



DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2021-21-3-459-471

Research article / Научная статья

## “Blue Homeland” and Cyprus: The “Survival of the State” Coalition and Turkey’s Changing Geopolitical Doctrine in the Eastern Mediterranean

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**Abstract.** The importance of the Eastern Mediterranean for the Turkish state is diachronic. In recent years, however, a renewed interest of Ankara is being recorded as a result of the developments in the energy sphere. This is expressed through various forms of interventionist policy of Turkey in the area. This article examines the reshaping of Turkey’s geopolitical dogma and its connection with Turkish perception of the Eastern Mediterranean. It examines the impact of the failed coup attempt in 2016 on the ruling power bloc and its reflections in the Turkish geopolitical doctrine. In this framework the article explores the reinstatement of the need for “survival of the state” (*devletin bekası*) as a result of the reshaping of the ruling coalition and the legitimisation of the attempt to strengthen the authority of the state. At the same time, the ideological construction of the Eastern Mediterranean is important, as it can reveal the process of construction of security issues or the instrumentalisation of real threats through which geopolitical orientation is reshaped and specific policies are implemented. This study consequently reviews the identification of the Eastern Mediterranean with a wider “hostile region” and analyses the functioning of the “blue homeland” concept as a legitimising axis of Turkish politics. The concept of “blue homeland” is examined in conjunction with internal developments in Turkey and especially the change of balance in the power bloc. Finally, the last part of the article analyses the ideological legitimisation of the “blue homeland” concept in Turkey’s strategy for the Eastern Mediterranean. Through these dynamics, the change in Ankara’s perception of the Turkish Cypriot community and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is also identified.


**Key words:** Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey, Cyprus, energy, Erdoğan, Blue Homeland, state, power bloc, security, neo-ottomanism

**For citation:** Moudouros, N. (2021). “Blue Homeland” and Cyprus: The “Survival of the State” Coalition and Turkey’s Changing Geopolitical Doctrine in the Eastern Mediterranean. *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 21(3), 459—471. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2021-21-3-459-471>

## «Голубая родина» и Кипр: коалиция «выживания государства» и меняющаяся геополитическая доктрина Турции в Восточном Средиземноморье

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**Аннотация.** Восточное Средиземноморье является традиционным с точки зрения внешнеполитических интересов регионом для Турецкой Республики. Однако в последние годы после открытия здесь больших месторождений газа и нефти Анкара проявляет растущий интерес к региону, что выражается в различных

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формах интервенционистской политики. Исследуется изменение геополитической доктрины Турции, повлекшее смену восприятия Восточного Средиземноморья. Автор последовательно анализирует процесс отождествления региона Восточного Средиземноморья с более широкой идеей «враждебного региона» и место концепции «Голубой родины» в нем. Данная концепция рассматривается в связке с внутренними событиями в Турции, особенно в контексте изменения баланса в правящем блоке. Автор отмечает, что исследование идеологического конструирования региона Восточного Средиземноморья важно с той точки зрения, что оно позволяет выявить процесс конструирования проблем безопасности или инструментализации реальных угроз, посредством которых государства корректируют свою геополитическую ориентацию и осуществляют конкретные политические действия. Рассматривается влияние неудавшейся попытки государственного переворота в 2016 г. на правящий «силовой блок» и отражение этого события в геополитической доктрине Турции. В этом контексте автор исследует идею «выживания государства» (*devletin bekası*), появление которой стало результатом создания новой правящей коалиции в Турции и ее попыток укрепить верховенство государственной власти во внутренних делах. Наконец, в последней части анализируется идеологическая легитимация концепции «Голубая родина» в стратегии Турции в Восточном Средиземноморье, что позволяет определить изменение восприятия Анкарой общины турок-киприотов и Турецкой Республики Северного Кипра в целом.

**Ключевые слова:** Восточное Средиземноморье, Турция, Кипр, энергия, Эрдоган, «Голубая родина», государство, властный блок, безопасность, неоосманизм

**Для цитирования:** Moudouros N. “Blue Homeland” and Cyprus: The “Survival of the State” Coalition and Turkey’s Changing Geopolitical Doctrine in the Eastern Mediterranean // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Международные отношения. 2021. Т. 21. № 3. С. 459—471. DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2021-21-3-459-471

## Introduction

“I pledge that we are ready to execute any order so as to protect every inch of the 462-thousand-square km of our blue homeland,”<sup>1</sup> — this statement belongs to lieutenant colonel Engin Ağmıř, in charge of Gökçeada frigate, in his address to the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, during a ceremony marking the anniversary of the establishment of the Turkish Republic, on 29 October 2019. The timing and content of this statement are important in many ways. On the one hand, the concept of the “blue homeland” (*Mavi Vatan*) was expressed in specific geographical dimensions and in a way that underlined the rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean. On the other hand, the description of this specific sea as “blue homeland”, on the anniversary of the establishment of the modern Turkish state, carried the strong symbolism of a determination to pursue the extension of the state’s influence to spaces outside its defined

<sup>1</sup> Cumhuriyet Bayramı Resepsiyonu'ndan askerlere canlı bağlantı // Habertürk. 29.10.2019. URL: <https://www.haberturk.com/gokceada-firkateyn-komutani-yarbay-engin-agmis-cumhuriyet-bayrami-resepsiyonu-nacanlı-baglandı-2535477> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

borders. As İbrahim Karagül, one of the pro-government journalists wrote, “The concept of the blue homeland is a wonderful definition. It is a beautiful expression that has changed the codes of our consciousness that shaped, once again, our understanding of the homeland”<sup>2</sup>.

The specific ideological construction of the Eastern Mediterranean is important, because it can reveal the process of construction of security issues or the instrumentalisation of real threats through which geopolitical orientation is reshaped and specific policies are implemented (Kaliber, 2009, p. 109). In this sense, the description of the Eastern Mediterranean as “blue homeland” can be considered as an attempt by the government to attain political control through which it will politically construct the region it wishes to influence (Kaliber, 2009, p. 109).

The ideological background, the political programme and the wider local and international

<sup>2</sup> Karagül İ. Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa geri döndü... // Yeni Şafak. 02.12.2019. URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/ibrahim-karagul/-barbaros-hayrettin-pasa-473-yil-sonra-geri-dondu-sancagi-karargha-konuldu-akdenizin-sahipleri-geri-geldi-turkiye-libya-anlasmasi-deniz-haritasini-degistirdi-sevr-plni-ellerinde-patladi-mavi-vatan-buyuk-ulke-turkiyenin-yuzolcumu-bildigimizden-cok-fazla-2053532> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

conjuncture, as well as the capitalist development<sup>3</sup>, have their own role in how a state perceives a region. All of the above are elements that influence the formation of a specific geopolitical doctrine. Through this doctrine, various policies, including national security policies, eventually emerge and are legitimised (Bilgin, 2012, p. 153—154).

The predominance of geography in policy-making and the “special and unique” geographical position of Turkey, as well as the prospect of its “encirclement” by enemies (Bilgin, 2012, p. 153—154), are important elements activated in the Turkish geopolitical doctrine and they become clearer, especially under conditions of crisis and transformation. The period marked by the July 2016 coup attempt, as well as the discovery of hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>4</sup>, constitutes an aggregation of interrelated developments that foster the intensity of the aforementioned characteristics in Turkey’s geopolitical doctrine.

This article attempts to analyse and decode the concept of “blue homeland” as a description of the Eastern Mediterranean through the examination of the impact the 2016 coup attempt had on the general ideological perceptions of Turkey’s ruling elite. The first part of the article examines the reinstatement of the need for “survival of the state” (*devletin bekası*) as a result of the reshaping of the ruling coalition and the legitimisation of the attempt to strengthen the authority of the state. The second part of the article analyses the attempt at a new security doctrine by the Turkish state, which was based, on the one hand, on a need for “survival” and, on the other, on the attempt to “export” defence policies to regions outside the Turkish borders. The third part of the study identifies the ways and the context within which the Eastern Mediterranean and the developments concerning

energy issues have been linked to the new security doctrine. This part examines the identification of the Eastern Mediterranean with a large geographical area that is described by the Turkish ruling elite in terms of threat.

### **“Survival of the State”: The Political Platform of a New Coalition**

The 15 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey was a decisive blow that marked the culmination of a state crisis, the escalation of antagonisms within the power bloc and the intensification of a pre-existing process of social polarisation. The night of 16 July had a decisive impact on almost all of the pillars of political authority and state structures. One of the most characteristic consequences the coup attempt had for Turkey was the formalisation of the dissolution of the prior power bloc<sup>5</sup> and the strengthening of the procedures for the construction of a new one. The basic protagonists of the state-political wing of the new power bloc were, of course, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by R.T. Erdoğan, together with large sections of the security bureaucracy of the state, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and sections of the *ulusalcı*<sup>6</sup>.

Precisely because of the repercussions the coup attempt had on the state structure, but also because of the ideological background of the new composition of power in Turkey, the main orientation that prevailed was the attempt to overcome the ruptures caused to the state

<sup>5</sup> The concept of power bloc used in this article is based on the theoretical elaborations of Antonio Gramsci, Nicos Poulantzas and Bob Jessop. Of course, the power bloc comprises differing social/class forces, which because of limited space are not analysed. In the case of Turkey, the power bloc has been analysed in many studies, see, for example: (Akça, 2014; Özden et al., 2017; Karahanoğulları & Türk, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> This concept initially appeared in Turkey in the 1970s, introduced by intellectuals who aimed to promote Turkish nationalism as distinct from and breaking with the religiously enhanced nationalism of other sections of the Right. It mostly underlined the secular aspects of nationalism. In the 1990s it was further enhanced by “anti-imperialist” references and focused on the confrontation of globalisation threats against the nation state (Bora, 2017, pp. 258—259).

<sup>3</sup> Fouskas V. K., Gökay B., Vankovska B. Special issue: Crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean and COVID-19 // *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*. 2020. Vol. 22. No. 3. P. 295—305. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2020.1755154> (accessed: 13.03.2021).

<sup>4</sup> Adar S., Toygur İ. Turkey, the EU and the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis. *Militarization of Foreign Policy and Power Rivalry* // *SWP Comment*. 2020. No. 62. P. 2.

structure and the immediate restoration of the unity of the state. In short, the main and perhaps exclusive aim was the reproduction of the state, its restoration and its strengthening at all levels (Aras, 2017, p. 4). Through all of the above, the aim was also to reproduce Erdoğan's influence in the new ideological and political framework that emerged (Bargu, 2018, p. 23).

It should, however, be noted that all the aforementioned dynamics were developed under the shadow of the ruling elite's existential insecurity (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016). The pursuit of restoration of the state and strengthening of its power and dominance were presented as the only options, with no alternative strategies (Taş, 2020, p. 8). The actions taken to deal with the repercussions of the coup, as well as for the suppression of the Gülen network or other forces that the ruling elite considered as terrorist, were advanced as a struggle for the "survival of the state." In this context, however, this struggle was conceived as a "life or death issue" (*ölüm kalım meselesi*) and as such, it received wider social support (Miş et al., 2016, p. 41). With the almost instantaneous handling of the coup leaders, Erdoğan created the framework for the construction of a specific collective identity on the axis of "one nation, one state, one homeland, one flag" (Adisonmez & Onursal, 2020, p. 299) and in this way managed to unite almost all sections of the right-wing—conservative spectrum of society.

Soon after the failed coup attempt, the complete concentration of power under Erdoğan prevailed as the only solution to the need for "re-soldering" state structures and restoring state power, and it did indeed have strong popular legitimisation (Bargu, 2018, p. 24—26). This dual dynamic — the aggressive state restoration policy and its social legitimisation — arose as the result of a prevailing fear of political extermination. Therefore, "existential insecurity" described at this particular juncture the fears and threats perceived both by the political leadership and a very large section of society (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016, p. 508). In essence, the coup attempt contributed to the intensification of the ideological convergence between AKP and MHP, precisely because it mobilised in a direct

and intense way the historical phobia of a large section of the Turkish right-wing — conservative spectrum: the fear that the Turkish nation was in danger "of remaining without a state, a homeland and a religion" (*devletsiz, vatansız, dinsiz*)<sup>7</sup>.

The "survival of the state" was thus transformed into a political platform on which the alliance of the two parties was formed. The concept of "survival" has great ideological and political significance. At the first level, invoking the need for survival contributed to the simplification of the complexity and contradictions of the coup attempt, sending, once again, the message that Turkey was encircled by "internal and external" enemies. Therefore, this concept immediately brought back the country's "encirclement syndrome" (Bilgin, 2007, p. 746), since it referred to the national obligation to safeguard the continuity and existence of the state<sup>8</sup>. In the MHP 2018 election programme<sup>9</sup>, it is underlined that the alliance with AKP constitutes the ideal of eternal existence of the Turkish state and the Turkish nation.

At a second level, however, the activation of the concept of "survival" set the ideological basis for the legitimisation of a change in Turkish foreign and security policy orientation. The word *beka*, does not only mean "survival," "continuity" and/or "existence" of the state. It also has the same root as the word *bakiye*, which means "legacy", "remnant", "what has remained"<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, the strategic connotation of this particular concept refers to an update of the perception that the republican state is "what has remained" of the Ottoman Empire, after the various "back-stabbings." The Turkish Right is, after all, characterised by various forms of

<sup>7</sup> Yıldırım E. Türkiye'nin nomosu: İslam // Star. 12.05.2018. URL: <https://www.star.com.tr/acik-gorus/turkiyenin-nomосу-islam-haber-1341862/> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>8</sup> Bora T. Beka // Birikim Haftalık Yazılar. 14.02.2018. URL: <https://birikimdergisi.com/haftalik/8746/beka> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>9</sup> Cumhuriyet İttifakı, Millet Aklı: Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Sistemi ve Cumhuriyet İttifakı // Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi Resmî Sitesi. 18.03.2018. URL: [https://www.mhp.org.tr/usr\\_img/\\_mhp2007/kitaplar/cumhuriyet\\_ittifaki\\_blumu\\_web.pdf](https://www.mhp.org.tr/usr_img/_mhp2007/kitaplar/cumhuriyet_ittifaki_blumu_web.pdf) (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

ideological exploitation of the “historical trauma” of the dismemberment and final dissolution of the Empire (Çelenk, 2017, p. 21). Therefore, one of the fundamental orientations that prevailed after the coup attempt was, among others, the search for “revenge on history”<sup>11</sup> in a way that would secure the reinstatement of Turkey’s influence in former Ottoman territories.

### **The New Security Doctrine and the “Export” of Defence**

The aforementioned framework was a general political strategy that drastically influenced Turkey’s foreign and security policy orientations, which had already been experiencing a crisis.

A key aspect of the failed coup that affected Turkey’s geopolitical orientations was the initial stance adopted by the USA and many EU countries towards the AKP government. Their avoidance of any immediate denunciation of the coup and the powerful rumours of an “Erdoğan-staged” coup in the Western media, as well as the intense criticism of the authoritarianism of the regime in the period immediately after, contributed to Ankara’s attempt to review the country’s relations with the West, as well as to the creation of a Turkish axis in the region (Duran, 2018, p. 38—39).

Through the further questioning of the trust between Western countries and Turkey, the AKP—MHP alliance intensified its anti-Western tendencies and contributed to the rise of a transactionalist perception of EU—Ankara relations; specifically the “restriction” of dialogue between the two parties to issues of immediate concern and conjunctural dilemmas (Taş, 2020, p. 10).

The suspicion that prevailed in relations between Turkey and the West resulted in the strengthening of Ankara’s will to proceed with the design of autonomous policies to safeguard its national security, awaiting neither the

approval nor the support of various Western powers (Duran, 2018, p. 29).

The specific concept of “self-protection”, which was further strengthened in Turkish geopolitical doctrine, stressed the trend towards autonomy in regional developments, a tendency that had, in one way or another, pre-existed in the AKP political programme. It also stressed the development of initiatives for the creation of all or almost all preconditions for autonomy — for example, the reinforcement of the national defence industry and the promotion of the army as a key axis for the realisation of the country’s foreign policy (Adar, 2020, p. 11—12).

This kind of reorganisation of state architecture, within the context created by the coup attempt, contributed to the upgrading of security policies and their transformation to regime security (Kaygusuz, 2018, p. 284—285). A direct product of the procedure in question was also the attempt to design Turkey’s new national security doctrine (Aras, 2017, p. 9). The debate surrounding this mainly developed in the context of the country’s need for “autonomy and self-sufficiency”<sup>12</sup>, as well as that of reshaping relations with the West, whose centres of power were perceived by Ankara as “sources of threat.”

The new national defence doctrine was initially presented as a necessity in the effort to combat a multifaceted attack against Turkey. Terrorist hotbeds that had to be eliminated were not only Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation (FETÖ) and Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), but also the “Islamic State” (Duran, 2018, p. 29). Therefore, as a first phase, the new national security doctrine is distinguished by both internal and external aspects.

The description of the key features of the new national security doctrine was given by the President of Turkey: “We will not wait for the threats to knock on our door; we will not wait for our souls to suffer. Whichever the threat is, whether internal or external, we will deal with

<sup>11</sup> *Cumhur İttifakı, Millet Aklı: Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Sistemi ve Cumhur İttifakı // Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi Resmî Sitesi. 18.03.2018. URL: [https://www.mhp.org.tr/usr\\_img/\\_mhp2007/kitaplar/cumhur\\_ittifaki\\_blumu\\_web.pdf](https://www.mhp.org.tr/usr_img/_mhp2007/kitaplar/cumhur_ittifaki_blumu_web.pdf) (accessed: 30.03.2021).*

<sup>12</sup> *Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Artık geri adım atmayacağız, kendi göbeğimizi kendimiz kesiyoruz // Hürriyet. 11.10.2019. URL: <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-artik-geri-adim-atmayacagiz-kendi-gobegimizi-kendimiz-kesiyoruz-41349046> (accessed: 30.03.2021).*

the problem at its source and not after it knocks on our door”<sup>13</sup>. A new element of extroversion had been introduced concerning the realisation of Turkey’s policy of national security. The tendency of the Turkish state for proactive and pre-emptive action against the threats it faces is quite similar to the concepts of pre-emptive war that prevailed in American foreign policy in the early 21st century<sup>14</sup>.

The tendency to “export defence” to areas outside Turkey’s territories essentially seeks to not confine the country’s security to the geography of Anatolia. On the contrary, the geographical definition of Turkey’s security expands according to political developments. In this respect, the new defence doctrine is not so “new,” in the sense that it carries within it characteristics of Turkey’s claims to establish itself as the “central state” in its region<sup>15</sup>.

The aforementioned elements of the ideological and political extroversion of the new national security doctrine are indeed also reflected in its practical aspects: the need to restructure and strengthen the Turkish army in ways that boost its capacity for operations abroad; the creation of more military bases abroad; the restructuring of secret services in ways that boost their activity abroad; and the strengthening of the domestic defence industry (Duran, 2018, p. 30). Turkey’s two military interventions north of Syria (*Euphrates Shield* and *Olive Branch* operations) were considered as the two most concrete and successful examples of the new national security doctrine<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> “Türkiye’nin Yeni Güvenlik Konsepti” Konferansında Yaptıkları Konuşma // Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı Resmî Sitesi. 22.11.2016. URL: <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/61114/turkiyenin-yeni-guvenlik-konsepti-konferansinda-yaptiklari-konusma> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>14</sup> Gürçan M. Turkey’s new ‘Erdogan Doctrine’ // Al Monitor. November 3, 2016. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/11/turkey-wants-use-its-hard-power-solve-regional-problems.html> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>15</sup> Kardaş Ş. Önleyici ve dönüştürücü yeni güvenlik doktrini // Ortadoğu Analiz. 2016. No. 8 (77). P. 8. URL: [https://orsam.org.tr/d\\_hbanaliz/1\\_sabankardas\\_77.pdf](https://orsam.org.tr/d_hbanaliz/1_sabankardas_77.pdf) (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>16</sup> Yeşiltaş M. Dış politikadan büyük stratejiye AK Parti’nin 19. Yılı // Sabah. 15.08.2020. URL: <https://www.sabah.com.tr/yazarlar/perspektif/murat->

## From Syria to the Eastern Mediterranean: A “Hostile Encirclement”

The discovery of hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean and the debate that developed in recent years over the possible quantities of natural gas present have the potential to change the political and economic equilibrium and have been instrumental in renewing Turkey’s interest in the area. Indeed, Ankara’s gaze towards the Eastern Mediterranean became all the more intense after the publication of energy reports in 2010 estimating that the Levantine Basin in the Eastern Mediterranean has about 122 trillion cubic metres of natural gas and 1,7 trillion barrels of oil<sup>17</sup>. According to Ankara’s own estimates, a possible confirmation of these findings, these quantities could cover Turkey’s energy needs for the next 500 years or even those of the whole of Europe for the next 30 years (Gökçe, 2019, p. 404—405).

The aforementioned developments, combined with the intensification of drilling activities by other states in the region in relation to hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean, have contributed to the renewed peak in Turkish interest. The most important element, however, is that the energy developments coincided with the aforementioned shift of Turkey’s security doctrine as it emerged after the 2016 coup attempt. The combination of these dynamics decisively influenced Turkey’s geopolitical conceptions, both in relation to the Eastern Mediterranean and in relation to Cyprus. It brought back to the forefront the debate over “Turkey’s rights and sovereignty” at sea (Özertem, 2016, p. 361), while at the same time boosting the Turkish state’s strategy for interventionism in the Eastern Mediterranean. Characteristic examples of this are the agreement for the determination of the continental shelf between Turkey and the Turkish Republic of

[yesiltas/2020/08/15/dis-politikadan-buyuk-stratejiye-ak-partinin-19-yili](https://www.tccb.gov.tr/yesiltas/2020/08/15/dis-politikadan-buyuk-stratejiye-ak-partinin-19-yili) (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>17</sup> Alhas A.M. Energy resources in Eastern Mediterranean: an overview // Anadolu Agency. June 15, 2019. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/energy-resources-in-eastern-mediterranean-an-overview/1504786> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

Northern Cyprus (TRNC), the launching of exploration at sea and the subsequent technological upgrading with drilling vessels (Özertem, 2016, p. 366).

The efforts of the Republic of Cyprus for agreements with neighbouring states for determination of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), as well as the drilling programme later on and the involvement of large companies, were developments interpreted by Ankara through different axes. At the heart of these axes was the perception that the Republic of Cyprus sought the complete exclusion of Turkey on the energy issue (Gökçe, 2019, p. 405). On the one hand, the specific developments constituted a new phase of the internationalisation of the Cyprus problem itself, with the addition of the energy aspect. Therefore, as an internationalisation phase, the current situation forced Ankara to activate aspects of hard power and create conditions of intervention to the developments (Özertem, 2016, p. 362). On the other hand, this form of internationalisation and the collaborations of the Republic of Cyprus on the energy issue rekindled the sense of “hostile encirclement” — not only the perception of the danger of Turkey being “cut off” from the Eastern Mediterranean, but also the conviction that the Republic of Cyprus was reintroducing the aim for monopoly of power internally, marginalising the Turkish Cypriots (Ulusoy, 2016, p. 402).

As retired Admiral Cem Gürdeniz pointed out, “Turkey finds itself today before a planned siege from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Aegean Sea, which is as wide-ranging as never before in the history of the modern Turkish state. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the Israeli, Greek Cypriot administration, Greek and Egyptian bloc unites its anti-Turkish collaboration under the guidance and strategic support of the USA and the EU and upgrades it from political to economic and military”<sup>18</sup>.

In short, the Republic of Cyprus has been recorded as one of the “hostile actors” against

Turkey. The policy for determining the EEZ and the cooperation agreements with states like Israel, Greece and Egypt constitute examples of threat against the prospect of Turkey becoming a regional energy hub (Tamçelik & Kurt, 2014, p. 900). In fact, Ankara considers that the strengthening of relations between the Republic of Cyprus and Israel encompasses a militarisation aspect that is clearly directed against the national security of Turkey (Tamçelik & Kurt, 2014, p. 901). In this sense, the Republic of Cyprus has started on a new course of being transformed into a “fortress-state” and a new military base of Israel<sup>19</sup>. As an extension of the above, the Republic of Cyprus now constitutes a kind of representative of Western and Israeli interests, openly antagonistic towards Turkey<sup>20</sup>.

The aforementioned are characteristics of a wider mood promoted through the Turkish media, especially the pro-government press, in recent years. The policy pursued by the US and other Western powers in Syria, as well as the collaborations developed between them and states of the Eastern Mediterranean on the energy issue, constitute examples that confirm the attempts at hostile encirclement and exclusion of Turkey<sup>21</sup>. The threat against Turkey is launched from the border with Iran, extends to the Quandil Mountains in Iraq (PKK headquarters) proceeds north of Syria and “flows” to the Eastern Mediterranean. This specific “threatening” geography constitutes a kind of anti-Turkish front that seeks to isolate Turkey in Anatolia<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Karagül İ. Doğu Akdeniz’de ölümçül satranç // Yeni Şafak. 10.07.2012. URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/ibrahim-karagul/dogu-akdenizde-olumcul-satranca-33156> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>20</sup> Aktaş Ö.F. Yeni Parola ‘Mavi Vatan’ // Yeni Şafak. 28.02.2019. URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/ekonomi/yeni-parola-mavi-vatan-3449000> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>21</sup> Aksan S. ABD Türkiye’yi çevreliyor: Şimdi de Doğu Akdeniz’i kaşıyorlar // Yeni Şafak. 03.12.2018. URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/abd-turkiyeyi-cevreliyor-simdi-de-dogu-akdenizi-kaşıyorlar-3412737> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>22</sup> Karagül İ. Doğu Akdeniz dünya savaşına dönüşmeden: Irak işgalinden, Suriye savaşından büyük olur // Yeni Şafak. 12.09.2018. URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/ibrahim-karagul/dogu-akdeniz-dunya-savasina-donusmeden-irak-isgalinden-suriye-savasından-buyuk-olur-2047254> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>18</sup> Gürdeniz C. Akdeniz’deki Sevr’e cevabımızdır: ‘Geldikleri gibi gidecekler’ // Aydınlık. 25.11.2018. URL: <https://www.gazeteoku.com/yazar/cem-gurdeniz/akdenizdeki-sevre-cevabimizdir-geldikleri-gibi-giderler/282658> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

Therefore, according to some aspects of the new security doctrine, the area extending from the Turkish-Syrian border to the Eastern Mediterranean should be considered a unified geopolitical landscape. This unified region is seen as antagonistic or even hostile to the national security of Turkey. As Yaşar Hacısalihoglu argued, the future of Syria and Iraq at strategic level is to a large degree determined by the geopolitics of energy in the Eastern Mediterranean — what is taking place in Syria today is the result of antagonism over energy in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>23</sup>. İbrahim Karagül considered the concentration of military forces and technology in the Eastern Mediterranean and north of Syria as the most characteristic developments of a huge geopolitical competition for the sharing of the “trillion-dollar cake”<sup>24</sup>. In this way, he pointed out, “the Syrian war has ceased to be a war for Syria and has been transformed into a face-off about the Eastern Mediterranean”<sup>25</sup>.

As an extension of the aforementioned reasoning, the actors in the region are more or less the same — with different priorities and interests in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, but all with a hostile disposition towards Turkey. In this context, a part of the Turkish ruling elite has developed the perception of the existence of two geopolitical fronts in competition: on the one hand are the USA, the EU, Israel, the Republic of Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt. On the other is Turkey, Russia and Iran, but also the Syrian government. The scenes of clashes and antagonism have been extended from the northern territories of Syria towards the Eastern Mediterranean. For this very reason, Turkey is called to face developments in Syria and Cyprus,

<sup>23</sup> Hacısalihoglu Y. Doğu Akdeniz Kararlığı // Prof. Dr. İ. Yaşar Hacısalihoglu Resmi Web Sitesi. 11.12.2018. URL: <http://www.yasarhacisalihoglu.com/dogu-akdeniz-kararligi/> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>24</sup> Karagül İ. Doğu Akdeniz dünya savaşına dönüşmeden: Irak işgalinden, Suriye savaşından büyük olur // Yeni Şafak. 12.09.2018. URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/ibrahim-karagul/dogu-akdeniz-dunya-savasina-donusmeden-irak-iscalinden-suriye-savasindan-buyuk-olur-2047254> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

as elements of a unified geopolitical region of the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>26</sup>.

In essence, Turkey’s “dual danger” in the Eastern Mediterranean stems from Western support of a possible Kurdish state formation in northern Syria with prospects for access to the Eastern Mediterranean, and from Western support of actions by the Republic of Cyprus aimed at excluding Turkey from the energy wealth of the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>27</sup>. In the face of this kind of “encirclement”, Ankara should show the same determination. Turkey’s practical measures of intervention against “hostile *fait accompli*” in the northern region of Syria could be an example of the same determination concerning energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>28</sup>.

### **The Eastern Mediterranean as a “Blue Homeland” and the TRNC as Security Provider**

The ideological construction of a hostile region starting from Syria and reaching the Eastern Mediterranean, threatening the survival of the Turkish state, has inexorably influenced the perceptions through which the Eastern Mediterranean itself is presented in Turkey’s geopolitical doctrine. In the context of strengthening the symbolism for the ideological and political legitimisation of Turkey’s interventionism in the Eastern Mediterranean, the doctrine of the “blue homeland” (*Mavi Vatan*) has reappeared in recent years. This perception is not irrelevant either to Turkey’s claim to maximise its influence in the Eastern

<sup>26</sup> Yavuz A. Kuzey Suriye ile Doğu Akdeniz tek cephedir // Odatv. 03.12.2018. URL: <https://odatv4.com/kuzey-suriye-ile-dogu-akdeniz-tek-cephedir-03121830.html> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>27</sup> Gürdeniz C. Akdeniz’deki Sevr’e cevabımızdır: ‘Geldikleri gibi gidecekler’ // Aydınlık. 25.11.2018. URL: <https://www.gazeteoku.com/yazar/cem-gurdeniz/akdenizdeki-sevre-cevabimizdir-geldikleri-gibi-giderler/282658> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>28</sup> Karagül İ. Doğu Akdeniz dünya savaşına dönüşmeden: Irak işgalinden, Suriye savaşından büyük olur // Yeni Şafak. 12.09.2018. URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/ibrahim-karagul/dogu-akdeniz-dunya-savasina-donusmeden-irak-iscalinden-suriye-savasindan-buyuk-olur-2047254> (accessed: 30.03.2021).



Mediterranean, or to its growing suspicion of the Western states' intentions (Taş, 2020, p. 18). It is no coincidence either that the term is used in the political discourse of senior officials of the Turkish state, and in a way that refers to a state policy<sup>29</sup>.

The “blue homeland” is essentially the maritime extension of aspects of the new geopolitical doctrine that emerged after the 2016 coup attempt (Areteos, 2020, p. 6). Even if it is not a comprehensive theoretical framework of strategy, the “blue homeland” is important because it forms part of the “second strategic zone” of states neighbouring Turkey. According to Yeşiltaş and Pirinççi (2020, p. 102), the second strategic zone is the “last protective shell” around the country and in the event of cracks in this shell, the construction of comprehensive security at national level will not be possible. This reasoning therefore confirms the tendency of “exporting Turkey’s defence” to territories and seas in the region that are considered as sources of threat.

The “blue homeland” is a concept attributed to the retired Admiral Cem Gürdeniz and describes the maritime regions in which Turkey claims to have sovereignty and therefore ability to determine maritime zones as well as an Exclusive Economic Zone<sup>30</sup>. This concept aimed to popularise the political goal of treating the seas surrounding Turkey as “homeland territory.” The ideological implications of this concept, especially with regard to the Eastern Mediterranean, are expressed more by a part of the Eurasianist military establishment. In recent years, these ideological leanings have survived mainly through far-right platforms close to the MHP. Because of the cooperation between MHP and AKP, the perceptions of these circles have

<sup>29</sup> Hulusi Akar: Mavi vatan denizlerimizde menfaatlerimizin ihlal edilmesine asla müsaade etmeyeceğiz // *Aydinpost*. 04.11.2018. URL: <https://www.aydinpost.com/ekonomi/hulusi-akar-mavi-vatan-denizlerimizde-menfaatlerimizin-ihlal-edilmesine-asla-musaade-etmeyecegiz-h460219.html> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>30</sup> Polat S. Mavi Vatan sahiptir mi? // *Aydinlik*. 16.01.2018. URL: <https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/mavi-vatan-sahiptir-mi-soner-polat-kose-yazilari-ocak-2018> (accessed: 30.03.2021). See also: (Gürdeniz, 2018).

found easier channels of expression through the state apparatus<sup>31</sup>.

At the same time, however, the ideological legitimisation of the “blue homeland” included also strong neo-Ottoman and Islamist perceptions. It is precisely the instrumentalisation of the imperial past that has legitimised the Turkish interventionism in the Eastern Mediterranean for a large part of Turkish society (Taş, 2020, p. 17). The politically motivated restoration of the Ottoman past, according to which the Eastern Mediterranean used to be a “Turkish lake,” aimed at the normalisation of the country’s interventionism. A characteristic example is the reinstatement of the Eastern Mediterranean as the locus where the dominance of the Ottoman Empire signalled its ability to create “its very own” universal order<sup>32</sup>.

The attempt to build a collective memory justifying Turkey’s presence in the Eastern Mediterranean was extended to the advocacy of 27 September, the day of the Ottoman naval victory at Preveza, as a new national day. On 27 September 1538, the Ottoman fleet, under the leadership of Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa, succeeded in defeating the fleet of the Christian alliance (assembled by Pope Paul III) under the orders of Andrea Doria, and in this way managed to extend the dominance of the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean. According to Islamist political thought in Turkey, the naval battle of Preveza is considered as the turning point of the Ottoman Empire’s successful transformation from a “land state” to an “empire of the seas”<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, the expansion of Ottoman sovereignty and control in the Mediterranean is advocated by the current government as the proof of the

<sup>31</sup> Uzgel İ. Mavi Vatan ve Türkiye’nin yeni güvenlik doktrini // *Gazete Duvar*. 15.06.2020. URL: <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yazarlar/2020/06/15/mavi-vatan-ve-turkiyenin-yeni-guvenlik-doktrini> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>32</sup> Ercan Yıldırım: Akdeniz’e sahip olan, dünya sistemine de sahip olur // *Star*. 08.06.2019. URL: <https://www.dusuncemektebi.com/d/184938/ercan-yildirim-akdeniz%E2%80%99e-sahip-olan,-dunya-sistemine-de-sahip-olur> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>33</sup> Akdeniz’i Türk gölüne çeviren zafer: Preveze // *Yeni Şafak*. 27.09.2018. URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/tarih/akdenizi-turk-golune-ceviren-zafer-preveze-3398328> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

transformation of the Mediterranean into a “Turkish lake”<sup>34</sup>. According to the prevailing ideological concept, the hostile encirclement of Turkey on energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean is a prospect that should be addressed, not only for the country’s national security, but also for the protection of its “natural rights” in a “Turkish sea.”

It is no coincidence that both the two Turkish drilling vessels (*Yavuz* and *Fatih*) and the two seismic research vessels (*Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa* and *Oruç Reis*) used in the Eastern Mediterranean bear the names of Ottoman sultans and admirals, an outright reference to this neo-Ottoman context. The patrols of the Turkish Navy in the region were code-named “Mediterranean Shield”<sup>35</sup>, explicitly referring to the defence of Turkish sovereignty against external challenges and threats.

At the same time, however, the wider ramifications of the “blue homeland” also focused on the identification of the importance of the connection between land and sea. At this point it would be important to decode the significance of the words chosen to name the doctrine. “Blue” explicitly refers to the sea. The use of the word “homeland” (*vatan*), however, has distinct ideological orientations. *Vatan* is a word of Arabic origin meaning the birthplace of a person. However, the politicisation of the concept in contemporary history has transformed the *homeland* into the description of the specific national region, national geography and national identity. It is, therefore, a concept charged with the mission of transforming “imaginary borders” into contemporary national and political borders (Özkan, 2012, p. 1—3). Therefore, the “blue homeland” in the context of the AKP—MHP alliance also constituted an attempt to promote the procedure of “territorialisation” of the sea and advocate the Eastern Mediterranean as an integral part of the territory and state sovereignty of Turkey. Through this doctrine, Ankara

perceives the security, defence and prosperity of the country as elements intertwined with the seas that surround it and not only the land<sup>36</sup>.

The aforementioned momentum is of great importance since it has brought the view of TRNC as a security provider to Turkey to the forefront of Ankara’s Eastern Mediterranean policy. Karagül described this shift as follows: “Here we are! At this point the TRNC will take on the role of saving Turkey”<sup>37</sup>. If the 1974 invasion of Cyprus took place on the pretext of protecting the Turkish Cypriots, recent rivalries in the Eastern Mediterranean have turned the northern territories of Cyprus into a provider of security to Turkey.

At this level the TRNC acquires critical importance as it can constitute a basis for the termination of Turkey’s “hostile encirclement” in the Eastern Mediterranean, precisely because of the presence of the Turkish army<sup>38</sup>. According to this perception, the existence of the TRNC constitutes a response against any possibilities to isolate Turkey. For this reason, the TRNC can serve as a second battle fleet for the protection of Turkey’s national security. Therefore, it is the continuation and strengthening of the TRNC that should be ensured and not its dissolution through a federal solution to the Cyprus problem<sup>39</sup>. It is not coincidental that Cem Gürdeniz describes the TRNC as the “southern fortress of the blue

<sup>36</sup> Aktaş Ö.F. Yeni Parola ‘Mavi Vatan’ // Yeni Şafak. 28.02.2019. URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/ekonomi/yeni-parola-mavi-vatan-3449000> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>37</sup> Karagül İ. Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa geri döndü... // Yeni Şafak. 02.12.2019. URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/ibrahim-karagul-barbaros-hayrettin-pasa-473-yil-sonra-geri-dondu-sancagi-karargha-konuldu-akdenizin-sahipleri-geri-geldi-turkiye-libya-anlasmasi-deniz-haritasini-degistirdi-sevr-plni-ellerinde-patladi-mavi-vatan-buyuk-ulke-turkiyenin-yuzolcumu-bildigimizden-cok-fazla-2053532> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>38</sup> Gürdeniz C. 21. yüzyıl Türk jeopolitiğinin ağırlık merkezi: Doğu Akdeniz // Independent Türkçe. 05.07.2019. URL: <https://www.indyturk.com/node/48556/t%C3%BCrkiyeden-sesler/21-y%C3%BCzy%C4%B1-t%C3%BCrk-jeopoliti%C4%9Finin-a%C4%9F%C4%B1rl%C4%B1k-merkezi-do%C4%9Fu-akdeniz> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>39</sup> Gürdeniz C. Mavi vatanın 34 yıllık güney kalesi: KKTC // ANKA ENSTİTÜSÜ. 22.11.2017. URL: <http://ankaenstitusu.com/mavi-vatanin-34-yillik-guney-kalesi-kkct/> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>34</sup> Akdeniz’i Bir Türk Gölü Haline Getiren Rüyâ // İslam ve İhsan. 27.09.2016. URL: <https://www.islamveihsan.com/akdenizi-bir-turk-golu-haline-getiren-ruya.html> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>35</sup> Bakıcı T., Sezer K. Akdeniz Kalkanı // Yeni Şafak. 10.12.2018. URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/akdeniz-kalkani-3414050> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

homeland” and stresses that “it should not be forgotten that the TRNC is not only the baby-land. It is the very mother-land”<sup>40</sup>. In this way the geographical position of Cyprus is reproduced as an element of crucial importance for Turkish national security<sup>41</sup>.

The crucial importance attached to the geographical location of Cyprus, and especially to the existence of the TRNC at the service of Turkey’s new national security doctrine, also constitutes the basis for the development of new military infrastructures, like the creation of a permanent naval base on the island<sup>42</sup>. These plans were submitted by the navy to the government and some of their details have been, in various ways, leaked to the Turkish press<sup>43</sup>. According to various reports, the reasoning behind the practical aspects set by the country’s navy as necessities for the establishment of a permanent naval base in Cyprus is based on the following: Turkey’s forces in the Eastern Mediterranean are supported by the ports of Mersin and Alexandretta, which, however, primarily serve civilian merchant vessels. Therefore, provision for the navy is substantially limited and it is forced instead to be supported logistically by the naval base of Aksaz in the Aegean, in the region of Marmara<sup>44</sup>. As a result, the need arises for a naval base at a closer location, for missions focused mainly on the region of Cyprus and the Middle East. The planning for the naval base in Cyprus comprises

the prospect of reducing travel time to the areas of mission, while at the same time increasing the potential of presence in the areas of operation. Cyprus is the closest location to the Turkish Navy’s operational zones and therefore can constitute a serious option as a base for logistic or other support<sup>45</sup>.

However, apart from the geopolitical issues raised by Ankara, Turkey’s presence in Cyprus is deemed necessary by circles close to Erdoğan also because of the intensified “culture war” between Turkey and a large section of the Turkish Cypriot community. Parallel to the geopolitical competitions in the Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara showed willingness to proceed with policies enhancing religious conservatism in the northern territories of Cyprus<sup>46</sup>. Through these policies, the cultural discipline of the secular Turkish Cypriot community is sought, as well as the marginalisation of Turkish Cypriot ideological forces that maintain trends of cooperation with the Greek Cypriot community. In this context, Ankara’s interventions in the elections for a new Turkish Cypriot leader in October 2020 can be more comprehensively interpreted.

## Conclusion

Even though the new ruling coalition in Turkey centred on AKP—MHP collaboration had started its formation in 2015, the 2016 coup attempt was a pivotal decisive moment in the culmination of its formalisation process. The coup attempt itself also intensified the dynamics of transforming the “survival of the state” into the political platform of the coalition. The dynamics released soon led the Turkish government on a quest for a new security doctrine, characterised by the attempt to “export” defence to territories outside the formal borders. The country’s military operations north of Syria were the first practical example of the new security policies, expressing also a form of militarisation of foreign policy.

<sup>40</sup> Gürdeniz C. Mavi vatanın 34 yıllık güney kalesi: KKTC // ANKA ENSTİTÜSÜ. 22.11.2017. URL: <http://ankaenstitusu.com/mavi-vatanin-34-yillik-guney-kalesi-kkct/> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>41</sup> Mavi Vatan’ın isim babası Kıbrıs Postası’na konuştu: “KKTC’nin jeopolitiği Anadolu’nun jeopolitiği demek” // Kıbrıs Postası. 15.02.2020. URL: [https://www.kibrispostasi.com/c35-KIBRIS\\_HABERLERI/n311855-kktenin-jeopolitigi-anadolunun-jeopolitigi-demek](https://www.kibrispostasi.com/c35-KIBRIS_HABERLERI/n311855-kktenin-jeopolitigi-anadolunun-jeopolitigi-demek) (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>42</sup> KKTC’ye giden ilk İHA Geçitkale Havaalanı’na indi // T24. 16.12.2019. URL: <https://t24.com.tr/haber/kkctye-gidecek-ilk-iha-havalandi,852266> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>43</sup> Gürcan M. Why Turkey wants a permanent naval base in Northern Cyprus // Al Monitor. September 12, 2018. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/09/turkey-why-ankara-wants-permanent-naval-base-in-cyprus.html> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Kaplan Y. Kıbrıs, elimizden gidiyor... Âcil önlem şart! // Yeni Şafak. 16.10.2020. URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/yusuf-kaplan/kibris-elimizden-gidiyor-cil-onlem-sart-2056520> (accessed: 30.03.2021).

However, the aforementioned developments coincided with the tension of antagonism in the Eastern Mediterranean. In this framework, the new synthesis of the ruling coalition brought back to life the concept of “blue homeland”, on which interventionism in the Eastern Mediterranean was based. The “blue homeland”, as a concept of ideological construction of the Eastern Mediterranean, is based both on the nationalist trends that voice anguish over the “hostile encirclement” of Turkey and espouse the Islamist / neo-Ottoman perceptions advocating the Eastern Mediterranean as a locus of “imperial presence” by the Turks. It is precisely this

ideological convergence that decisively influences Turkey’s gaze towards Cyprus and the Turkish Cypriot community. It transforms the TRNC into a security provider for Turkey and through this development has an impact on the internal political situation of the Turkish Cypriots. Therefore, the reorganisation of Turkey’s regional policies is the result of both the effects of the international political and economic environment, and the internal reshuffling of balances and changes in the ideological framework within which the Turkish ruling elite has been operating in recent years.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 06.04.2021  
Accepted / Принята к публикации: 10.06.2021

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