries to benefit from the suffering of the Ukrainian people.

As regards the environmental challenges in the regions of the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, it is worth mentioning that in the latter half of the twentieth century, industrialization, urban growth and other developments have had profound consequences such as the decline of major fish species, loss of jobs, migration from coastal areas to urban centres and the list is long sadly.

To conclude, the Black Sea Region and the Eastern Mediterranean both have tremendous economic potential which could shape the future energy market. At the same time, we are confronted with various common challenges: environmental degradation and potential ecological disasters, mass population movements, migration and asylum-seekers flows, transformations of our demographic structure, energy security.

Because of the ongoing war in Ukraine prices of essential products are skyrocketing. We are now faced with the possibility of a global food crisis.

The time is therefore ripe to work collectively, aiming at creating synergies and cooperation, in order to counter and address the various challenges we are faced with. I personally believe that the promotion of the concept of "regional multilateralism" must be the new norm of cooperation between the countries of the region.

As far as Cyprus is concerned, we will continue to strengthen and institutionalise our Trilateral and Multilateral mechanisms of cooperation with the countries of our region, in order to reach a common denominator to the emerging security challenges.