



Watch List 2023

Autumn Update | 4 October 2023

Every year Crisis Group publishes two additional Watch List updates that complement its annual Watch List for the EU, most recently published in January 2023. These publications identify major crises and conflict situations where the European Union and its member states can generate stronger prospects for peace. The two additional updates include an overview of the policy environment and main challenges for the European Union and five crises and conflict situations, which can update those identified in the annual Watch List or present a new focus of concern. For each of the five cases included in this update, Crisis Group provides field-based analysis and specific policy advice to the European Union and its member states, with the aim to guide and improve their efforts to prevent, mitigate or end conflicts.

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

President's Take: Hot Spots Near and Far

The year 2023 has seen peace and security challenges both far from the EU's borders and closer to home. The latter, especially, have heightened in recent weeks and months, which have seen fighting in the South Caucasus and Kosovo, even as a second year of war in Ukraine stretches on. While the three crises are very different in nature, all suggest a worrying inclination on the part of some governments to seek solutions to disputes through force of arms. Insofar as this jarring trend involves a proliferation of new wars, large and small, it flies in the face of the decades of energy that the EU has invested in turning the page on past conflagrations in Europe and its neighbourhood. Crisis Group is working on a report about how these conflicts are shaping the emerging European security architecture and how best to minimise the risk of future clashes. In the meantime, however, these three crises demand immediate attention. We have explored [all of them](#) in earlier work, but I want to share a few thoughts about recent developments.

Three Immediate Crises

Start with the South Caucasus. During a 24-hour military operation on 19 and 20 September, Azerbaijan regained full control of Nagorno-Karabakh (a Soviet-era name that Baku no longer uses). While internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan, the enclave is primarily populated by ethnic Armenians. Azerbaijan lost control of the enclave and surrounding territory in the 1990s, after which the region was administered by de facto authorities in Stepanakert, and subsequently recovered some of it following a six-week war in 2020. September's one-day war ended the enclave's three decades of de facto self-governance and triggered an exodus to Armenia of residents who were already traumatised by a nine-month long Azerbaijani blockade that had hindered access to basic necessities. Deeply mistrustful of rule from Baku, many, perhaps most, expect not to return. The government in Yerevan, which did not challenge its more powerful neighbor in September's conflict, is struggling to cope with the influx – already more than 100,000 people, it says; international [observers](#) say only 50 to 1,000 ethnic Armenians remain in the Karabakh region. While fighting has largely subsided in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, flare-ups remain possible in areas along the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia, where skirmishes have occurred periodically since the end of the 2020 war. Baku has pushed Yerevan for new concessions, notably on a transport corridor through southern Armenia to connect Azerbaijan to its exclave, Nakhichevan.

There are a number of things the EU can do to mitigate the humanitarian crisis and lower the risk of tensions escalating between Baku and Yerevan. The first priority must be protection and support for those fleeing to Armenia. To meet immediate needs, the EU announced a relief package worth €5 million (\$5.1 million) and pledges have also been made by France, Germany and Sweden. Long-term assistance will also be needed to help those who want to settle permanently in Armenia make new lives and integrate fully. As Crisis Group has previously [counselled](#), governments with ties to Baku should reinforce the importance of protecting the enclave's very few residents who decide to stay and those who have yet to flee. Authorities should safeguard property and cultural heritage sites, ideally in coordi-

nation with the UN, to ensure transparency and accountability. A preliminary [UN mission](#) visited Karabakh on 1 October to assess the humanitarian situation, and donors should look to channel aid through the UN to the extent possible.

At the same time, to prevent hostilities along the border that separates them, work must urgently continue to find a political settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. If EU-facilitated talks due to take place between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on 5 October deliver confidence-building measures such as prisoner releases, it will be a step in the right direction. Success on the political front will require all actors with influence on the parties – including Russia, Türkiye and the U.S., as well as the EU – to increase the incentives for diplomatic, rather than military solutions. In order to facilitate better coordination in maintaining border stability, the EU should also urge Azerbaijan to begin cooperating with the EU mission that deployed to Armenian territory with Yerevan's consent earlier in 2023.

Farther west, Kosovo-Serbia tensions are at their highest since the days immediately after Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. On 24 September, the ambush of a police patrol in northern Kosovo sent tensions soaring. A large cache of military-grade weapons was retrieved when a Serb paramilitary group withdrew after taking control of a monastery overnight. It included mortars, anti-tank rockets, armour-piercing grenades, large-calibre sniper rifles and vehicles falsely bearing the insignia of KFOR, the NATO-led peacekeeping force. The size and make-up of this haul suggests that the group had planned a major attack on the Kosovo special police forces deployed in the Serb-majority north. The aim of the assault remains unclear, but it seems plausible that the group hoped to spark a crisis that would force KFOR to take over full responsibility for security in the north – and lead to the exit of at least some, if not all, of the Kosovan police stationed there. Although Belgrade denies involvement in the attack, the arms seized are more usually found in military stores than in the hands of militias, pointing to the strong probability of Serbian support.

While the risk of escalation has now increased considerably, hopes for [a deal between Kosovo and Serbia](#) were low even before the 24 September attack and the troop build-up. EU-facilitated normalisation talks between Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti Vucic on 14 September faltered due to Kurti's insistence that Belgrade de facto recognise Kosovo by treating it as a sovereign, independent country before Pristina would make progress on prior unfulfilled agreements, [according to Josep Borrell](#), the EU's high representative for foreign affairs. [Pristina has since indicated](#) that it has lost faith in EU mediator Miroslav Lajčák, and the recent events make the chances of the resumption of EU-led negotiations even less likely. Nevertheless, the EU and the Quint (a coordination body consisting of France, Germany, Italy, the UK and the U.S.) should not stop trying. They should redouble their efforts to bring the parties to the table, with an initial focus on de-escalation and confidence building. When tensions ease, diplomats can switch back to getting the parties to implement the [Agreement on the Path to Normalisation](#) concluded in February. In the meantime, further reinforce-

ments for KFOR are essential to help keep the two sides at arm's length from each other. The UK's deployment of a battalion of troops is a welcome step in this regard.

But the biggest and most geopolitically consequential of Europe's conflicts – both because of its escalatory potential and its global reverberations – remains Russia's war in Ukraine. Ukraine's resistance to Russian aggression, now approaching its second anniversary, remains a remarkable example of courage and resilience in the face of steep odds. It is also highly dependent on continued material and economic support from the EU, its member states and the U.S., as Russia understands well. Moscow's war plan depends in large part on this support faltering as the war drags on. Whether that will happen is an open question. With the prospect of a long war ever clearer – particularly given the slow progress of Ukraine's summer counter-offensive – the provision of Western support has become contested ground. This contest tends to pit incumbent political elites (which support Kyiv) against populist and often right-wing rivals (which have no such affinity and in some cases are drawn to Moscow). The Euro-Atlantic states have thus far remained largely united in judging Ukraine's success to be critical – not least because of a shared interest in preventing further Russian aggression, including acts directed at them. Indeed, the EU itself has led and continues to lead on support to Ukraine. But the domestic pressures on Ukraine's backers should not be underestimated.

The politics of sending massive assistance to Ukraine creates leverage for opponents who say the money would be better spent at home. Even in countries where support for Ukraine's war is steadfast, politicians are not necessarily willing to support Ukraine's economic needs if that will create costs domestically. For example, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland decided to ban Ukrainian grain imports, in violation of the European Single Market's rules, after farmers argued that they were being undercut by cheap wheat from Ukraine. While Polish backing for Ukraine remains strong, and Warsaw, which has reportedly now reached a new deal with Kyiv on grain transit, is unlikely to lessen its support either before or after its 15 October parliamentary elections, the same cannot be so easily said for either Hungary or Slovakia. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has criticised, although not blocked, EU support for Kyiv for nearly a decade. In Slovakia, Robert Fico, whose Smer party came out ahead, although far short of a majority, in 30 September elections, has vowed to end weapons shipments to Ukraine. Whether he will do so will depend in large part on what coalition takes shape to control the government.

Populist parties are making inroads elsewhere, too. In Germany, the far right Alternative für Deutschland party, which has close ties to Moscow and is critical of military assistance for Kyiv, is polling better than the ruling Social Democrats, potentially calling even Berlin's long-term support into question. If, as seems possible, parties with a similar line on Ukraine do well in the June 2024 European Parliament elections, pressure to reduce spending on arms and aid will only increase. In addition, growing backlash among Republicans, whom might score a victory in the 2024 U.S. elections, leaves Europeans and Ukrainians worried about Washington's commitment not just to Ukraine, but to European security more broadly. The 30 September deal between Republicans and Democrats to avoid a government shutdown

excised aid to Ukraine. This move may reflect plans to use other vehicles for passing such a package, but it injects further uncertainty into the prospects for continued assistance. Broader bipartisan support would have obviated the need for such machinations.

Whither Enlargement?

Amid all this uncertainty, the question of what will happen with Ukraine's bid for EU membership raises fundamental issues for the EU. Having been declared a formal candidate in June 2022, Kyiv is impatient to gain entry to the European club – in part because joining would surely help cement future aid flows. Ahead of important summits taking place in Granada, Spain in early October to discuss EU enlargement and the institutional reform it will necessitate, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal [pledged to bring his country into the EU](#) within two years, claiming Kyiv has met all the criteria needed for accession talks to begin. EU leaders are faced with finding a way to manage not only Ukraine's candidacy but also the accession hopes of countries from the bloc's eastern neighbourhood and the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – as well as Türkiye, a candidate since 1999.

But if the EU is now thinking about how to make possible and prepare for an EU 30+, the challenges are many. We discuss Türkiye's fraught relations with the EU in our Watch List entry below. Serbia's accession is contingent on the receding prospect of normalised relations with Kosovo. In the case of Ukraine, the EU would be extending its security guarantee to a country presently defending itself in a war with Russia. In other instances, it would be welcoming governments that seem less than wholeheartedly committed to democratic, institutional and economic reforms. The economic burden of integration would also be significant, as accessions would further strain the EU's budget and increase competition for its structural funds. Certainly, Shmyhal's two-year timeline for Ukraine seems highly optimistic. Indeed, it is not yet clear what reforms and actions would be needed to make more plausible the 2030 target proposed by European Council President Charles Michel for at least some enlargement attainable.

Challenges and Opportunities

While the conflicts on the EU's eastern borders will likely pull the attention of the EU and its member states inward, this Watch List Update is a reminder that Europe cannot allow itself to lose sight of challenges elsewhere – or its interests and responsibilities in helping meet them. What follows is not a comprehensive list of the world's crises. It does not feature, for instance, the recent flooding in Libya, violence in Ethiopia's Amhara state or the brutal civil war in Sudan. Rather, the Update is a discussion of five of many situations where the EU has an important opportunity to use its resources to help prevent conflict or mitigate its ravages. These include providing a lifeline to Rohingya displaced from their homes in western Myanmar; supporting President Gustavo Petro's ambitious "total peace" agenda in Colombia; steering Tunisia away from debt default; forging a pragmatic approach to Niger's

junta; and seizing opportunities created by a thaw in relations with Türkiye. If nothing else, these entries remind us that, even as Europe works to manage local crises, there is much it can do to promote peace and security around the world.

Comfort Ero, Crisis Group President & CEO

October 2023

Colombia: Is “Total Peace” Back on Track?

As President Gustavo Petro advances in [his plans for “total peace”](#) through talks with armed and criminal groups, parts of Colombia face the threat of fresh [violence](#).

The stakes for these talks are higher than ever: they must deliver results not only on paper but in the daily lives of conflict-affected communities. The Petro administration’s interlocutors include a remnant of the demobilised Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EMC is its acronym in Spanish); unlike the rest of the former FARC, this faction never signed the 2016 peace agreement that ended Colombia’s armed conflict with its largest insurgency. Separately, a still-active Marxist insurgency (the National Liberation Army, or ELN) is also in negotiations. In addition, Colombian authorities have launched a series of dialogues with criminal groups and urban gangs, though the channels of outreach to the Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces, the country’s largest armed organisation in terms of personnel and territory and a major player in drug trafficking, have gone cold.

Despite progress in reaching ceasefires and entering serious negotiations, testimonies from the public as well as available data [suggest that, so far, there has been no clear-cut improvement in security](#) in either cities or the countryside. Although murder rates have dropped slightly, several armed and criminal groups have [tightened](#) their grip on areas they control. The number of clashes among groups engaged in turf wars has climbed, while cases of extortion, kidnapping, [recruitment](#) and meddling in politics ahead of the [October local elections](#) all appear to be on the rise. Ethnic minorities, children and rural women are among the main victims.

Initial missteps in rolling out the “total peace” strategy help account for the contrast between the high-level advances in talks and worsening insecurity at the grassroots. Unilateral six-month ceasefires announced by the authorities in the first half of 2023 amounted to tactical gifts to armed and criminal groups, which grew stronger during the respite from military operations. Lower homicide rates in many areas conceal a more sinister reality: that is, armed groups have attained such a stifling hold on daily life that they no longer need to use violence to dispense with rivals or silence critics. Instead, civilians comply out of fear. State security forces admit they are only now starting to recover their ability to apply pressure on armed groups after the hiatus.

The good news is that the government appears committed to learning from its early mistakes as it seeks to bring greater security to all Colombians. At this pivotal moment, as talks inch along, Petro’s government should clarify its priorities for negotiated outcomes and direct “total peace” efforts toward de-escalating violence. It should employ military operations to complement this approach, reinforcing its message that dialogue, not armed resistance, is the only way forward.

To support the government's peace efforts, the EU and its member states should consider the following:

- ❑ In its roles supporting negotiations with the FARC-EMC and talks with urban gangs, the EU should encourage all parties to make civilian well-being a priority. The EU should support efforts to involve conflict-affected communities – including the youth and women among them – in dialogues and provide support to ensure ceasefire monitors and negotiators can travel to affected areas as they seek to adjudicate alleged violations and hear directly from residents.
- ❑ Aid efforts to incorporate environmental protection goals into talks, including with the FARC-EMC and the ELN.
- ❑ Work to establish a greater European diplomatic presence in rural areas, for example through the expansion of the Defend Life (Defendamos la Vida) program, aimed at protecting social leaders.
- ❑ Boost European funding for implementation of the 2016 peace agreement, as the Trust Fund for Colombia – which was vital to expanding rural development – has run dry.
- ❑ Intensify European cooperation with Colombia, and Latin America more generally, on matters related to reining in organised crime, including through information sharing, joint investigations, training and technical assistance.

A Troubled Beginning

President Petro came to power in August 2022 on the back of mass discontent with corruption, inequality and rising violence. For a time, thanks to the landmark 2016 peace agreement between the government and the FARC, Colombia had seen rates of forced displacement, massacres, kidnappings and other crimes fall to their lowest points in recent history. More recently, however, new and existing armed groups have sought to win control of lucrative illicit businesses, engaging in ferocious competition to that end. Armed groups also took advantage of lockdowns and school closures during the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) to deepen their control and recruit new members. As a result, conservative Iván Duque (2018–2022) was the first Colombian president in two decades to leave office with the country plagued by higher levels of insecurity than when his term began.

Upon assuming the presidency, Petro confronted an alarming blight of violence that his administration has since struggled to quell. From the outset, his government has argued that negotiations to demobilise armed groups are essential to any effort to resolve the multi-sided conflicts in localities throughout the country. Officials have promised to talk to all types of armed outfits in the campaign to reduce violence. Yet when it comes to criminal groups, a significant part of the Colombian public is hostile to the administration's ambitions, as are top legal authorities and many members of Congress. Historically, critics argue, the Colombian state has negotiated primarily with its political opponents – especially guerrillas – not with criminals out merely for pecuniary gain. Legal obstacles also inhibit talks with

organised crime, including a constitutional amendment passed under the Duque administration [outlawing amnesties](#) for drug trafficking and kidnapping.

Early setbacks in the implementation of Petro's "total peace" agenda reinforced these concerns. The government declared unilateral ceasefires with five armed and criminal groups, beginning on 1 January, with the aim of reducing violence. Instead, these organisations exploited the opportunity by recruiting more members and seizing new territory without fear of military pushback. The ceasefires resulted in what a senior military officer called "a complete loss of momentum" over the first three months of 2023.

The government wisely chose not to renew the ceasefires when they expired on 31 June, but the damage had been done. The Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces are now more deeply entrenched on the country's Atlantic coast; the FARC-EMC has expanded aggressively in the Amazon and along the Pacific coast; and the ELN has firmed up its footholds in strategic departments (as Colombian provinces are known), including Cauca on the Pacific and Norte de Santander on the Venezuelan border.

Petro's government is adapting after the initial disappointments, trying to strengthen its position both on the battlefield and at the negotiating table. It secured a bilateral ceasefire with the ELN that began on 3 August, with protocols that include a commitment to uphold international humanitarian law. Given the insurgency's habit of failing to distinguish between soldiers and civilians, for example when it plants landmines or carries out kidnappings, that is a crucial measure.

The Defence Ministry has ordered [the military to push back harder](#) against all the groups that are not covered by a ceasefire, intensifying operations against the Gaitanistas and the FARC-EMC. In August, for example, Defence Minister Iván Velásquez launched a large-scale offensive to retake parts of a region in Cauca that the FARC-EMC has held for years. This campaign against the group's leadership and strongholds appears to have had an effect. The FARC-EMC agreed on 19 September to a full bilateral ceasefire, set to begin on 8 October. Before the ceasefire was to take hold, however, the FARC-EMC carried out a string of car bombings, including a particularly egregious assault on a police station in Cauca that left two civilians dead. Responding to public outrage, the guerrillas on 22 September told their fighters to stand down from all further offensive operations.

Authorities are hopeful that the new defence policy may finally align with the government's strategy for dialogue by putting military pressure on groups to embrace negotiations, while also offering them material incentives to do so. There are other indications that the Petro government has fine-tuned its approach. Having previously designated just a handful of officials to manage an array of complex peace processes, the government announced in late August that it would decentralise peace efforts through [eight regional offices](#), with a commissioner assigned to each.

Yet important components of a viable peace strategy are still sorely missing. The government has failed to establish a clear legal framework for dialogue with criminal groups, including the Gaitanistas. Despite congressional approval of the "total peace" plan in November 2022, the attorney general has insisted that additional

legislation is required to lay out the terms of what can be discussed and what benefits can be offered for the mass demobilisation of criminal groups. In June, Congress set aside the government bill that would have filled this gap. The Gaitanistas have also rejected the terms on offer, which would have included reduced jail terms of between six to eight years and an amnesty for a small portion of ill-gotten wealth in exchange for full truth and transparency about past crimes. Without a law to govern talks, dialogue with urban gangs is also in limbo. Despite some early successes, including a truce in the port city of Buenaventura that [ended homicides for 80 days](#), groups are growing impatient waiting for the government to determine what kind of demobilisation package it could offer within the law.

Coerced Communities

Much of the administration's diplomacy with armed and criminal groups has focused on reducing confrontations with state forces. Less has been done to calm the violence perpetrated against civilians – much of which derives from clashes between rival armed groups or their attempts to cement control of community life.

To hold territory, armed and criminal groups [turn their coercive powers on communities](#), many of which lack state protection. Arauca has suffered a wave of assassinations as rival groups attack social leaders (ie, activists and civil society representatives) who live in areas run by their enemies or are accused of sympathising with the other side. But groups also increasingly rely on insidious and often hard-to-detect forms of violence and social control to deter detractors, while keeping a low profile for themselves. Armed groups have forcibly limited the movement of entire communities along the Pacific coast – a practice known as confinement, cases of which are [up 18 per cent in the first six months of 2023](#). They have also planted landmines, and mandated that people carry locally issued ID cards to keep intruders out. Across the country's southern departments – namely, Cauca, Caquetá and Putumayo – armed groups have coerced unarmed civilians to encircle soldiers and demand that they leave.

Armed and criminal groups are hoping to consolidate their hold on these and other areas in October's local elections, when mayorships and local council seats are up for grabs. These groups covet influence over these officeholders, primarily as a means of laundering illicit revenues, for example through state procurement contracts, and for purposes of shaping security operations. By the end of August, the Electoral Observation Mission, a civil society group, had recorded 288 violent attacks or threats on politicians since the start of the electoral cycle, including 21 assassination attempts. The total number of attacks already represents an 80 per cent increase over the 2019 local polls. The same organisation in September [flagged 125 municipalities](#) as at extreme risk of electoral violence – the highest number since 2010.

At the start of campaign season, the FARC-EMC had declared that it would allow only friendly candidates to campaign in areas under its control, and these security threats had prevented some members of traditional parties from registering their candidacies. Government negotiators have since secured a commitment from FARC-EMC to allow elections to go ahead without meddling by the armed group. Con-

tenders along the Atlantic coast, meanwhile, have told Crisis Group that channels of communication with the Gaitanistas are essential in order to run for office safely, though the group has said publicly it will not intervene in the vote. “It is impossible to campaign for fear that they will make an attempt on your life”, an independent candidate said. A prospective mayoral aspirant in an ELN stronghold said the guerrillas “do not put forward candidates, but they do eliminate candidates”, preventing their political foes from standing for office.

Women and youth tend to bear the brunt of abuse in areas under armed group control. Women face specific challenges in trying to hold their families and communities together under conditions of extreme duress. “Women are the ones who always carry the greatest risks – of being raped or assaulted, of becoming widows, of not knowing how to keep children out of conflict”, a social leader from Arauca said. Young people are also drawn into the fray. Armed groups say that their prime recruitment population is aged sixteen to 24; the youths who join up often lack other opportunities and face reprisal if they refuse to enlist.

Escaping the Coercion Trap

Stopping such coercive practices, above all in rural areas, is crucial not just to safeguard public well-being but also to prove that talks offer communities genuine benefits. The public is souring on negotiations as the perception spreads that they do little to make people safer. Just [28.5 per cent](#) of Colombians in one recent survey said they believe “total peace” is working well, while nearly 67 per cent felt that public security had deteriorated. To help ward off such concerns, talks with the ELN should underline compliance with international humanitarian law, stressing that civilians must be shielded from violence. Achieving Petro’s stated objective of a full cessation of hostilities with the FARC-EMC – with the goal of ending violence against civilians, including recruitment, extortion and movement restrictions – would of course be an enormous step in the right direction. While the rebels have rejected these terms thus far, smaller steps might be feasible. For example, the FARC-EMC might agree to cease recruitment of minors and place its fighters at a distance from civilians, perhaps in return for a commitment by the military to also stay out of these populated areas.

“Total peace” efforts should provide [relief to the populations](#) that have faced the highest rates of victimisation: ethnic minorities, children and rural women. Initial agreements with both the ELN and FARC-EMC include promises of joint humanitarian efforts in conflict-affected areas; these must be handled with extreme care, with neither armed groups nor the military involved in delivering essential aid. Meanwhile, negotiations with both the ELN and the FARC-EMC should include more women’s participation. In the ELN’s case, a newly created popular consultation group could grapple with issues such as gender-based violence and the effects of forced confinement. The FARC-EMC process is intended to be mobile, visiting places across the country, thus helping the voices of women, young people and ethnic communities to be heard.

What the EU and its Member States Can Do

Rural communities trust the EU and its member states, thanks to their history of strong support for implementation of the 2016 peace process, giving them special inroads to help the “total peace” strategy reach and protect these populations. While the EU cannot intervene in the agenda for the talks with the FARC-EMC, it has been asked to serve as a guarantor of the process, allowing EU diplomats to offer guidance on international humanitarian law, as well as the technical and financial resources to ensure that negotiators from both sides hear directly from victims and affected communities. Because talks are set to take place in Colombia, the EU might for example subsidise official visits by negotiators and members of monitoring bodies to regions in conflict. Such community connections are vital for ensuring that any agreement enjoys popular support. They would also help along dialogues with urban gangs and talks with the ELN.

European interests in ending deforestation in Colombia also align with the FARC-EMC process. In initial contacts with the government, FARC-EMC leaders made clear that they are seeking a peacetime role in environmental protection, and negotiations could look to specify what this role might entail. The group has demonstrable influence over certain areas: in recent months, for example, they have enforced a [modest reduction](#) in clearing of land in the Amazon region. The Colombian state, by contrast, has little institutional presence in these remote territories. Military operations to curb deforestation, meanwhile, have [targeted small-time loggers](#) rather than the financiers and powerful economic interests that are driving mass environmental degradation. A collaborative approach could have benefits for all concerned.

The EU and member states can also work to expand their visible diplomatic presence in rural Colombia. Social leaders and communities report that visits and statements from international diplomats confer a level of protection. Armed groups are less likely to attack social leaders whose external ties are readily apparent, particularly when the groups are polishing their image in preparation for peace talks. The EU’s Defend Life program has so far given dozens of leaders this extra layer of security.

Funding for continued implementation of the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC is also vital for addressing the inequality and lack of rural development that continue to drive conflict. The EU Trust Fund supported nearly every component of the accord, from [helping former FARC](#) guerrillas return to civilian life to strengthening [rural economies](#) and supporting the emblematic [territorially focused development programs](#) (PDETs), which sought to harness growth in post-conflict areas. But the Trust Fund has not received new funds since 2021, and as such it cannot finance new projects. In its absence, the Petro administration has fewer resources to direct toward these transformative initiatives, even though it has stated that rural reform is a priority. New financing, particularly for the PDETs, could help push these projects across the finish line and create a stronger basis for peace. Funding for women’s participation in negotiations and for specific protection initiatives to address gender-based violence (for example under the EU’s own Action Plan on Women, Peace

and Security and Gender Action Plan) would also help bring to fruition the provisions in these and other parts of the accord.

Finally, the EU should accelerate joint law enforcement efforts with Colombia – something that is already [well under way](#). Europe is now a prime destination for Colombian cocaine, and trans-Atlantic ties among criminals have deepened. In addition to the [recent announcement of increased judicial cooperation](#), the EU could expand training and exchange opportunities for Colombian partners in the security forces. Europol could leverage a [pilot project](#) for information sharing through the Europe Latin America Programme of Assistance against Transnational Organised Crime, or [EIPAcCTO](#), initiative, which is set to enter a more intensive phase soon. Recent [successful investigations](#) of drug trafficking networks have demonstrated the value of European expertise and funding, including support for deploying investigators and analysing financial flows. This cooperation could be channelled into the creation of joint special investigation units (similar to those that the U.S. and UK maintain with Colombia), focusing on specific organisations or types of crimes.

Niger: Containing the Fallout from the Coup

A [26 July coup in Niger](#) has upended alliances in West Africa and struck another in a succession of blows to democratic principles in the region. After military takeovers in Mali and Burkina Faso in 2021 and 2022, the European Union, the U.S. and other allies of Sahelian states had pinned their hopes on Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum as a guarantor of stability and a bulwark of sensible civilian governance. Whereas Islamist militants are stepping up a campaign of violence in Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger had largely contained jihadist activities over the last two years. Bazoum had developed a security policy that included non-military initiatives such as engagement with repentant militants, while also forging closer ties with the U.S. and French militaries. But despite Bazoum's track record, those who helped him ascend to power in 2021 did not protect him when General Abdourahamane Tiani, head of the presidential guard, staged a putsch, apparently fearing that he was about to be removed from his position.

As the junta consolidates its power, a geopolitical drama is unfolding. Niger's donors, neighbours and security partners are divided over how to work with the country's new military leadership. France has withdrawn its ambassador after a bitter stand-off and will pull its 1,500 troops out of Niger by the end of the year. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), reeling from the instability caused by the military takeovers in Mali and Burkina Faso, has imposed harsh sanctions – freezing all commercial and financial transactions between its member states and Niger, including electricity exports. The EU has thus far backed ECOWAS in its demand that Bazoum be reinstated. While some EU member states increasingly favour a less hardline approach, France does not, limiting the EU's ability to make inroads with the junta. By contrast, the U.S. has kept channels of communications open with military officers in order to preserve its foothold in the country and outmanoeuvre Russia. China, meanwhile, is primarily interested in protecting its oil blocks.

The stakes are high. Prospects for resolving the security crisis sweeping the Sahel are dim. Niger's economy is suffering and the people as well. As they struggle to reconcile democracy promotion with security and humanitarian considerations, the EU and its member states should:

- ❑ Encourage ECOWAS, for example through its member state Nigeria, to pursue dialogue with Niger's junta. Though the spate of coups in West Africa has understandably fed a fear of contagion, there is a need for de-escalation.
- ❑ In discussions with the junta, push for a civilian-led transition that brings together representatives of the military, political parties and civil society organisations, including women's groups; and, together with ECOWAS, discreetly support civilian groups that can advocate for accountable governance and an eventual return to constitutional order.
- ❑ Ensure that development and humanitarian aid continues to reach those most in need, such as displaced persons and children. EU member states should remind all sides – the junta as well as ECOWAS countries – of the need to guarantee

unimpeded access for humanitarian workers delivering aid. Another step could be to push ECOWAS to exempt essential commodities such as medicines, fuel and electricity from the sanctions regime.

- In the medium to long term, face the challenge presented by the crisis by evaluating whether Europe's emphasis on security cooperation in the Sahel has been effective, or whether it would be better served by an approach that focuses more on good governance and economic development.

The Junta Digs In

The coup in Niamey has done severe damage to regional cooperation. Motivated by security concerns and fears of coup contagion, many of Niger's southern neighbours as well as its Western partners have taken a tough stance against the junta. ECOWAS has levied significant financial and economic sanctions and threatened to intervene militarily if negotiations to reinstate Bazoum hit a dead end. A military intervention appears unlikely, however – especially since senators from Nigeria's northern states have urged President Bola Tinubu to [“use political and diplomatic means”](#) to resolve the crisis rather than send soldiers to Niger. Those countries that favour an intervention – Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Senegal – are unlikely to proceed without Nigeria's participation.

In any event, most observers agree that such an intervention would prove disastrous for Niger. The security forces and many of the capital's residents appear to back the junta, and an armed conflict could lead to civilian casualties. On 15 September, Mali and Burkina Faso, both of which have experienced two coups over the past three years, signed a mutual defence pact with Niger's military rulers, pledging to help one another fight jihadism and ward off “external aggression”. It is unclear how much military assistance either country could actually provide the Nigerien junta, should the accord be put to the test, as both have their hands full trying to contain Islamist insurgencies. But any involvement on their part would contribute to regional chaos. Moreover, a military intervention will undermine ECOWAS itself, particularly if the junta (as well as opposition politicians in ECOWAS member states) keeps harping on the notion that the bloc is being manipulated by France, the former colonial power in much of the Sahel.

Meanwhile, the situation in Niger is increasingly grim. The country suffers chronic food insecurity, due to floods and droughts, among other things. ECOWAS sanctions have disrupted Niger's food imports, triggering a spike in prices for basic commodities. The landlocked state brings in most of its imports by road, particularly from Benin and Nigeria. The sanctions have largely put a halt to this trade, as well as to electricity supplies from Nigeria, which was meeting over two thirds of domestic demand. Pharmacies are running out of stock and hospitals are struggling to cool vaccines for infants. On top of that, the EU has frozen over €500 million in financial support and security aid, leaving Niamey with a shrunken budget and uncertainty about promised military assistance. Niger's \$14 billion economy depends heavily on foreign support; external partners were to supply 48 per cent of the state's budget for 2023. Nigerien authorities have also leaned on international organisa-

tions to help provide basic services in rural zones and care for the estimated 700,000 displaced in the country.

The junta refuses to budge, however, capitalising on the hardship to rally public support for its power grab. Its recent decisions have made matters worse. Although humanitarian assistance is exempt from ECOWAS sanctions, Niamey has blocked aid from entering through Benin on the grounds that the latter supports a military intervention, telling NGOs to send their convoys through its ally Burkina Faso instead. Moreover, in late August, the junta further restricted UN agencies and international NGOs from working independently, which has constrained their capacity to deliver assistance.

Hard Security Choices

The coup in Niger darkens an already bleak picture in the Sahel. Mali is inching toward all-out war with armed separatists in the north, where two jihadist groups, Islamic State Sahel Province and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, are also fighting over territory. Jihadists are active in much of rural Burkina Faso, while the country's military leadership is distributing arms to civilians to defend towns and villages.

In contrast to its neighbours, Niger had better contained jihadist attacks over the past two years. Before the coup, even the military attributed Niger's resilience partly to Bazoum's policies, which included the government's willingness to speak with jihadists, the disarmament and social reintegration of repentant militants, and the gradual absorption of vigilante self-defence groups into the security forces. The junta will likely halt those initiatives, which it regards as undermining the status of career soldiers. Still, at present, it is unclear what the officers' priorities will be.

As for Western security cooperation, it is in disarray. The junta has shored up its credentials by tapping into anti-French sentiment and demanding that France remove its 1,500 troops from the country. French President Emmanuel Macron's lengthy standoff with the junta hindered other EU member states from articulating a path forward on how to engage with authorities. On 24 September, France finally said it would pull out by year's end, closing the book on its stabilisation strategy for the Sahel. Its ambassador left the country three days later.

Unlike France, and despite years of French-U.S. military cooperation in the region, the U.S. took a cautious approach. It did not immediately label the military takeover a coup, although it appears to be applying coup-linked restrictions under U.S. law nonetheless, and has not recognised the junta as the legitimate government. With 1,100 troops in the country, it has suspended most economic and military aid and security cooperation but [resumed drone flights](#) to collect intelligence from a base it has built near the city of Agadez following discussions with senior junta officials, some of whom are U.S.-trained. Washington continues to deliberate over whether it will maintain a military presence in Niger following France's withdrawal.

That leaves the EU facing difficult choices. The bloc saw Niger as a key ally in matters affecting not only the region's security but also its own, including narcotics trafficking and migration. In July 2022, the bloc committed €70 million under the European

Peace Facility (EPF) for the Nigerien armed forces, though it has disbursed little of this sum to date. Just one month before the coup, [in June](#), Brussels agreed to provide lethal aid such as ammunition to Niger, the first time it would have used the EPF for such purposes other than for Ukraine. It also established an EU Military Partnership Mission in Niger in February. All these plans now hang in the balance, while France's uncompromising approach to the junta, which is consistent with democratic principles, has as a practical matter slowed down EU efforts to have a forward-looking discussion on how to engage with Nigerien authorities. Other member states have, however, begun cautious talks with Niger's new prime minister, Ali Lamine Zeine, an economist.

Talks may not be enough to guarantee a durable security partnership with the junta given all the impediments – including its alignment with the Malian and Burkinabe transitional authorities, both of whom are on friendly terms with Russia – but that should not be the EU's primary aim in any case. If the EU and member states want a stable foundation for cooperation with Niamey, and to keep Niger from following Mali and Burkina Faso down the path of implosion, then their priority should be to emphasise the need for a civilian-led transition. In this regard, they are most likely to be successful if they work with and through ECOWAS to deliver this message. Some flexibility on the part of all outside actors – the EU and ECOWAS included – will likely be necessary to develop functional working arrangements with the new authorities.

What the EU and its Member States Can Do

Although there are few good options, the EU and its member states can take several steps to prevent the crisis from deteriorating, and learn lessons from this recent episode.

First, Brussels should support ECOWAS in pursuing talks with the junta, paying particular attention to persuading those member states favouring a military intervention that a new tack is required. Though such an operation appears highly unlikely, given both the bloc's internal divides and the African Union's opposition, it bears reinforcing that an intervention could have destabilising consequences and an unclear outcome. The EU should press for diplomatic engagement instead. Because of its political and economic weight, Nigeria seems well positioned to take the lead in talks with Niamey, though there are other regional contenders, too. [Togo](#), for instance, has openly stated its disapproval of military action and signalled its willingness to help facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to Niger.

Secondly, the EU should make up for time lost with France's no-compromise approach and figure out how to forge a productive relationship with Niger's junta in which it can push, primarily through ECOWAS, for a civilian-led transition that brings together representatives of the military, political parties and civil society organisations, including women's groups. Together with ECOWAS, the EU can start quietly supporting civilian groups that can play a role in the eventual return to constitutional order.

Thirdly, the EU, together with the UN, should encourage all sides to guarantee safe, unimpeded passage for humanitarian organisations delivering food and medicine to people in distress, taking into account the specific needs of displaced persons, women and children. The EU should also push ECOWAS to make exceptions for pharmaceuticals, medical supplies, petroleum products and electricity in its commercial and financial sanctions.

Finally, the coup should serve as a warning that the EU's security policies in the Sahel need a rethink. Under Bazoum, Niger was on the right track, but its political system remained brittle and popular discontent with the ruling elites was growing. Seemingly solid security partnerships are vulnerable to falling apart in these circumstances, as Mali's example shows. While the EU will not be well served by severing ties with Niger, the military takeover in Niamey should prompt discussions about Brussels' priorities for the region. It is high time for the EU to discuss whether its security focus should be sustained in the Sahel or whether a greater emphasis on governance and economic development may provide better results.

Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: Limiting the Damage of a Protracted Crisis

The future looks increasingly bleak for the close to one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, most of whom were forced out of western Myanmar more than six years ago. The 2021 coup in Myanmar brought to power the same military officers whose brutality toward the Muslim minority in Rakhine State in 2016-2017 pushed them across the border. Although the regime insists it wants repatriation to begin, it has refused to guarantee citizenship to returnees. Meanwhile, the situation in Rakhine State has become more complex, due to the growing strength of the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed group that is fighting for greater autonomy for the Rakhine Buddhist majority and now controls much of the state's centre and north.

The refugees are facing mounting problems in their overcrowded camps. International aid is declining sharply, forcing the UN to cut vital food assistance by one third in 2023. At the same time, insecurity is growing. Poverty and hopelessness threaten to create a vicious cycle in which refugees – particularly young men – join criminal gangs and armed groups, fuelling the violence. Women and girls are embarking on risky boat journeys or overland travel (via Myanmar and Thailand) to Malaysia – their trips often paid for by waiting Rohingya men in exchange for marriage. Others stay and are married off at a young age. Bangladesh, despite having earned global praise for hosting the large Rohingya population, is getting impatient with the attendant burdens. By refusing to acknowledge that the crisis will likely drag on indefinitely and planning accordingly, Dhaka risks making a difficult situation worse.

The EU and its member states can help address this set of challenges by:

- ❑ Increasing funding for the UN's humanitarian appeal in Bangladesh to help meet the needs of Rohingya refugees, lest camp conditions deteriorate further. With violence on the rise, it is particularly important that the EU expand its support for protection services for vulnerable refugees, including community leaders and young men at risk of harm by armed groups, and women facing intimate partner violence; its member states should also consider accepting the most vulnerable for third-country resettlement.
- ❑ Using the EU's influential position in Bangladesh to encourage Dhaka to adopt a long-term strategy recognising that the vast majority of the refugees are likely to remain in the country for years to come. Although integration may not be politically feasible, refugees need greater access to education and better job opportunities so that they can live in dignity. The EU should make clear that, if Dhaka changes tack, it stands ready to mobilise additional funding for projects that reduce the need for humanitarian aid, such as income generation and durable shelter.
- ❑ Maintaining, to the extent possible, humanitarian support for Rohingya who remain in Rakhine State. It should work directly with local service providers, which may help navigate restrictions imposed by Naypyitaw, and also avoid inadvertently strengthening the regime or legitimising its initiatives, such as the planned

closure of camps for the internally displaced. To improve coordination at the national level, the EU should lobby the UN to appoint an experienced permanent resident coordinator.

- ❑ Continuing to support international efforts to hold Myanmar's military accountable for its abuses against the Rohingya and other groups in Myanmar, both prior to and since the coup.

Dwindling Hopes for Repatriation

The Rohingya refugees in southern Bangladesh are facing increasingly grim prospects of returning to their homes in Myanmar, as conditions in the camps become ever more difficult. Over the last two years, international funding for basic, life-saving services has dropped dramatically as crises elsewhere grab attention and donor fatigue sets in. The shortfall is particularly acute in 2023: with the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis Joint Response Plan barely 40 per cent funded, the UN has been compelled to slash food aid by one third. It now spends just \$0.27 per day on each person's rations. There have also been cuts to other services. Shrinking budgets have forced the UN and international NGOs to lay off refugees from paid volunteer roles that, due to Bangladeshi government restrictions, are one of their few legal sources of income. Given the many other emergencies around the world, including Russia's war in Ukraine, this decline is only likely to continue in the coming years.

Meanwhile, violence is steadily increasing in the sprawling camps as armed groups and crime rings entrench themselves among the refugees. For a time, the dominant such group was the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which carried out the attacks in Myanmar in 2016-2017 that prompted the military's violent campaign against the Rohingya. But in September 2021, ARSA overreached when it killed a prominent Rohingya community leader, Mohib Ullah, drawing international attention to the problem of rising violence in the camps. The killing spurred Dhaka into action, and security forces began cracking down on ARSA by arresting some of its members.

Other armed groups have taken advantage of a weakened ARSA. Bangladeshi authorities say no fewer than eleven are now active in the camps. Over the past year, the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) in particular has grown in power, gradually wresting control of several camps from ARSA. Many of these groups work closely with Bangladeshi crime syndicates to move drugs – mostly yaba (a mix of methamphetamine and caffeine) but increasingly crystal methamphetamine, which is much more lucrative – over the border from Myanmar and to major markets in Dhaka and Chattogram, a southern coastal city.

Turf wars among ARSA, RSO and other groups have erupted. The number of killings so far in 2023 is already higher than in all of 2022; the victims are typically young men or those in community leadership positions, although women and children are sometimes caught in the crossfire. Abductions, in which gangs hold refugees for ransom, have also skyrocketed. Bangladesh's Armed Police Battalion, the agency in charge of camp security since 2020, has been unable to bring the gangs to heel.

It has also faced well-substantiated allegations that its members are [shaking down](#), [wrongfully detaining](#) and even [torturing](#) refugees themselves.

Against this backdrop, Bangladesh and Myanmar's military regime have, since the beginning of 2023 and with Chinese support, sought to start repatriating Rohingya refugees to Rakhine State, following two failed attempts in 2018 and 2019. Each country has its own reasons for wanting Rohingya to return. Naypyitaw hopes it can strengthen its defence at the International Court of Justice, where it has been accused of violating the Genocide Convention, and relieve international pressure in the wake of the 2021 coup. Dhaka has its eye on the general election planned for January 2024, before which it hopes to have a foreign policy victory that dilutes the public's impatience with hosting of such a large refugee population. As for Beijing, it is seeking opportunities to portray itself as a constructive international player, amid heightened tensions with Washington, and also hoping to gain further support from Dhaka and Naypyitaw in Asia.

Yet despite assurances from both Dhaka and Naypyitaw, a proposed "pilot project", under which a first contingent of 1,176 refugees would go back to Rakhine State, is unlikely to proceed. The Myanmar regime has sent several delegations to visit the refugees in Bangladesh and, in May, refugee leaders even travelled to Maungdaw in northern Rakhine for a visit intended to show them that it is safe. In September, following a fresh round of meetings, the regime and Bangladesh announced plans to repatriate up to 7,000 refugees by the end of the year. But Myanmar has refused to meet key refugee demands, particularly regarding citizenship (which most Rohingya lack), a stance that is likely to limit the number of candidates willing to return.

Another factor complicating repatriation is the emergence of the Arakan Army as a political force in Rakhine State. Since the 2021 coup, the group has [gained control of much of the countryside](#) in central and northern Rakhine, including along the Bangladeshi border. Repatriation at scale is thus likely to be possible only with the group's agreement. Yet, so far, it has been left out of discussions between the two governments.

The bottom line is that for most refugees, going home remains a distant prospect. While the sheer desperation of life in the Bangladesh camps may persuade a small minority of Rohingya to return notwithstanding the risks, that is hardly something to celebrate. The conditions in Rakhine State are not conducive to safe, dignified and voluntary repatriation, and they are unlikely to be as long as the military regime is in power.

At the same time, the Bangladeshi government refuses to consider viable alternatives for addressing the refugee crisis. Insisting that speedy repatriation is the only way forward, it has imposed restrictions on camp operations and refugee liberties that leave Rohingya almost entirely dependent on outside aid and compel humanitarian groups to keep operating on an emergency footing rather than prepare for prolonged displacement. It has also shifted around 30,000 Rohingya to Bhasan Char, a low-lying silt island almost 40km from the mainland, where acute exposure to cyclones adds a new dimension to their vulnerability. Dhaka's policies – ranging

from denying refugees the right to work to insisting that they live in temporary shelters and remain inside fenced camps or on Bhasan Char – are adding to the humanitarian response's cost at a time when international funding is declining.

If it does not change, Bangladesh's policy is likely to make a bad situation worse in the years ahead. Making life more difficult for Rohingya refugees will inevitably push them toward dangerous coping strategies. Unless conditions in the camps improve, those unable to find a way out may grow more susceptible to militancy as time passes. Men and boys may enlist in armed groups or gangs. Girls and women may wind up in underage marriages or in arranged marriages in Malaysia that require them to brave the seas in rickety boats captained by unscrupulous human smugglers to reach their new spouses. Increasingly, Rohingya are also making the hazardous trek to Malaysia overland through Myanmar and Thailand, where they risk arrest for violating immigration laws. In the wake of further cuts to food rations in June, there have been growing reports of intimate partner violence and malnutrition.

The Situation in Rakhine State

Living conditions are also worsening for most of the Rohingya who still live in Rakhine State. More than 120,000 remain confined to displacement camps that were set up over a decade ago; most lack citizenship and all rely on international aid for food and basic services. Cyclone Mocha, which hit Rakhine in May, wiping out several camps, underscored how vulnerable this population is. Naypyitaw said 117 Rohingya were killed, but other sources put the number higher. The regime subsequently blocked an aid delivery plan put forward by the UN, as well as a proposal to bring supplies across the border from Bangladesh.

The regime is now slowly moving forward with a plan to close some of the camps for the displaced, but like the talk of repatriation, this scheme appears to be a ploy to burnish its image by reducing the number of displaced people, including Rakhine Muslims. The lack of proper planning and care for the welfare of camp residents is obvious, as those who have been relocated thus far are languishing in shabby resettlement sites close to the old camps, where they have even less access to social support.

As for Rohingya living in Rakhine outside camps, their basic rights continue to be unprotected, and the combined effects of conflict, COVID-19, the coup and Cyclone Mocha have deepened their troubles. Many feel they are stuck between the Arakan Army and the military, which has threatened community leaders with arrest if they are found to be cooperating with the ethnic armed group's bureaucracy. A bright spot has been improved relations between Rohingya and ethnic Rakhine communities, thanks to the Arakan Army's emergence; very popular among the Rakhine, the group's leaders have emphasised that the majority Burmans, rather than Muslims, are the real enemy of the Rakhine people. The Arakan Army has also taken steps to include Rohingya in the lower levels of its bureaucracy and eased movement restrictions in areas it controls. Recent tensions between the Arakan Army and ARSA in northern Rakhine State threaten to undo some of this fragile progress, however,

as fears of renewed Rohingya insurgency among ethnic Rakhine will likely fuel anti-Rohingya sentiment.

What the EU Can Do

First, as one of the world's largest humanitarian donors, the EU should increase its aid to Rohingya refugees through the UN humanitarian appeal. Brussels has generally maintained a consistent level of support for Rohingya appeals over the past six years, and EU member states provide limited additional funding. In July, the EU released an additional €12.5 million to address humanitarian needs of people in Myanmar and Rohingya in Bangladesh. But the dire – and rapidly worsening – situation in the camps is reason enough to increase funding further, particularly in the short term. With a strong presence in Bangladesh, including in Cox's Bazar (the southern district where most camps are located), the EU should also work with other donors to stabilise overall funding for the refugees, and help ensure that the Rohingya's basic needs – food, shelter, health and education – are met through the UN-led humanitarian response. In light of growing violence and insecurity, Brussels should also give more to aid organisations providing protection services, which are struggling to cope with rising insecurity in the camps, and to support alternative solutions for those most at risk.

EU member states, meanwhile, should follow the lead of actors such as the U.S. and Canada in committing to resettle some number of Rohingya refugees – especially from among the most vulnerable. Dhaka has recently permitted resettlement for the first time since 2010. (It was previously reluctant because it feared the availability of this option could become a pull factor encouraging more Rohingya to cross into Bangladesh.) Although third-country resettlement will help only a small proportion of refugees, it will be life-changing for those people, and the benefits may go further besides. It could also improve the climate for discussions with the Bangladeshi government by demonstrating Europe's commitment to taking concrete measures of its own to alleviate the crisis.

Secondly, it is important for the EU to push the Bangladeshi government harder on the parameters it sets for the refugee response. Dhaka's regulations prevent refugees from working legally, leaving them almost entirely dependent on international aid – an unsustainable situation given the precipitous falloff in assistance pledges. The EU, which Bangladeshis perceive as neutral in their domestic politics, and is a vital trade partner (accounting for almost 40 per cent of exports), should encourage Dhaka to loosen restrictions on Rohingya employment and movement, which would allow humanitarian agencies to move beyond emergency relief.

As part of that effort, Brussels should make clear to Dhaka that it will mobilise funding for longer-term initiatives that would reduce Rohingya dependence on humanitarian aid, such as job opportunities and durable shelter. For example, the EU could make clear that, apart from providing funds itself, it will convene a donor conference to solicit pledges, as it did with the event it co-hosted in 2020 with the U.S., UK and UN High Commissioner for Refugees. That event raised \$600 million in new pledges for humanitarian programs. Before a new conference can take place, how-

ever, Dhaka will need to change its approach to the refugee crisis, accepting that the vast majority of the refugees will remain in Bangladesh for years to come.

Thirdly, the EU and member states should send a clear signal about repatriation. Given the crisis in Myanmar, the chances that Rohingya refugees can go home have only grown slimmer. While respecting the wishes of those refugees who may nonetheless want to return, the EU should make clear that it opposes the current pilot project given the military regime's failure to ensure safe, dignified and voluntary repatriation.

Fourthly, the EU should also maintain its support to Rohingya in Rakhine State, who due to a combination of conflict and economic crisis have become even more reliant on international aid since the coup. It will be easier said than done. Since the coup, the military regime has tightened restrictions on humanitarian aid, including limiting the travel authorisations required for visiting Rakhine State, blocking visas for international staff and introducing a new Organisations Law that gives the junta greater control over aid groups.

For donors like the EU, these strictures only increase the urgency of shifting as much funding as possible to local partners including NGOs and community-based organisations, which can more easily navigate these restrictions. To work with these groups and ensure the safety of their staff and beneficiaries, Brussels will likely need to relax its usual requirements on partner registration, banking and reporting. Close coordination with other actors, particularly the UN, will also be essential to ensure that funding is efficiently and usefully allocated. To enhance the effectiveness of the UN country team, the EU should push the UN leadership to appoint a permanent resident coordinator as soon as possible, filling the vacancy left when the last one departed in November 2021. The incoming official should have the skills and experience necessary to handle Myanmar's particular challenges.

Finally, the EU and member states should continue to support international accountability mechanisms that aim to hold to account perpetrators of abuses, including conflict-related sexual violence, against the Rohingya in Myanmar during the 2016-2017 military crackdown. The primary such mechanisms are the International Criminal Court and the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, a body the UN has tasked with gathering evidence for future criminal proceedings. Their efforts serve as a reminder to potential perpetrators that a cloud of criminal suspicion – and the prospect of prosecution – will follow those who choose to commit atrocities.

Steering Tunisia away from Default

Since July 2021, when President Kais Saïed [made his power grab](#), sacking the prime minister and suspending parliament, Tunisia has taken a further autocratic turn as its underlying economic crisis keeps growing. The president is trying to build a full-blown authoritarian system and consolidate his public support with stridently nationalist rhetoric. He has laced his discourse with racist innuendo pinning the blame for the country's socio-economic woes – such as inflation and unemployment – on sub-Saharan African migrants, among others, sparking vigilante attacks. Meanwhile, he has rejected the terms attached to a proposed International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan aimed at balancing the budget and restoring investor confidence, pushing the country to the brink of default on its foreign debt. Default would likely make the above problems dramatically worse by exacerbating the risk of violence and imperilling already fragile domestic stability.

At first, the European Union (EU) and many of its member states evinced great concern about Tunisia's direction under Saïed. The president seemed to be reversing the democratic gains of the country's 2011 uprising, the first of that year's popular revolts in the Arab world. But Europe has gradually shifted its focus to curbing irregular migration. An increase in migrant arrivals from across the Mediterranean Sea was the main driver of this change, though the election of the far-right government led by Giorgia Meloni in Italy has contributed. Today, the EU speaks of Tunisia as a key partner in battling irregular migration, a task that it believes will require major aid packages so that Tunis can deliver the results Europe wants to see while maintaining stability. These two priorities have overtaken talk of restoring democracy and the rule of law – producing a stream of funding that critics say amounts to a blank check for Saïed's government.

The EU and member states must walk a difficult line – balancing their various political, security and economic agendas in Tunisia with the important work of seeking rights and governance reforms. Right now, however, that balance appears to be tilting too far away from seeking the reforms that will be required to stabilise the country.

Rather than abandoning that agenda, the EU should work with member states to:

- ❑ encourage Tunisia and the IMF to agree on revised loan terms, pressing Tunis to make a deal and IMF shareholders to ease certain conditions (for example, calling for smaller spending cuts);
- ❑ maintain a focus on human rights and governance – stressing the need to curb vigilante violence and contain its repercussions – by underscoring their importance for domestic stability; and
- ❑ begin preparing for the possibility that Europe may need to provide emergency financing to Tunisia – for example, to support medicine and wheat deliveries – should the country fail to reach an agreement with the IMF and default on its debt.

A Shaky Partnership with Europe

Ever since Saïed's fateful actions in 2021, Europe has been unsure what to do regarding Tunisia. Saïed replaced the country's semi-parliamentary system with a presidential one that allows him to concentrate almost all government powers in his own hands. Among ordinary Tunisians, the fear of repression that disappeared in the wake of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's overthrow in the 2011 popular uprising has resurfaced. Since mid-February, arrests and convictions of public figures, especially politicians, have accelerated. More than 35 of them are [in prison on a range of charges](#). Peddling a program inspired by nationalist and left-wing ideas, the president plays [upon resentment](#), notably of the former political class, to boost his popularity.

Early on, disturbed by the authoritarian drift, the EU insisted on a return to democratic rule. In September 2021, for example, the EU's high representative for foreign affairs, Josep Borrell, visited Tunis and [declared](#) that "the free exercise of legislative power and the resumption of parliamentary activity ... must be respected". High-ranking EU officials – as well as member states such as France and Germany – kept up the pressure on rights and governance issues after Saïed made a widely criticised racist speech in February. In that speech, he claimed that "hordes of illegal migrants" were behind "violence and unacceptable acts", adding that the "ultimate aim" of sub-Saharan African migrants in Tunisia was to "transform the demographic make-up" of the country. His words came alongside a [brutal crackdown on migrants](#). Tunisian security forces appear to have become increasingly aggressive in [deporting to the Libyan border](#) migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. There are increased worries among migrants about vigilante attacks and mob violence – corresponding to incidents such as July's attacks on Sub-Saharan migrants in [Sfax](#), a coastal city.

European leaders have been especially frustrated that Saïed engaged in such egregious democratic backsliding despite the considerable sums sent Tunisia's way in the course of the post-2011 democratic transition that for many was a potent symbol of the Arab uprisings' promise. As of 2016, according to an EU report, the country was one of the main beneficiaries of EU funding under the [European Neighbourhood Policy \(ENP\)](#), having received approximately 8.5 per cent of the total allocation. As per the ENP, these funds promoted a new approach to relations with Tunis, which focused on political cooperation, economic and social integration. By 2020, the reform project had already run into Tunisian resistance, due in large part to the rise of a new political class in the 2019 elections that was hostile to Western-imposed reforms and critical of the country's democratic trajectory. Things only got worse following Saïed's "self-coup" in 2021.

In addition to rights and governance issues, disputes over economic reforms have complicated efforts to get Tunisia the financial assistance it desperately needs, as its economy reels from (among other things) shocks generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine. The IMF appeared ready to offer a lifeline with a 48-month, \$1.9 billion stabilisation loan after reaching a staff-level agreement with Tunis in late 2022. But that would have required Tunis, among other things, to cut

fuel subsidies and reform state-owned enterprises – moves that were politically unpopular due to their potential impact on jobs and incomes. Saïed, together with Tunisia’s main trade union and friendly pundits, deemed these conditions “foreign diktats” and suggested that their social impact would be too great. They invoked the risk of riots similar to those of January 1984, which were triggered by a rise in bread and cereal prices (although the IMF did not in this case propose cutting bread subsidies). In rejoinder, the EU and several member states have advocated that Tunisia adopt the full range of reforms attached to the IMF loan. Brussels made continuation of its own financial assistance contingent upon an IMF credit arrangement and fulfilment of its conditions. For the time being, Tunisia appears to be letting the negotiations lie fallow.

While EU officials continue to lament the lack of reforms, urge Tunisia to complete the IMF deal and stress the need to reinvigorate Tunisia’s democratic institutions, member states – particularly Italy – increasingly seem more worried about the spike in irregular migration from Tunisia. Arrivals in Italy have tripled over the past two years, reaching 56,000 in August 2022. Against this backdrop, the Meloni government, which took office in 2022, conspicuously failed to condemn Saïed’s notorious February speech. Italy has increasingly angled for a loosening of IMF loan conditions – fearing that the alternative would be an economic meltdown and even more migration. Other European countries remain committed to the reform project, and some (like France and Germany) have voiced deep concern about Tunisia’s anti-migrant rhetoric. But as a matter of EU policy, worries about economic collapse and the related challenge of managing irregular migration issues have increasingly moved to centre stage.

Managing the Risk of Default

The question is what happens now. Tunisia is at serious and rapidly growing risk of defaulting on its foreign debt, and it will require external assistance to manage this challenge. By 2024, with \$2.6 billion foreign liability repayments scheduled for 2024 (including a euro-denominated bond maturing in February, equivalent to \$900 million), it is still unclear how the government will be able to secure sufficient funds to meet these liabilities.

The IMF loan under discussion would be the most reliable way for Tunisia to stay current on these payments. In today’s conditions, the government would struggle to find alternative external financing to cover the costs, as Tunisia’s economic indicators continue to deteriorate. The main rating agencies, Fitch and Moody’s, have downgraded Tunisia’s credit rating, making it even harder for the country [to borrow from abroad](#).

There would be risks and downsides to accepting an IMF loan as well. From Tunisia’s perspective, the long-term economic benefits are no doubt hard to gauge and would depend to some extent on what terms are finally negotiated, the extent to which reforms are implemented and the state of the global economy over time. Its political consequences could also be difficult to manage. From donors’ perspective, it is entirely possible that despite having signed the deal, Saïed would scape-

goat the IMF for every unpopular measure it may contain. Such nationalist posturing could trigger unrest, with Tunisians holding the financial institution responsible for their economic predicament – and perhaps directing their ire at Westerners (or Western assets) in the country.

Still, the risks of moving ahead with a loan far outweigh the risks of a no-agreement scenario, which, absent a fresh infusion of financing from elsewhere or an unexpected improvement in Tunisia's macro-economic outlook, could be catastrophic. The EU would have to stop its financial assistance, since it is conditional on an IMF deal. In 2021 and 2022, while IMF negotiations were under way, the European Commission helped the country stave off default by borrowing €600 million from private creditors at subsidised rates and then lending it to Tunisia. But if there is no IMF agreement, the Commission will not be able to do that again and its options for aiding Tunisia will be few. As for the Gulf Arab states, while Saudi Arabia gave Tunisia a \$400 million soft loan and \$100 million grant in July, neither Riyadh nor other Gulf capitals are likely to offer more credit in the absence of an IMF deal and a clear economic reform program. Thus, unless revenues from oil and phosphate exports, worker remittances and tourism somehow rebound beyond the rosier expectations, or global interest rates decline significantly and reduce Tunisia's external debt, failed talks with the IMF would probably push the government into default.

A default would put Tunisia in a dangerous downward spiral. It could unsettle the banking sector, especially given the high exposure of domestic banks to treasury bills and bonds, as well as foreign currency. It could also crowd out the private sector due to a credit crunch as the government's borrowing needs increase; cause a drop in production; generate still more inflation; enable even greater corruption (which seems to be increasing as the economic situation worsens); stimulate the underground economy; and unleash clashes along agriculture distribution chains in rural areas. In turn, people protesting the sharp deterioration of the economic and social situation could set off a violent reaction by Saïed's supporters, who might try to direct popular frustrations at businesspeople and members of the political opposition with links to the West. In any of these circumstances, many Tunisians would presumably leave the country, often by attempting the cross-Mediterranean voyage to Europe.

Partly as a result of such fears, Brussels has softened its line on rights and governance issues with Tunis, giving Saïed additional incentives to accept a deal with the IMF by offering fresh funding conditional on an agreement and releasing other, smaller funds to support the country's migration control forces. In July, the EU and Tunisia signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) to establish a bilateral partnership that encompasses cooperation on economic matters, the digital transition, green energy and migration. European and Tunisian media outlets and civil society groups lambasted this agreement for omitting mention of the government's human rights record, as well as for establishing what they characterised as a cash-against-migration scheme. As part of the pact, Brussels offered €900 million in macro-financial assistance conditioned on a deal with the IMF, €150 million in unconditional budgetary support and €105 million to fund migrant returns as well as Tunisian efforts to prevent irregular migration to the EU. Under the latter arrangement, and following end-

of-September discussions among EU member states, Tunisia is to handle asylum applications of Europe-bound refugees on its own soil, rather than allowing these people to cross the Mediterranean and apply.

Meanwhile, the number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean has increased by 69 per cent since this package was announced. But because migration is partly driven by factors beyond Tunisia's control, and partly caused by its own poor governance, increased funding in the absence of reform is by itself likely to have disappointing results.

What the EU Can Do

The EU and member states face highly imperfect choices when it comes to Tunisia. Efforts to help Tunis stabilise the country and avoid domestic unrest cannot fully succeed without a commitment by the government to reforms, both with respect to rights and governance, and with respect to the economy. Yet if European and other donors push too hard for reform, their help with stabilisation may not be welcome. The best way forward is therefore likely to involve something of a balancing act, which European actors should pursue as follows:

First, the EU and member states should throw their weight behind efforts to broker an agreement between Tunisia and the IMF. Though the odds of getting to yes may be modest, there is still reason to keep trying. Beyond continuing to dangle carrots in the form of prospective assistance, the EU should lobby the IMF and influential shareholders like the United States to make sure the terms it is seeking are realistic while still nudging the government toward reform. In particular, they should press the Fund to offer revised terms that call for Tunis to make smaller and smoother spending cuts, particularly to energy subsidies, and perhaps develop more realistic fiscal targets; lowering IMF debt repayment surcharges could also help. While the EU cannot set the terms of an IMF loan, its political pressure can help soften both sides' positions and make a deal more likely. Those member states that have the best channels to Tunis should send the message that whatever effects Tunisians may be worried about the IMF loan having over the long-term, they cannot be worse than default.

Secondly, the EU and member states should not let its increasing focus on economic stabilisation and irregular migration eclipse discussion of human rights and governance reform. In order to frame the need for reform in terms that could resonate in Tunis, they should focus on these reforms as essential for social stability, with particular attention to changing behaviours that are most likely to prompt violent unrest. The EU could pursue this agenda at the forthcoming meetings of the Council of [association](#) EU Tunisia, which provides opportunities for cooperation with the Tunisian authorities to support justice reform, promote human rights and safeguard the rule of law.

At the top of the list, Brussels should pressure President Saïed to curb vigilante violence, whether toward sub-Saharan African migrants or anyone else. Indeed, between January and April, many Tunisians in the country's interior reported that self-

proclaimed Saïed partisans, known as the “Kais militias”, began reprimanding individuals who criticised the president in cafés. Reacting to possible anti-government protests and Saïed’s new speeches putting the blame on certain actors, these self-organised groups could intensify violence against migrants. They might also start orchestrating demonstrations and attacks on the opposition, as well as businessmen and external scapegoats, such as foreign backers of the opposition and international NGOs. Tunisia should work to prevent them from doing so.

Finally, the EU should also prepare for the possibility that it will have to lend emergency assistance in the event of a Tunisian debt default. While this aid would be for different purposes than the sort of financing available should the IMF loan be concluded, assistance that supports soft wheat and medicine deliveries may be needed in order to prevent a humanitarian crisis, which could erupt into dangerous unrest. The EU should also consider supporting financing mechanisms, for example, to allow for the import of fuel products. Brussels should begin road-testing this possible approach with member states now, so as to build consensus around what it would be willing to offer. While countries such as Germany and Italy have remaining differences over how much political capital to expend trying to halt authoritarian drift, a focus on maintaining domestic peace in Tunisia may help them overcome this division.

Building Momentum in EU-Türkiye Relations

An opportunity has arisen to make durable improvements to ties between Türkiye and the European Union, which have been frayed for years. There remain multiple sources of tension between Brussels and Ankara, which have hampered both the latter's bid to join the bloc, pending since 1999, and other forms of cooperation. Thorny issues include matters of domestic policy (notably Türkiye's track record on human rights and democracy) and foreign affairs (including the need for a political settlement on the divided island of Cyprus). While Europeans were pleased that Ankara lifted its objections to Finland's accession to NATO in March, they see its continued delay of Swedish membership in the organisation as another irritant.

Despite these problems, however, following Turkish elections in May, when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan secured a third term in office, and his subsequent appointment of a more moderate and professional cabinet, relations with Brussels have got better. Hopes of a rapprochement have accordingly risen. There are limits to how far the improvement is likely to go in the near term. Certainly, Ankara's EU membership bid is unlikely to move forward absent measures to strengthen the rule of law and open a path to resolving the Cyprus issue, neither of which is likely in the near term. But progress in certain areas is possible. If the EU and its member states work more closely with Ankara in areas of shared interest, like trade and migration, they may be able to overcome deep-running mistrust and open space to work toward mutual peace and security goals, while keeping open the prospect of Türkiye's eventual membership in the bloc.

To further improve relations with Ankara, the EU and its member states should:

- ❑ Engage Türkiye in regular high-level meetings, including by inviting the Turkish foreign minister to the next Gymnich meeting, an informal gathering of the EU member states' top diplomats, and by putting on the table concrete proposals for fostering cooperation at by-annual European Political Community (EPC) summits.
- ❑ Aim to launch negotiations to modernise the Türkiye-EU customs union, address trade barriers and disagreements about sanctions on Russia.
- ❑ Grant more and longer-term visas to Turkish businesspeople and investors to boost trade. Doing so would be a managed step in the direction of full visa liberalisation to Turkish citizens, which is contingent on Ankara meeting the remaining criteria.
- ❑ Revive a 2020 proposal for a conference to sustain de-escalation in the eastern Mediterranean. This step could further strengthen Türkiye-Greece ties and perhaps encourage dialogue between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, even as prospects for restarting formal negotiations on the divided island look dim.
- ❑ Continue financial aid for over four million refugees in Türkiye and for sustainable rebuilding in earthquake-hit Turkish provinces.

State of Play

The summer months saw a thaw in Turkish-EU relations. It helped that Ankara cleared the path for Finland to join NATO in March, a step that it had been blocking. While the Turkish parliament has yet to ratify Sweden's NATO bid, President Erdoğan announced in July that Türkiye would reverse its opposition to Stockholm joining, provided that there is progress on Ankara's own EU accession, a process that had seemed irrevocably stalled for years. High-level Turkish-EU meetings ensued, including a promising early September visit to Ankara by Olivér Várhelyi, the EU's commissioner for neighbourhood and enlargement. The visit took place at a time when the EU is exploring a way forward with Türkiye. In addition to the annual progress report that will come out in October, the European Commission is working on a separate report assessing the "state of play" in relations with Türkiye, due for publication by the end of 2023.

As Erdoğan made clear over the summer, EU membership remains an important (if long-term) aspiration for Ankara, but it is not Ankara's only goal with respect to Brussels. Türkiye's new cabinet, formed after the May elections in which Erdoğan secured a third term in office, is composed of experienced hands in ministerial positions who see better ties with the EU as a factor in fixing the country's mounting economic troubles. Pending meaningful progress on membership, they are interested in stronger links with the bloc and are willing to explore avenues of engagement to that end.

The Turkish economy, which has been in dire straits for years, suffered another major blow with the devastating February earthquakes that killed at least 50,000 people and displaced millions. This disaster came on top of the socio-economic strains accumulating with the influx of millions of refugees following the Syrian war. Annual inflation was running at over 60 per cent in August and unemployment at around 10 per cent. Erdoğan has returned to orthodox economic policies, after a spell of eccentric interest-rate adventurism when policymakers had gradually reduced interest rates in hopes of lowering inflation and strengthening the Turkish lira. After the elections, Erdoğan appointed internationally respected figures to helm the economy, notably Mehmet Şimşek as finance minister. While its EU membership bid remains stuck, Türkiye hopes to attract more Western investors and to secure better EU trade terms and more assistance for migrants and earthquake-hit provinces.

Although Ankara is far from ready to fully trust the EU, some Turkish officials hope progress in areas of shared interest could substantially improve ties. "This is a new window of opportunity", one seasoned official said. "If we can take steps to advance files of mutual interest, more progress could follow, including in Türkiye's membership process". Turkish officials looking to strengthen links with the EU are particularly eager to see steps toward negotiations on revamping the EU-Türkiye customs union. But others doubt the EU is sincere about offering what one official called "meaningful carrots" to put relations on a more constructive path; they complain of contradictions and double standards in the bloc's treatment of Türkiye in comparison to other EU candidate countries and external partners. Some Turkish officials see an additional obstacle in the rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe

opposed to Turkish EU membership. Ankara also continues to be wary of what it perceives as European leniency with groups it considers security threats, notably the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which it has listed as a terrorist organisation, as have the U.S. and the EU.

For their part, many European officials and diplomats welcome Ankara's apparent interest in improving ties, but are also sceptical about Ankara's commitment to moving in this direction. "This is not the first time we hear talk in Ankara of turning a new page with the EU", one said. With Türkiye's membership bid languishing for so long, and key accession criteria unfulfilled, many officials in Brussels and member state capitals have come to see Türkiye more as a security partner and a bulwark against migration than a country that could one day join their club.

Europeans have a host of concerns. Ankara's democratic backsliding has raised concerns in Europe about where Türkiye is headed, as has its non-compliance with European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rulings ordering the release of individuals whose arrests the court said were "politically motivated", most prominently businessman and human rights advocate Osman Kavala. Many also worry that to mobilise his conservative-nationalist base, Erdoğan may whip up anti-Western rhetoric ahead of March 2024 local elections, when his party will try to retake Istanbul, Ankara and other big cities that it lost to opposition control in 2019. The window to make progress may thus be narrow.

EU officials also fret about Ankara's foreign policy, which they see as insufficiently aligned with their own. On one hand, Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine has transformed views about European security and reaffirmed Türkiye's importance as a key NATO ally. Ankara has supported Ukraine politically and with weapons, including drones. It played a key role in brokering the now-lapsed Black Sea grain deal, which created an opening for Ukraine to export some of its grain stocks. But it has also been less confrontational toward Moscow than Europe would like, for example not getting fully behind Western sanctions. Indeed, its trade with Russia has increased. For Europeans, Ankara's delay in backing Finland and Sweden's NATO bids has similarly deepened mistrust. "Türkiye has focused on advancing its own interests during a war in Europe that is existential for us", a European official said.

The unresolved Cyprus question also bedevils relations. Türkiye does not recognise the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), the Greek Cypriot-run state that joined the EU in 2004 despite Greek Cypriots' rejection of a UN-brokered plan to reunify the island, which Turkish Cypriots had approved. Subsequent diplomacy has come to naught, most recently in 2017 when talks intended to pave the way to federation failed. Tensions at sea followed, with Türkiye sending naval vessels to waters claimed by the RoC to obstruct offshore energy exploration that excluded Turkish Cypriots. For this reason, among others, the EU suspended high-level dialogue with Ankara, cut pre-accession funds in 2019 and imposed limited sanctions in 2020. Recently, in mid-August, [violent skirmishes](#) erupted on the island when the de facto Turkish Cypriot authorities began constructing a new road to connect the majority-Turkish Cypriot town of Pile/Pyla, located in the UN-administered buffer zone, to the north.

Three UN peacekeepers and eight Turkish Cypriot security personnel were injured in the incident.

Meantime, initiatives to relaunch formal negotiations are [stuck](#). The RoC insists on talks aimed at creating a bizonal, bicomunal federation. Ankara and the de facto Turkish Cypriot government in the island's north prefer a two-state solution that would involve recognition of a Turkish Cypriot state. With no obvious way forward to relaunch negotiations, the RoC has used its member state veto to stymie many EU efforts at repairing ties with Türkiye. European diplomats to whom Crisis Group spoke say positive signals on Cyprus, such as Ankara's blessing for [appointing a new UN envoy](#), might go some way to dissuade the RoC from impeding efforts to bring about a rapprochement between Türkiye and the EU.

Still, while Cyprus presents an enduring challenge in the eastern Mediterranean, there are reasons for hope, thanks in part to Türkiye's warming relations with old rival Greece, an EU member since 1981. [Ankara's ties with Athens](#) have got much better since 2020, when the neighbours almost came to blows in the Aegean Sea. Both had put their navies on high alert after Ankara sent ships to escort a hydrocarbon research ship in disputed waters. Those tensions also drew in a number of EU member states, notably France, souring Türkiye's relations with them. But in the course of 2023 Athens and Ankara have helped each other when disaster struck, as it did with wildfires and flooding in Greece and the earthquakes in Türkiye. Greece's foreign minister, Giorgos Gerapetritis, visited Ankara in early September, and the two countries' foreign ministers met again on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York a few weeks later. Ankara has also intensified diplomacy to normalise its confrontational relations with Israel, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, which "bodes well for keeping a lid on tensions in the eastern Mediterranean", a European official said.

Seizing the Moment

Fraught relations between Türkiye and the EU are nothing new. But in a volatile security environment, a little easing of tensions could go a long way, benefiting both parties and the region as a whole. If Ankara and Brussels begin to rebuild their relationship, even as they recognise the many differences between them, they will be better able to sustain de-escalation in the eastern Mediterranean, respond to the challenges of refugee flows, support Ukraine and constrain Russian aggression. They may even be able to help lay the groundwork for peace in the bloody war caused by Moscow's invasion. They will also help ensure that the evolving European security order is based on cooperation and coordination with Türkiye as a key NATO ally. But both sides will need to make a conscious decision to pursue engagement and keep it going through the disagreements that will remain inevitable. Brussels need not turn its back on its values, of course, but it may need to manage its expectations with regard to Ankara, even as Ankara recognises that EU concerns will remain a critical part of its agenda.

As long as Ankara remains willing, the EU and its member states should continue re-engaging with it. They should consider taking steps in the following areas:

First, it would be useful to reopen high-level dialogues with Türkiye suspended since 2019. A good place to start would be to invite Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan to the next Gymnich meeting – an informal semi-annual get-together of European foreign ministers planned for January 2024. It has been almost five years since a Turkish foreign minister attended one of these meetings. Ankara had hoped to be invited in August, but several EU member states said no. “For a while now, we have not been able to enter into meaningful contacts with the EU”, a Turkish official said. “A push from the highest levels would help”. Türkiye’s inclusion in the Gymnich gathering could pave the way for renewed high-level dialogues in areas of mutual interest such as counter-terrorism, energy, transport and justice sector cooperation.

Secondly, the EU should put on the table concrete proposals for inching ahead in modernising its customs union with Türkiye. The EPC meetings could present an opportunity to move in this direction. Established in 1995, the union covers industrial products only, but it has significantly boosted trade nonetheless. EU officials asked member states for a mandate to launch talks with Türkiye on upgrading the union in December 2016, but they abandoned the project after that year’s failed coup in Türkiye and the government’s subsequent crackdown.

Both sides see the value of expanding the customs union to cover services and agriculture and adding innovations such as a more effective dispute resolution mechanism. Turkish officials want to revise agreements reached in technical talks in 2014-2015 to reflect the state of global trade and the EU’s Green Deal, a plan to make the EU climate-neutral by 2050. European officials are not opposed, but they also expect Ankara to remove trade barriers, such as additional levies and taxes imposed on products they say are already covered by the customs union. Ankara, meanwhile, wants a say in the EU’s free trade agreements with third countries that can have adverse effects on Turkish industries.

Although it is not a formal condition for expanding the customs union, Europeans also want more alignment from Ankara on sanctions against Russia. They worry about the flow of sanctioned goods and materials to Russia through Türkiye. Ankara says it is trying to block such transactions circumventing sanctions, adding that it is working with the European Commission and Western capitals to do so. “We are doing what we can”, a Turkish official said, “but there is a limit to how far we can go given our delicate relations with Russia and economic dependencies”. In March, Ankara handed Turkish companies a list of foreign goods under sanctions that are proscribed from transfer to Russia. To explore further alignment, the EU and its member states should advance talks with Ankara bilaterally as well as through their year-old sanctions working group.

Thirdly, EU member states should grant Turkish investors and businesspeople more and longer-term visas. Doing so would boost trade, and it might also foster progress toward granting visa-free travel to all Turkish citizens. Facilitating more visas is not the same as full visa liberalisation – ie, the lifting of visa requirements

for Turkish citizens – which would require Ankara to fulfil six more of the EU’s list of 72 criteria. (The outstanding issues include the EU’s demand for Ankara to reform its broadly worded anti-terror laws, which Brussels says create too much room for politicised prosecutions.) EU officials are concerned that granting more visas could fuel westward migration of Turkish citizens. Already, a surge in Turkish asylum seekers in Europe has seen applications in Germany, for instance, triple in the first eight months of 2023 compared to the year before. But focusing on the facilitation of visas for investors and businesspeople would represent a positive step for more interaction between Türkiye and the bloc that would not increase the likelihood that more Turkish citizens will emigrate.

Fourthly, the EU should revive a 2020 plan (initially proposed by President Erdoğan and later taken up by European Council President Charles Michel) to organise a multilateral conference on the [eastern Mediterranean](#) aimed at further de-escalation. Back-channel discussions about this subject went nowhere in 2021 when tensions were high. But now, with an opening in Türkiye-Greece relations and less ill-will among other parties, it makes sense. Such a conference could help address Ankara’s fears about being isolated in the region, which have been compounded by its exclusion from the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (a U.S. and EU-backed platform established in early 2020 bringing together Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Italy and France). A conference would need careful preparation, but it would be worth the effort given the prospect of advancing discussions about improving collaboration, including on oil and gas. If the parties could find a formula that also includes Turkish Cypriots, they might even help forge a path back to formal negotiations over Cyprus – or at least stop things from getting worse.

Finally, the EU should continue sending aid to lift Ankara’s burden in caring for the over four million refugees (including 3.3 million Syrians) whom Türkiye has been generously hosting, as well as to help rebuild the earthquake-hit areas of the country where many of these refugees live. Cooperation in managing migration is what has kept Türkiye-EU relations afloat over the last several years. Now millions of Syrians living in Türkiye as well as Turkish citizens have been badly affected by the earthquakes. A 2016 EU-Türkiye migration statement remains the main framework for helping refugees. Within this framework, the EU committed €6 billion (more than €5 billion of which has been disbursed) to refugees in Türkiye. At a June conference, donors pledged an additional €5.6 billion for those displaced in Syria as well as refugees in Türkiye, Jordan and Lebanon. In March, the EU, its member states and a host of other international donors promised another €6 billion for earthquake relief in Türkiye. The EU-Türkiye Investment Platform and the European Investment Bank should also carry on and, where possible, expand investment initiatives including, but not limited to, help for earthquake-hit areas.