

The Republic of Cyprus and the EU sanctions on Russia: navigating shelter seeking and political shocks

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The Republic of Cyprus and the EU Sanctions on Russia: Navigating Shelter Seeking and Political Shocks

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Cyprus at the Hellenic Observatory, London School of Economics.

- After the Invasion of Ukraine, the EU sanctioned Russia.
- The RoC had special diplomatic, economic and societal ties with Russia.
- The RoC seeks shelter in the EU and was perceived as Russia's trojan horse within the Union.



Was the RoC entrapped within its EU shelter or emancipated, i.e., found an opportunity to reshape its foreign policy?

How was this choice perceived by the foreign policy and general elites and public opinion?

Theoretical Frameworks:

Our research project is situated at the intersection of small state studies and foreign policy analysis

Shelter Theory : To address their vulnerabilities small states seek political, economic, and societal shelter in great powers and international and regional organizations. Due to power asymmetries, they face the abandonment or entrapment dilemma. Sheltering comes with a cost in autonomy. Shelter decisions may create divisions on the domestic front.

Political Shocks: i) unanticipated or unexpected, ii) occur suddenly, iii) manifest a dramatic disruption to current conditions, iv) exhibit an actual, dramatic impact on the status quo experienced by the impacted state. They often have a functional role being seen as a window of opportunity for policy change.

Second Image Reversed: How do international events impact domestic arrangements?

Agenda

- . Rationale of the Research
- . RoC's Foreign Policy before the Invasion of Ukraine
- . Challenges After the Invasion of Ukraine and EU Sanctions on Russia
- . Elite Perceptions of RoC's Role and the EU
- . Public Opinion Perspectives – Methodology & Findings
- . New Challenges in Cyprus's Foreign Policy
- . Policy Proposals
- . Theoretical Considerations

RoC's Foreign Policy before the invasion of Ukraine



Multidimensional Approach:
The Republic of Cyprus
shifted from focusing solely
on the Cyprus Question to a
more diversified foreign policy.

Key Influences:

EU Presidency (2012): An eye-opening experience

Europeanization during the economic crisis.

Hydrocarbons Discovery: Raised Cyprus's geopolitical profile.

Turkey's Assertiveness: Increased regional tensions.

A spill-over effect in regional cooperation that started from the energy sector.

RoC's Foreign Policy Goals:

Resolution of the Cyprus problem.

Protection of natural resources.

Active participation in EU policies and enhancing security collaborations.

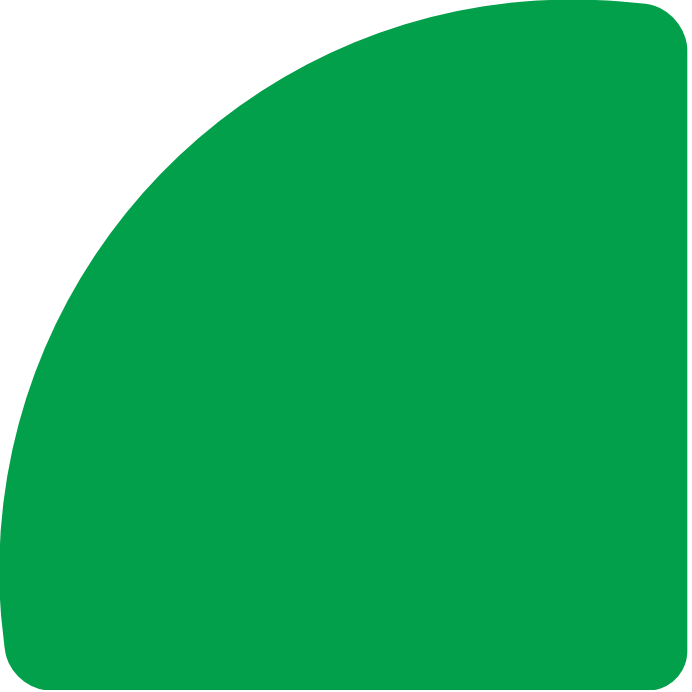
Promotion of peace in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Strengthening ties with the U.S., UK, Israel, while maintaining relations with Russia and Arab States.

The foundations of a Multivector Foreign Policy



RoC - EU Relationship:

- The RoC's accession into the EU was a prototypical shelter-seeking move. Cyprus joined the EU seeking security and support for the Cyprus Question.
 - During the economic crisis the EU membership provided a safety net but at the cost of some autonomy.
 - Diplomatically the EU has enlarged the RoC's action space and enabled it to punch above its weight, as the latter is seen as a bridge between countries in the Eastern Mediterranean and the EU, by both neighbours in the region and the EU.
 - Effort to connect the evolution of the EU - Turkey relations with the Cyprus question with mixed results.
 - Credibility Crisis due to relations with Russia, the visa and passports programme
- 

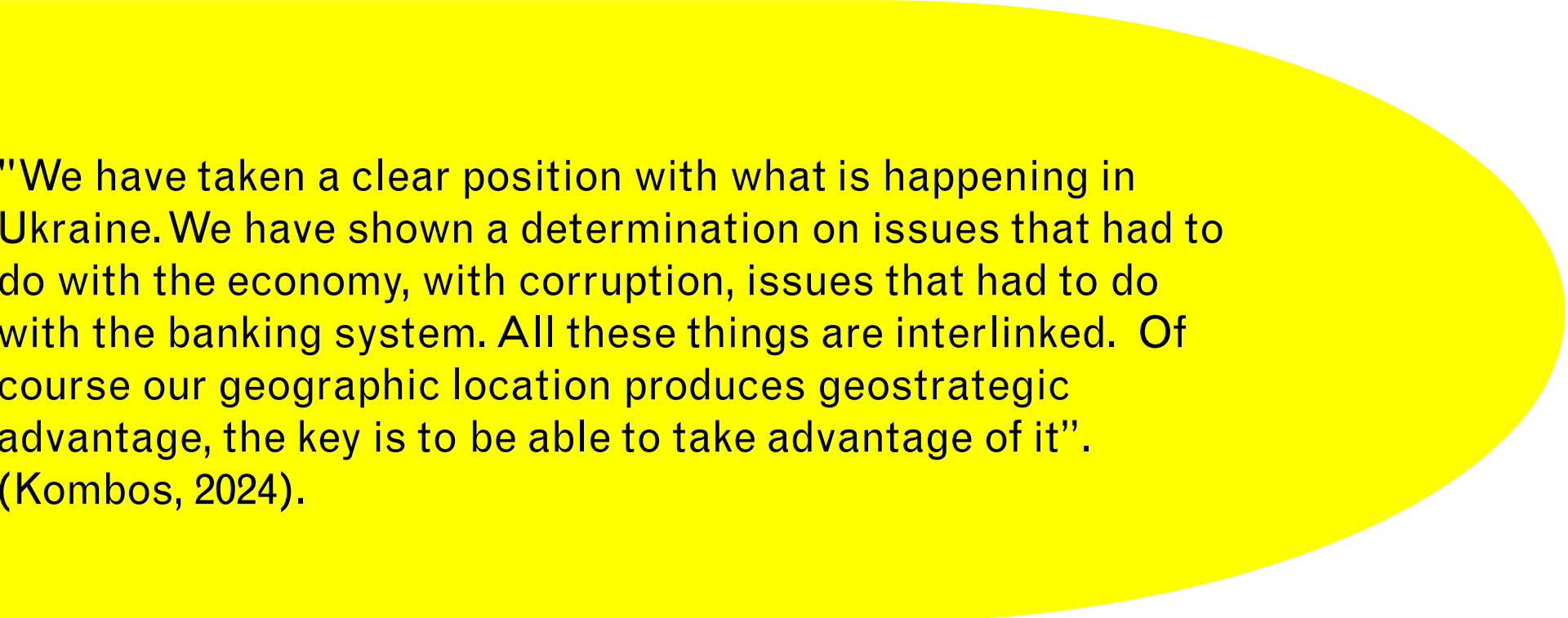
Regional Role: the RoC aspires to be a key knot in Eastern Mediterranean networks. A key player in forming trilateral partnerships with Greece and Israel, Egypt and Jordan respectively.



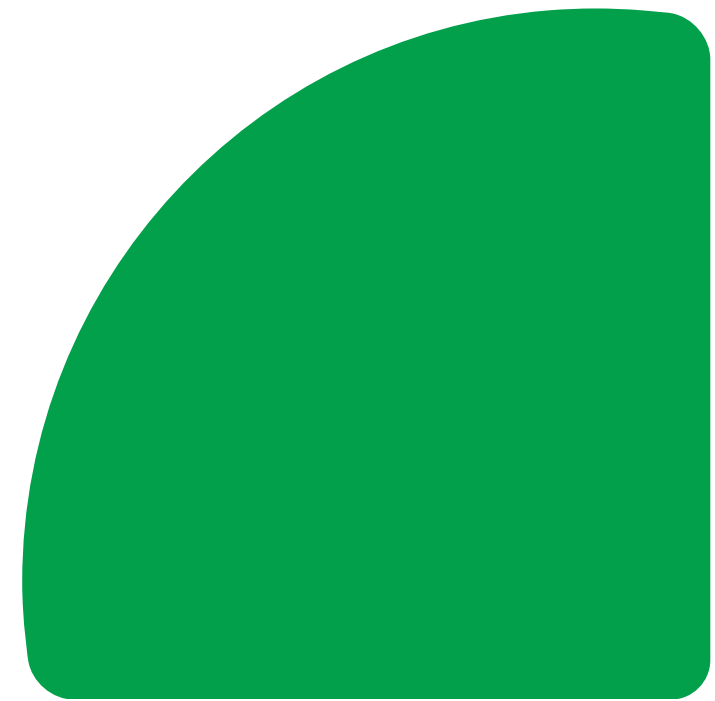
RoC - U.S. Relationship:

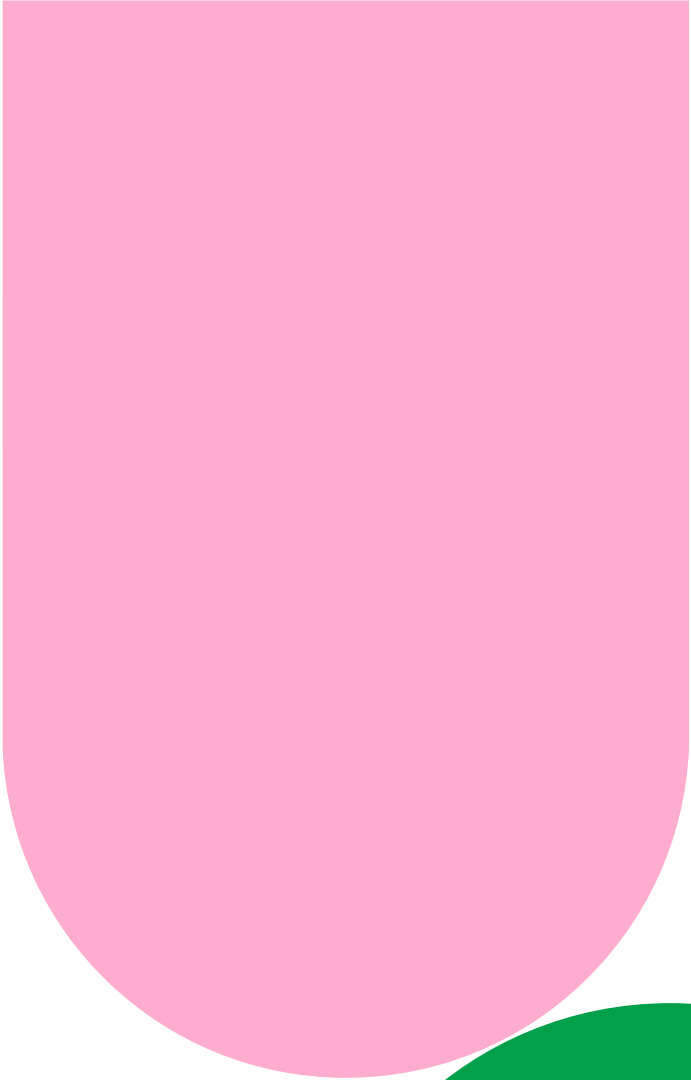
Historically tense but enormously improved in the last decade, driven by shared interests in regional security.

Key Milestones: A high-profile visit by Joe Biden in 2014, EastMed Act (2019), lifting of U.S. arms embargo, the creation of CYCLOPS security center, and the Strategic Dialogue Launch in June 2024.



"We have taken a clear position with what is happening in Ukraine. We have shown a determination on issues that had to do with the economy, with corruption, issues that had to do with the banking system. All these things are interlinked. Of course our geographic location produces geostrategic advantage, the key is to be able to take advantage of it".
(Kombos, 2024).





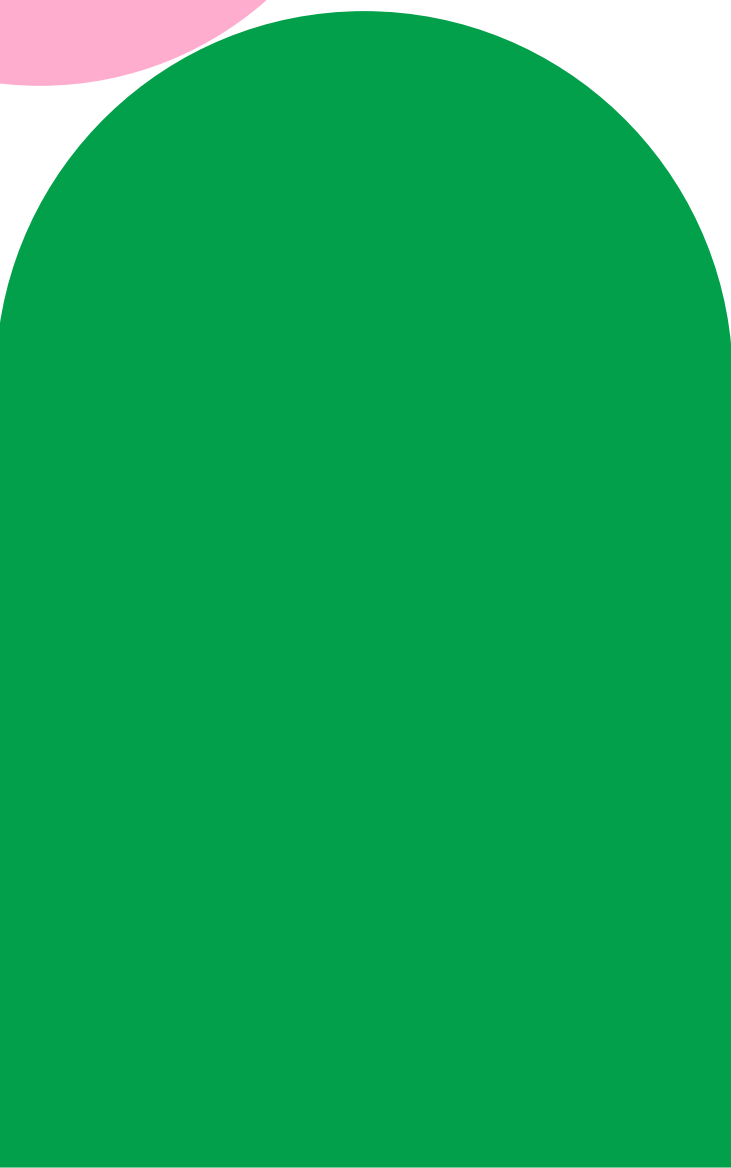
RoC - R u s s i a

R e l a t i o n s h i p :

Strong ties, economic interests, tourism, spiritual ties, historical links, arms trade, Russia's support at the UNSC for the Cypriot issue, and reciprocal support of Russian interests within the EU.

Strained by Russia's closer relationship with Turkey, allegations of corruption linked to Cyprus's Golden Passport Program, and Western pressures for derussification .

Did the relationship start to diverge even before the EU sanctions on Russia?



Challenges After Invasion of Ukraine and EU Sanctions



The invasion of Ukraine and the Western reaction that followed it was a political shock for the RoC.

2 different reasons.

1. **Return to power politics and revisionism in Europe.** Being occupied, having a revisionist and significantly stronger neighbour that had recently challenged its sovereignty and being non-allied put the RoC in a difficult position

2. RoC's economic, diplomatic, military, and societal links with Russia were disrupted by the EU's decision to impose sanctions on the latter and sever ties with it at the Institutions and member-states level.

Foreign Policy Recalibration: Cyprus had to adhere to EU obligations and shelter-seeking aspirations and prove that it is a reliable partner who shows solidarity. It also linked Russia's revisionism with Turkey's revisionism.

The RoC's multivector foreign policy and dual-track approach to Russia and the West was undermined.

Russia did not receive the RoC's stance well.

"You shot yourselves in the foot. And we do not want that to happen"

Russian Ambassador Osadchiy

Elite Perceptions of the Sanctions, ROC's Role and the EU

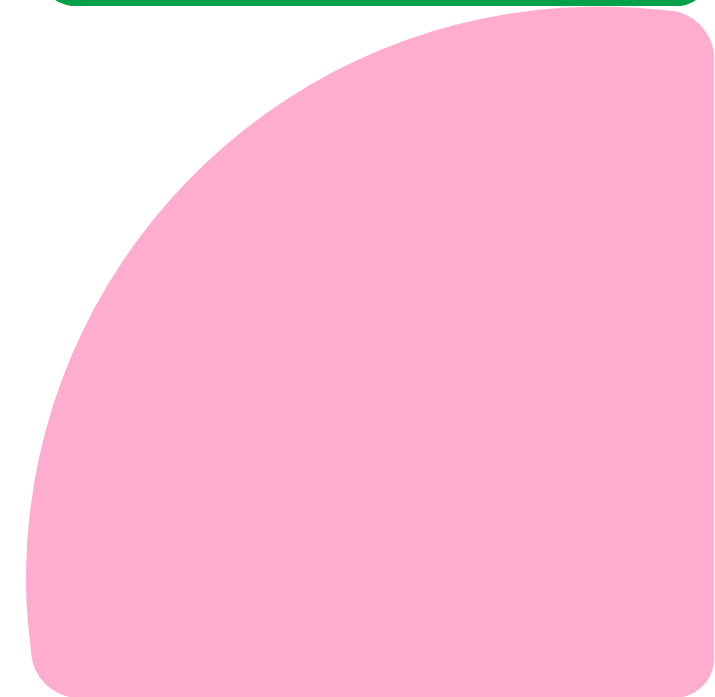
Foreign Policy elites: have deep knowledge of foreign policy issues and/or context-specific experience.

General elites: may hold prominent positions outside of foreign policy domains but are closely related to or influenced by foreign policy decisions.

35 semi-structured interviews with diplomats, academics, ministers and ex-ministers, members of the House of Representatives, and journalists.

RoC's Role in the Region:

- Viewed as a bridge -builder in the Eastern Mediterranean.
- Optimists: Cyprus can transcend its small size with a multivector foreign policy, leveraging strategic position and energy resources.
- Sceptics: Any progress is seen as opportunistic, short term, hindered by inadequate foreign policy infrastructure.
- Pessimists: Power asymmetry with Turkey is detrimental. The RoC is too small to have an impact in the region.



Role of the EU:

EU Membership
as Shelter:
Seen as vital
for RoC's
diplomatic
leverage.

Security
Concerns:
Disappointment
with EU's weak
stance on
Turkey.

Credibility
Deficit:
Cyprus's
relations with
Russia and the
focus on
Turkey hinder
its standing
within the EU.

Potential
alliances:
Greece and
France viewed
as potential key
allies.

EU Sanctions on Russia:

- **The RoC did not have many options but to follow the EU and show solidarity. Two perspectives:**
 - **Historical Trauma Motivation:** A parallel drawn between Ukraine invasion and Cyprus's 1974 experience.
 - **Pragmatic Necessity:** Need to align with EU for broader strategic benefits.
- **Future Relations with Russia**
 - Derussification was already underway. Sanctions accelerated this process. Cyprus belongs to the West and sanctions opened a window of opportunity.

“We need a restart to our economic and political system and we need to distance ourselves from Russia”
 - Concerns over long-term impact on Cyprus-Russia economic and political ties. Cyprus should not fall for “Anti-Russia hysteria”

Views on the US:

United States:

- Optimists: View Cyprus as gaining strategic importance to the US due to regional conflicts, foreign policy orientation and geographic position.
- Sceptics: Concern over the US using Cyprus for self-interest without mutual benefit and without the capability to attract more attention; the relationship is dependent on Turkey-US relations.
- Generational Divide: Younger elites see opportunity; older elites distrust US intentions.

Public Opinion Perspectives Methodology & Key Findings

Methodology:

- Survey Dates: March 3 - 13, 2024, with 505 participants.
- Sampling: Stratified by geography, gender, and age (margin of error: $\pm 4.5\%$).
- Focus: Public opinion views on international actors, Cyprus's role, and key foreign policy issues.

Key Findings:

- Favorable Views:
 - Greece (88%) and France (78%) rated highly.
 - Mixed Views on Russia (48% positive) and shifting opinions on the U.S. (56% positive).
- Cyprus's Positioning:
 - Strong ties felt with Greece (77%) and the EU (69%).
 - Public favors strengthening ties with the EU (45%), Russia (31%), and the U.S. (34%).

Public Opinion on Foreign Policy, Conflict, and International Law

Public Needs & Concerns:

- Top priorities: resolving the Cyprus division (39%) and strengthening the economy (35%).
- Emotional influences: fear (35%), anger (22%), and hope (22%).

Perception of International Conflict:

- 63% expect increased global conflicts in the next 5 years.
- 53% support small states forming stable alliances;
- 28% prefer avoiding exclusive alliances.
- 43% the role of international law will be weakened.
- Majority believes that Cyprus position deteriorated because of regional conflicts

Views on the War in Ukraine & EU:

- 58% feel Cyprus was "entrapped" within the EU
- High support for humanitarian aid to Ukraine (77%), but scepticism towards military aid and sanctions on Russia.
- Only 38% agree that Cyprus participation in the EU is a diplomatic asset.

Challenges in Cyprus's Foreign Policy





Rift Between Elites and Public Opinion:

Divergence in views on EU sanctions against Russia and their long-term impact.

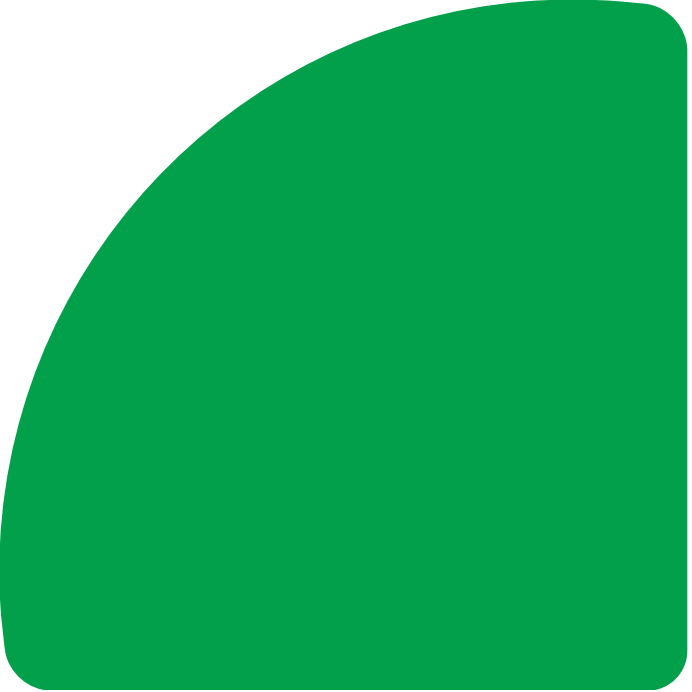
Public scepticism about distancing from Russia.

Public Opinion favours a “dual track approach”. “To the West with Russia

Public Opinion does not see the EU as a shelter, especially in diplomatic terms.

A majority favours an inclusive shelter-seeking strategy. High approval ratings for France, Greece, and Egypt support this view.

Regional and global crises are not perceived as opportunities. Fear is the prevailing sentiment, justified by the perception that the RoC's regional position deteriorated, conflicts will increase and international law will be weakened.





Future Relations with Russia:

Uncertainty over how Cyprus will recalibrate its relationship with Russia amid sanctions.

Russia's position over the Cyprus Question within the UNSC remains important.

Need to think also about the US elections and what will happen on the Ukraine front after them.

Small states need to be prepared.



Key Policy Proposals for Cyprus' Foreign Policy

Enhance domestic unity .

Domestic Divisions remain and can create vulnerabilities, which could be exploited by malign actors seeking to undermine social cohesion in Western societies .

The RoC must therefore anticipate such risks, especially as tensions with Russia and turbulence in the Middle East persist,

Capitalize on its EU Shelter

Ensure leveraging the RoC's foreign policy reorientation . Both elites and the public view France and Greece as reliable partners, and enhancing cooperation with them —both within and outside the EU framework —will meet the expectations of both groups and bolster the RoC's position . The 2026 Presidency is an opportunity .

Regional Security :

Regional initiatives enjoy widespread support, and in light of the prevalent fear and uncertainty in the region, regional security - focused partnerships will be highly beneficial .

EastMed Security

Quartet : Collaborate with Greece, Egypt, and France on regional security .

Eastern Mediterranean Security and Stability Mechanism

Invest in Foreign Policy Capabilities :

Financial resources but also a shift in how FP is crafted .

Expand Expertise : Leverage universities and think tanks for policy innovation .

Increase Transparency :

Involve civil society for more inclusive decision -making .

Public Awareness : Engage citizens to build trust and alignment with foreign policy goals .

Theoretical considerations & Future Research

The limits of multivector foreign policy in a polarized international system whose polarity is undefined.

The costs of shelter seeking. Definitely a cost to a small state's autonomy, as theory suggests.

What happens when the cost comes as a political shock? How do small states handle the shock?

What will happen if the competition with other powers increases and political shocks multiply?

Connection to Europeanization theory.

Thank you!

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