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EXPLORING THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF THE
EUROASIA, EUROAFRICA AND TÜRKİYE-NORTH
CYPRUS INTERCONNECTOR PROJECTS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR CYPRUS

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The EuroAsia Interconnector, the EuroAfrica Interconnector, and the Türkiye-north Cyprus Interconnector are infrastructure initiatives in the Eastern Mediterranean aimed at meeting various energy policy goals. Their ultimate objective is to provide a secure and sustainable supply of electricity to the countries involved, while also ending Cyprus's and Israel's electricity grid isolation. Consequently, multiple actors, including the EU, are supporting these projects through political backing, funding through the EU Projects of Common Interest program, and favourable regulations.

The Electricity Authority of Cyprus (EAC) owns and operates three power stations: Vasilikos, Dhekelia, and Moni Power Stations, with a total installed capacity of 1478 megawatts (MW); the northern part of Cyprus has a combined installed capacity of 404 megawatts (MW), which includes thermic and diesel generator sources.¹ The primary organization responsible for producing, transmitting, and distributing electricity in the north is the Cyprus Turkish Electricity Authority (KIBTEK). Under critical circumstances, such as major power system interruptions, the inter-island exchange of electricity is managed through the north-south synchronized interconnector built in January 2019. In this respect, the interconnection represents a significant tool for the energy security of both parties. The synchronized cable has offered the south a greater degree of wind utilization, while in the north it has reduced the frequency and duration of periodic blackouts.² In the Cyprus context, the role of the interconnector is confined to ensuring energy security. However, the interconnector would be best used within a wider context, i.e., as part of an interconnected Mediterranean power system that would foster a low-carbon regional energy framework. In this regard, the above-named regional interconnector projects involving Cyprus should embrace this broader vision and extend beyond considerations of the security of supply and geopolitical fault lines.

Projects in Focus

The EuroAsia Interconnector, which is entering its construction phase, aims to connect the national electricity grids of Israel, Cyprus, and Greece via a 1,208 km subsea HVDC cable. The interconnector is designed to be a reliable route for electric energy transmission to and from Europe and will contribute to various EU energy targets, including: ending the energy isolation of Cyprus as an EU member state via a multidirectional flow of energy; contributing to the completion of the European Internal Market; helping the EU achieve its (at least) 15% cross-border electricity interconnection target by 2030.³ At the time of writing, however, the EuroAsia Interconnector project is facing challenges related to its financing, as confirmed by George Papanastasiou, the Energy Minister of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC),⁴ which may jeopardize the project. Should the project require financial assistance, the RoC must carefully assess the value of the interconnector in regard to the national emission objectives. According to a European Network of Transmission System Operators analysis, the EuroAsia Interconnector has the potential to achieve a notable reduction in carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, ranging from 1.3 to 6.8 million tonnes annually.⁵ This corresponds to approximately 21% to 110% of Cyprus's total emissions.⁶ The interconnector is also expected to stimulate investments in renewable energy sources. At present, it appears that significant delays to the project are likely; in fact these delays have already elicited a reaction from the European Union (EU), which is providing co-financing for the initiative.

¹ The Cyprus Turkish Electricity Authority (KIBTEK). Official website: <https://www.kibtek.com>

² Personal Communication, Mr. Ahmet Hüdaoğlu, former Chairman of KIB-TEK Board of Directors, 19 March 2023, Nicosia.

³ European Commission. Electricity Interconnection Targets. Retrieved from https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/infrastructure/electricity-interconnection-targets_en

⁴ E. Hazou (July 18, 2023). Interconnector project runs into financing problems. *Cyprus Mail*. Retrieved from <https://cyprus-mail.com/2023/07/18/interconnector-project-runs-into-financing-problems/>

⁵ Hazou, Interconnector Project.

⁶ Ibid.

The EuroAfrica Interconnector will link Egypt's electricity grids to Europe via Cyprus. The interconnector intends to create an energy hub for Africa and the Arab world by developing an Eastern Mediterranean Energy Corridor. This would serve as a new, alternative source of energy supply for Europe, with electricity produced from the gas reserves and renewable resources in Egypt and Cyprus. There is a growing interest in accessing Egyptian electricity, which can be attributed to the ongoing strife in Ukraine and the consequential disruption of Europe- Russia gas supply connections. This situation has resulted in a pressing need for the European Union (EU) to explore viable alternatives in the realm of energy sourcing. Egypt, in close geographical proximity to Europe, manifests tremendous potential for harnessing solar and wind power. We note, too, that the EuroAfrica is only one of several interconnector initiatives envisaged to establish power transmission links between Egypt and Europe. Concurrently, there are two other direct interconnection projects: the 3-Gigawatt (GW) Greece-Egypt Interconnector (GREGY), and the 2-GW Greece-Africa Power Interconnector (GAP), although neither involves Cyprus. Considering Egypt's aspiration to transmit energy to Europe within a five-year timeframe,⁷ any financial impediments like those encountered in the EuroAsia case could prompt Egypt to prioritize accelerating alternative interconnection initiatives in the region, potentially leaving Cyprus behind.

Constructing an interconnector between the *de facto* TRNC and Türkiye was proposed in 2016 in the context of an energy cooperation agreement signed in İstanbul between Türkiye and the TRNC.⁸ The agreement included building an interconnector and renewing the extant electricity infrastructure to improve the electricity supply security of the TRNC, as well as cooperating on utilizing more renewable energy and exploring new oil and natural gas resources. Earlier, in 2011, the two parties signed another energy cooperation agreement, which led to exploration and drilling activities in the northeastern part of the island. In regard to the cable route, former Energy Minister of the TRNC, Sunat Atun, stated that the connector would be laid between a new transformer station based in Akkuyu, Mersin, and the Tekneçik transformer station in northern Cyprus.⁹ In January 2023, the former Vice President of the Republic of Türkiye, Fuat Oktay, and the Prime Minister of the TRNC, Ünal Üstel, announced together that the cable remains on Türkiye's agenda and the project will be realized in the near future.¹⁰ A recent memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed between AKSA Energy and KIB-TEK (Turkish Cypriot Electricity Authority), reiterated that the preliminary assessments aimed at initiating the procedural steps for formulating and establishing the interconnection infrastructure between Türkiye and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) would be conducted over a year.¹¹ The MoU stated that the financing of the cable itself would be undertaken by AKSA Energy. Emphasis on the funding aspect is crucial, as there has been concern over the financing.¹²

⁷ S. El Wardany (18 November 2022). Egypt to Speed Up Plans to Export Power and Hydrogen to Europe. Bloomberg. Retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-18/egypt-to-speed-up-plans-to-export-power-and-hydrogen-to-europe#xi4y7vzkg>.

⁸ *Daily Sabah* (2016). Turkey to supply electricity to North Cyprus with undersea cable by 2017. October 13. Retrieved from <https://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2016/10/13/turkey-to-supply-electricity-to-north-cyprus-with-undersea-cable-by-2017>.

⁹ Anadolu Agency (2017). Turkey Cyprus Power Cable Links Akkuyu Tekneçik Lines, October 16. Retrieved from <https://www.anews.com.tr/economy/2017/10/16/turkey-cyprus-power-cable-links-akkuyu-tekneçik-lines>

¹⁰ Kıbrıs Ada Haber (2023). KKTÇ'nin Elektrik Sorunu Çözülüyor [The electricity problem in the TRNC is going to be resolved], January 18. <https://www.kibrisadahaber.com/kktcnin-elektrik-sorunu-cozuluyor-435595h.htm>

¹¹ *Özgür Gazete* (2023). İşte Aksa Kıbtek Sözleşmesi, July 22. Retrieved from <https://www.ozgurgazetekibris.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Kalecik-III-Sozlesmesi-1-Agustos-2023.pdf>

¹² Personal Communication. Mr. Nami Özdiç, Cypriot politician and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, 31 January 2023, Nicosia.

Agreements and Divisions over Proposed Interconnector Projects

Electricity certainly can be seen as an important avenue of strategic cooperation for the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities. A degree of such cooperation is already in place, as discussed above (north-south interconnector). Now, irrespective of the political settlement of the Cyprus Problem, both sides need to connect to a larger network; any attempts at self-sufficiency would best be avoided. Here we can anticipate various scenarios, depending on the strategy, approach, and partnerships that would be involved in building these systems, as well as a range of economic, environmental, and political/geopolitical consequences. These conjectural consequences are primarily dependent on the mutual trust between the two communities and the future interoperability of these systems.

In this section, we examine different scenarios and consider their potential for regional cooperation versus conflict. Additionally, we look into the potential outcomes for the countries involved according to each scenario.

Envisaged Scenarios for Cyprus

Scenario 1: System-building alongside geopolitical tensions and political divides yet within the EU framework for all actors involved

In this scenario, the Euro-Asia and Euro-Africa projects are actualized as planned, and north Cyprus and Türkiye are also connected via a subsea HVDC cable, linking the *de facto* TRNC to a larger European grid via Türkiye, with minor political implications for Türkiye resulting from the *de facto* nature of the TRNC. However, the interconnector that already exists between the north and the south of Cyprus is abandoned as a political move by one or the other side, based on the rationale that the energy problem is already addressed with the other interconnectors.

Economic criterion: All involved parties will benefit economically from the EuroAsia and EuroAfrica Interconnectors. Foremost, the uninterrupted and multidirectional flow of energy via larger grids will improve energy supply security for all involved countries as well as for the EU system.

Uncertainties around the investment costs of the subsea HVDC cable between Türkiye and the TRNC make the project rather ambiguous.¹³ It is necessary to ensure that both the TRNC power plants and the subsea HVDC cable between Türkiye and the TRNC are efficiently and economically operated¹⁴

The EuroAsia and the EuroAfrica interconnectors are technically ambitious projects. The fact that the lowest points of both interconnectors would lie 3,000 meters deep could create technical difficulties during the construction process. These two interconnectors are also designed to be the longest subsea interconnector cables in the world, and a number of marine geohazards such as submarine mass movements must be considered. Further, one of the most destructive subduction zone earthquakes in European history occurred just offshore Crete.¹⁵ Thus, in such a scenario, i.e., in case of any technical problems with one of the interconnectors, there must be the option to connect to diverse markets to ensure uninterrupted electricity supply. It would therefore make sense to maintain the north-south interconnector after the large interconnector projects are realized, as this would not only have tremendous economic benefits for the island, but would also increase energy security in overall terms.

¹³ KIBTEK (2018). Electricity Production Scenarios Report, October <https://www.kibtek.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Uretim-Senaryolari-14.11.2018-Revson.pdf>, p.62.

¹⁴ Personal Communication, Hüdaoğlu. Op.cit.

¹⁵H. Kopp, et al. (2021). Marine geohazards: Safeguarding society and the Blue Economy from a hidden threat. In A. Muñiz Piniella, P. Kellett, R. van den Brand, B. Alexander, A. Rodríguez Perez, J. Van Elslander & J.J. Heymans, eds. Position Paper 26 of the European Marine Board, Ostend, Belgium.

Environmental Criterion: Because this scenario would eventually solve the two sides' grid isolation problem, this option would promote the substantial development of renewable energy sources, leading to an island-wide reduction of CO2 emissions. Both communities will be able to enjoy sustainable energy in this context, and the RoC will be able to contribute to its long-term decarbonization objectives of decreasing greenhouse gas emissions by 24% by the year 2030.¹⁶ This scenario also contributes to the European Union target of achieving at least 15% electricity interconnection among member states by 2030.¹⁷

Political/Geopolitical criterion: This situation does not support a future reunification of Cyprus; instead it promotes division and self-sufficiency. It also excludes Türkiye from regional energy sector cooperative efforts, while Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt further strengthen their cooperation through shared infrastructure.

In this situation, the decision to abandon the north-south electricity interconnector poses a political as well as an energy security-related risk, as there is no clear reference guaranteeing electricity interconnectivity in any relevant official document. The European Union can play a significant role in resolving this issue. The "Green Line Regulation" (Council Regulation 866/2004) defines the conditions for the movement of people and goods from non-government-controlled areas to those controlled by the TRNC.¹⁸ The Commission confirms that Turkish Cypriots' personal rights as EU citizens remain unaffected, even if they live in areas outside the EU customs and fiscal territory. To ensure the energy security of both communities, it is necessary to implement additional regulations at the EU level in relation to this matter. Furthermore, and relevant to this scenario, Longo and Jaradat¹⁹ argue that the EuroAsia Interconnector has legal and political implications for the Palestinian Authority (PA), since the EU and European states have legal responsibilities vis-à-vis Israel's contested settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). Assistance provided by the EU and European states to the EuroAsia Interconnector can affect their legal standpoint with respect to Israel's contested settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). In other words, the EuroAsia Interconnector will enable the transmission and exchange of electricity between Europe, Israel, and the settlements that are considered illegal.²⁰ The EuroAsia Interconnector also conflicts with the EU's 2013 Guidelines that specify the conditions under which Israeli entities and activities in the occupied territories are eligible for EU grants, financial instruments, and prizes.²¹

Scenario 2: System-building alongside geopolitical tensions and political divides, but outside the EU framework for the de facto TRNC

In this scenario, the projects connecting Europe and Asia and Europe and Africa are completed, and north Cyprus and Türkiye are interconnected too, but the TRNC is not connected to the Turkish power grid. Instead, it is connected to a separate generator in Türkiye. This approach would prevent any political

¹⁶ Cyprus Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan (2020), January, p. 48 https://energy.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-01/cy_final_necp_main_en_0.pdf

¹⁷ European Commission. Electricity Interconnection Targets. Official website.

https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/infrastructure/electricity-interconnection-targets_en#eu-electricity-interconnection-target

¹⁸ F. Ersözer, (2019). *The Green Line Regulation and its potential for cooperation in Cyprus* (No. 9). PCC Report.

¹⁹ A. Longo & I. Jaradat (2020). The Palestinian Human Rights Organizations Council (PHROC) Legal Briefing on the EuroAsia Interconnector, October 7. PHROC. https://www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/2020/10/10/ij-phroc-legal-briefing-euroasia-interconnector-final-07-10-2020-1602308650.pdf.

²⁰ *ibid.* p.7.

²¹ The European Union (2013). Guidelines on the eligibility of Israeli entities and their activities in the territories occupied by Israel since June 1967 for grants, prizes, and financial instruments funded by the EU from 2014 onwards. *Official Journal of the European Union*, July 19, 2013/C 205/05. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/044b0978-9f3f-4cdc-b0df-827d94af5c6c/language-en>.

issues that might arise in regard to TRNC status within the ENTSO-E context. The interconnector between the north and south is abandoned as a tactical choice by one side or the other as in the first scenario.

Economic criterion: The security of energy supply for all countries involved as well as the EU system will increase. Only the TRNC, which will be connected only to an isolated generator, will suffer. As such, this connection will not help end the energy isolation of the Turkish Cypriot community in real terms. In a free market context, electricity trading via interconnectors is based on the principles of supply and demand, where buyers and sellers negotiate and agree on the price and volume of electricity to be traded daily.²² The transmission of electricity from Türkiye to the TRNC will be a dependency relationship. Since TRNC will not have equal access to an electricity market that includes all relevant players, it will not have access to a fair and transparent pricing system either.

Environmental criterion: Although the entire island will no longer have one electricity system due to the abandonment of the interconnector across the border, in environmental terms, both sides will ultimately overcome their grid isolation problems. Therefore this scenario can promote the substantial development of renewable energy sources and an island-wide reduction of CO2 emissions.

Political/Geopolitical criterion: This scenario is also based on the logic of viewing the island as two distinct and isolated grids; as such it promotes division and self-sufficiency. The transmission of electricity from Türkiye to the TRNC will also create a political dependency. Because the interconnector across the border is abandoned, this scenario excludes Türkiye from the regional energy sector cooperation.

Scenario 3: System-building alongside regional geopolitical tensions but not alongside the political divide in Cyprus

The Euro-Asia and Euro-Africa projects are realized as planned in this scenario, but north Cyprus and Türkiye are not connected via a subsea HVDC cable. Still, the Turkish Cypriot community is not isolated in energy terms as all actors in Cyprus adopt a more inclusive, island-wide policy and the north-south interconnector remains in place. Thus, the north of Cyprus is also connected to larger European, Asian, and African grids. ENTSO-E is guaranteed by the RoC concerning the synchronization and inter-operability of the island-wide electricity grid.

Economic criterion: This scenario can be regarded as the most realistic if we consider that there are serious doubts over the investment cost of the cable between Türkiye and the TRNC (as discussed above). While there will be electricity trading throughout the European, Asian, and African grids, all relevant decisions will be taken by the Greek Cypriot authorities until a political settlement of the Cyprus Problem. A more inclusive, island-wide policy with the ongoing operation of the interconnector across the border will certainly have island-wide economic benefits if the Turkish Cypriot community is guaranteed equal access to an electricity market that includes all relevant players and has access to a fair and transparent pricing system.

Environmental criterion: This scenario, similar to the previous ones, can promote the substantial development of renewable energy sources and island-wide reduction of CO2 emissions.

Political/Geopolitical criterion: The main political risk in this scenario is that the Turkish Cypriot authorities may be absent from the decision-making bodies related to ENTSO-E. ENTSO-E is comprised of national transmission system operators (TSOs) from each member country, and each TSO has a representative in the ENTSO-E General Assembly, the highest decision-making body. There are also working groups and committees within ENTSO-E, consisting of TSO experts who focus on specific areas of the electricity system. To address the absence of the Turkish Cypriot authorities, elected representatives from their community could be included in the Cypriot delegation.²³

²² Personal Communication, Hüdaoğlu, Op.cit.

²³ Personal Communication, Nami.Op.cit.

Scenario 4: System-building alongside regional interdependency logic

In this scenario, the main idea is to devise a regional strategy whereby an interconnector system can build bridges across political divides and increase mutual trust and understanding. In other words, this requires system-building alongside regional geographical patterns and economic realities, irrespective of regional geopolitical tensions and political divides. This can be described as an interdependency scenario, wherein economies will be interconnected and mutually dependent; political decisions taken by one country will have significant political and economic consequences for others. This scenario will also create opportunities for further cooperation and collaboration among countries in the region.

In the first phase of this scenario, an initial interconnector, specifically the Türkiye-Cyprus one, would be built. However, here the approach would differ radically from the Türkiye-north Cyprus interconnector project discussed earlier: in this scenario the interconnector capacity would be determined based on the whole island's electricity demand. The current north-south interconnector will play a crucial role in this scenario, connecting the entire island to Türkiye and the rest of Europe, and would require only the construction of an 80 km cable between Türkiye and Cyprus. The next phase of the project could involve completing the Cyprus-Israel and Cyprus-Egypt phases of the EuroAsia and EuroAfrica projects, respectively. The final stage would be to construct and join the Cyprus-Crete interconnectors to both projects to enhance the flexibility and resilience of the interconnector system. Construction of any one of these phases should not prevent the realization of another. For a project of this size and breadth, feasibility studies are key and should guide policymakers in terms of timing for all phases. Ensuring that all interconnector projects are constructed in an integrated and interoperable manner will give all involved countries access a wide variety of energy sources and the ability to better manage fluctuations in demand and supply in a timely fashion. This is important because improved backup capacity at the regional level will enhance the resilience of electricity systems and increase the share of renewable energy sources.

This could be a new avenue for strategic cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean. The EU could facilitate the development of the Türkiye-Cyprus peace interconnector project, in which energy regulatory authorities from both Türkiye and Cyprus would collaborate. In the context of establishing new opportunities for collaboration and interdependence in view of the geographical realities in Cyprus, building a power station in Erenköy could be envisioned as a joint venture between the two communities. Such a power station could utilize natural gas and solar energy as sources to produce electricity, and because the proposed location would require cooperation, the two sides would essentially need to work together to transmit electricity to the entire island.

Conclusion

This paper has explored different scenarios for electricity cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean with the goal of offering practical solutions in line with a number of proposed regional interconnector projects. The design of the interconnector projects in the Eastern Mediterranean, namely the Euro-Asia, Euro-Africa, and Türkiye-north Cyprus interconnectors, reflects a general uncertainty regarding the region's political future. This paper has discussed the conditions under which these projects might become interdependent and has developed scenarios based on the logic of exploiting nature-based/geographical synergies, enhancing the economics and efficiency of the projects, fostering transboundary solidarity among states in the region, and promoting peace and stability.

If the interconnector projects are executed as planned, they will inevitably bring about both agreement and division, benefiting certain actors while excluding others, i.e., in political terms. The projects' designs raise various concerns, e.g., the ever-changing geopolitical landscape in the region, legal and ethical responsibilities, and unresolved political problems such as the Cyprus Problem. The challenge of establishing cooperative relationships in the region and among conflicting parties in the context of the Cyprus Problem is well recognized. Yet, endorsing the isolated design of these interconnector projects, which disregards interoperability, undermines the potential for fostering trust and for reaping the benefits of a regionally shared grid. Opting for isolated interconnector projects could further reinforce the political divide in Cyprus. This would be a lost opportunity to pursue shared energy policy goals and foster cooperation through electricity sharing. At this crucial moment, with the urgent need to increase the share of renewables in total energy consumption due to climate change concerns, it is vital to seize the opportunity for collaborative efforts.

Policy Implications and Discussion

The analysis in this paper leads to the conclusion that seemingly contradictory interconnector projects - the Türkiye-north Cyprus project and the Euro-Asia/Euro-Africa projects - can be complementary if reconsidered to prioritize cooperation and interoperability. In fact, Cyprus has the potential to become an energy hub in the heart of Europe, Asia, and Africa, although this advantage should not be viewed solely as a geopolitical strategy. The RoC should reconceptualize its regional energy strategy and use platforms such as ENTSO-E and MED-TSO as avenues for dialogue and cooperation with Türkiye. The Turkish Cypriot community-- until there is a political settlement-- needs to be included in relevant bodies and mechanisms related to electricity trade and regional energy cooperation. One way is through sitting on ad-hoc committees that meet under the auspices of the United Nations. The EU needs to recognize that the designs for the Euro-Asia and Euro-Africa projects are inadequate in terms of addressing the urgency of today's energy and climate crisis and that neither project addresses the concerns of the Turkish Cypriot community, the greatest being the issue of *fait accompli* in matters relating to their rights and interest. In this context, the EU should provide incentives for regional cooperation, as well as for the Turkish Cypriot community and Türkiye. Such a policy strategy could contribute to a much-needed, peaceful settlement of the Cyprus Problem.

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