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## Five crises around Europe not to be forgotten despite Covid-19



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The Covid-19 pandemic understandably dominates both the headlines and policymakers' agendas, but there are other crises brewing around Europe that receive far less media coverage. This Clingendael Alert highlights five political and military crises that stubbornly refuse to take a holiday break and which might well come to overshadow the summer season. The list is far from exhaustive; in its latest *Crisis Watch*, the International Crisis Group tracked no less than 16 deteriorating conflicts,<sup>1</sup> and the planet continues to face climate

emergencies, as witnessed by floods in Ukraine and China and locust plagues in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere.

### 1. Armenia-Azerbaijan: clashes not unusual, but frustration mounts

In July the protracted conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan flared up with exchanges of artillery and drone strikes that led to an estimated 16 casualties, making it the deadliest episode since the 'four-day war' of 2016. While skirmishes are a regular feature of the 30-year conflict and the risk of escalation into a full-blown war remains

1 See International Crisis Group, '[June alerts and July trends](#)', *Crisis Watch*, June 2020

limited, three factors nonetheless make it important not to dismiss current fighting as 'business as usual'.

The recent fighting occurred on the international Armenian-Azerbaijani border, more than 300 kilometres from the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh where incidents regularly take place. This increases risks of escalation, particularly as the densely populated border between the two belligerents is poorly demarcated and does not coincide with actual lines of control.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the geopolitical overlay of the conflict mirrors that of rising tensions elsewhere, with Armenia counting on the support of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while Azerbaijan has the backing of Turkey. While neither Moscow nor Ankara presently have an interest in triggering a major proxy war in the south Caucasus and Russia prefers to play both sides, this conflict nonetheless adds to Russian-Turkish tensions over Libya and Syria.<sup>3</sup> And finally, elites in both Armenia and Azerbaijan are frustrated with the stalled peace process and struggle to contain popular discontent with respect to the Covid-19 crisis. Emotions ran high on 14 July as a crowd of 30,000 protesters stormed the parliament in Baku and called for war with Armenia, prompting President Aliyev to fire his Foreign Minister for the 'failed negotiations'.

As frustrations mount so do the risks of miscalculation, even if all sides may well want to contain the conflict. It could also have an impact on the EU's relationship with both countries: after all, both Armenia and Azerbaijan are members of the EU's Eastern Partnership, which is up for discussion at a summit early next year. The fighting also took place near a major energy transit corridor and further escalation could disrupt European energy supplies.

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- 2 Laurence Broers, 'New fighting brings three-year Armenian-Azerbaijani truce to an end', *Chatham House*, 16 July 2020; International Crisis Group, 'Preventing a bloody harvest on the Armenia-Azerbaijan state border', 24 July 2020
  - 3 Ayla Jean Yackley, 'Caucasus skirmish pits Russia against Turkey, straining shaky alliance', *Politico*, 21 July 2020

## 2. Ethiopia and Egypt: rising tensions over water

Tensions over the water of the Nile River have been simmering for decades between the major regional rivals Egypt and Ethiopia but have increased since 2011 when Addis Ababa began construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam at the river's Blue Nile tributary. For more than 50 years Cairo has appealed to its historical treaties with Great Britain and Sudan, which allocate three-quarters of the available Nile River resources to Egypt.<sup>4</sup> But upstream, Ethiopia has argued it was not included in negotiations allocating water use rights and thus does not feel bound by these historical agreements and claims the right to use a share of the resources – considering that about 86% of Nile water originates within its borders.<sup>5</sup> Ethiopia emphasises the significant developmental benefits of the dam, bringing electricity to millions of Ethiopians currently without access to power. But the stakes are also high for Egypt, given that the Nile provides more than 90% of the country's water supplies, including for agricultural irrigation.<sup>6</sup>

The dam will affect water availability in Egypt to some degree, particularly during the filling of the dam reservoir. But changing regional power relations play an important role, too. Although Egypt has historically been an influential actor in the region, Ethiopia's leadership role in north-eastern Africa is growing.<sup>7</sup> While Egypt attempted to put

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- 4 The treaty of 1959 allocates 55.5 billion cubic metres (66%) of Nile water to Egypt and 18.5 billion cubic metres to Sudan (22%); the remaining 12% is lost to evaporation. See the agreement ([link](#))
  - 5 Temesgen T. Deressa and John Mukum Mbaku, 'While Egypt struggles, Ethiopia builds over the Blue Nile: Controversies and the way forward', *Brookings, Up Front*, 25 July 2013
  - 6 Tobias von Lossow, Luca Mieke and Stephann Roll, 'Nile Conflict: Compensation rather than mediation. How Europeans can lead an alternative way forward', *SWP Comment 2020/C11*, March 2020
  - 7 Tobias von Lossow, 'Machtverschiebung am Nil. Äthiopien und Ägypten begegnen sich im Wasserkonflikt auf Augenhöhe', *SWP Aktuell 2013/11*, February 2013

political pressure on Ethiopia to abandon the dam, and has over the decades hinted it might use military force to maintain control over the Nile waters, it was not able to win its major allies and partners, for example the US, China or Gulf states, over to its side – as they are unwilling to jeopardise their own good and increasingly important relations with Ethiopia over this issue.<sup>8</sup>

With the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam now nearing completion, tensions have been heating up significantly over the process of filling the reservoir, which will take several years. Although Egypt, Ethiopia (and Sudan) reported reaching a ‘major common understanding’ on the issue on 21 July after several rounds of negotiations, tensions could remain high. Although the tensions between the two rivals might not directly affect major European interests, they could severely affect regional stability and potentially international trade given the wider geopolitical competition along the Red Sea trade route.

### 3. Libya: new geopolitical playground

Since the international intervention of 2011, resulting in the fall of the Gadhafi regime, Libya has been in turmoil. The country is exporting instability to the Sahel zone and importing violence and destruction. The latest chapter is now unfolding: Libya has become the new geopolitical battleground between two groups of countries. On the one hand, Turkey and Italy support the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. Ankara is supplying arms and deploying Syrian-Arab fighters to the front, who have ended the siege of the capital by the forces of General Haftar. On the other hand, Egypt, Russia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and France

have backed General Haftar, whose power base is in the eastern part of the country.

Ankara’s aspirations are based on Turkey’s *Blue Homeland Doctrine*, which sets ambitious goals for expanding the country’s interests in the Mediterranean, Aegean and Black seas through diplomatic and military action. At the same time, it would enable Turkey to gain access to energy and other resources;<sup>9</sup> this is apparent in Turkey’s claims on oil and gas fields around Cyprus and its establishment of an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) from its southern coast down to Libya, based on a deal with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli.<sup>10</sup> Geo-economic interests also come into play for Italy. ENI is the most important foreign company ensuring oil and gas exports from Libya. Italian and Turkish economic interests in Libya align and, thus, Rome is not objecting to Ankara’s intervention.<sup>11</sup>

As a result of Turkey’s military assistance to the GNA government, General Haftar’s forces have been driven back in an eastern direction. Egypt’s leader, President Abdul Fahta Al-Sisi, has already threatened to intervene militarily on a large scale, driven by his fear of Turkey’s growing influence in the region. At the end of July the Egyptian parliament approved military action west of the country. Russia and the UAE continue to provide military assistance to Haftar. France has clearly chosen to set a confrontation course with Turkey after a naval incident between the two countries on 10 June.<sup>12</sup> French interests and Greek concerns about Turkish claims on the EEZ versus Turkey’s expansion policy have created a new rift

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8 Tobias von Lossow et al., ‘[Nile Conflict: Compensation rather than mediation](#)’; Declan Walsh and Somini Sengupta, ‘[For thousands of years, Egypt controlled the Nile. A new dam threatens that](#)’, *The New York Times*, 9 February 2020

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9 Heather A. Conley and Rachel Ellehuus, ‘How NATO can avoid a strategic decoupling in the Eastern Mediterranean’, *Commentary – Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 17 July 2020

10 Asli Aydintaşbas, Julien Barnes-Dacey, Cinzia Bianco, Hugh Lovatt and Tarek Megeresi, ‘Overview: Fear and loathing in the eastern Mediterranean’, *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, May 2020

11 Rasim Marz, ‘Türkische Ambitionen in Nordafrika’, *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft*, 14 July 2020

12 See for example: [John Irish](#) and [Robin Emmott](#), ‘France-Turkey tensions mount after NATO naval incident’, *Reuters*, 7 July 2020

within NATO. Equally, the European Union is split over the clashing interests of its member states (France, Italy) and, thus, is not in a position to prevent the worst from happening. The Libyan crisis is quickly turning into an international conflict, dividing NATO, drawing in regional powers and creating more chaos inside the country, and destabilising the eastern Mediterranean at the same time.

#### 4. Belarus: a brewing storm and a dilemma for the European Union

The political situation in Belarus, an Eastern Partnership country, is heating up. After 26 years in power, President Lukashenka faces unprecedented challenges in the run-up to the presidential elections on 9 August. He has clamped down on dissent by jailing opposition leaders or not allowing them to register as candidates. Although police repression has been ramped up, Lukashenka nevertheless appears to be losing control. The authorities' mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have led to more self-organisation and politicisation of Belarusian society and people have continued to come out on to the streets.<sup>13</sup> Opponents of Lukashenka have now united their campaigns and rallied around Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the wife of an imprisoned blogger whose scathing criticism of the 'cockroach' Lukashenka triggered the 'slipper protests'. While Lukashenka is clearly willing to do whatever it takes to cling to power and will probably secure another term in August, he appears to have lost touch with an increasingly mobilised populace that is yearning for change and he will have to rely more on repression to extend his rule.

This creates a conundrum for the European Union, which has a geopolitical interest in offering Belarus an alternative to further integration with the Russian Federation but simultaneously wants to uphold EU values by enforcing respect for human rights. A decade ago, the EU slapped sanctions on

Belarus after another violent crackdown; these were lifted in 2016 as Lukashenka began to build ties with the West in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine. The Kremlin is often vexed by Lukashenka's resistance to closer integration and his attempts to play both sides; ironically, Russia would therefore benefit from having a weakened and isolated Lukashenka who has to rely on repression to stay in power. Absorbed as it is by its own internal squabbles, the EU should nonetheless watch closely what happens in Minsk and carefully calibrate its response to balance its geopolitical and human rights objectives.<sup>14</sup>

#### 5. Sudan: sliding back?

In April 2019, following months of sustained popular protests fuelled by an exclusionary political system and a collapsing economy, the Bashir regime in Sudan was ousted. The replacement and incarceration of Omar Bashir, an authoritarian ruler indicted at the ICC for human rights violations, and his replacement by a transitional government headed by former United Nations economist Abdallah Hamdok, was celebrated as a major victory.<sup>15</sup> The transitional government installed was based on a power-sharing arrangement between the popular civilian 'Forces for Freedom and Change' and military components that previously supported Bashir's rule. While the new government was hailed as a major opportunity for Sudan to change its governing system and transition to fully civilian democratic rule, the transitional power-sharing arrangement is fraught with inherent tensions and the country remains at risk of sliding back into authoritarian military rule.<sup>16</sup>

13 Olga Dryndova, 'Belarusian spring? Politicisation of the wider society', *New Eastern Europe*, 8 July 2020

14 Andrew Wilson, 'An election in Belarus: How the West could support a marginalised opposition', *ECFR Commentary*, 21 July 2020

15 Walsh, D., 'Sudan erupts in celebration after army and civilians agree to share power', *The New York Times*, 17 August 2019; De Waal, A., 'In Sudan, Omar al-Bashir is out and the army takes over', *The New York Times*, 11 April 2019; Alamin, M., 'Sudan says ousted president to stand trial for crackdown, coup', *Bloomberg*, 7 April 2020

16 16 Tossel, J., 2020, 'Consolidating Sudan's transition: A question of legitimacy', *CRU Policy Brief*, The Hague: Clingendael

The transitional government has taken significant steps to fundamentally change the former governance system (e.g. putting Omar Bashir on trial, starting peace negotiations with rebels fighting the former government, ending restrictive religious regulations, etc). However, the civilian component of the transitional government appears to be losing ground as the country's economy, one of the major drivers of popular discontent and protest against Bashir, has continued to worsen.<sup>17</sup> Sudan's population is facing increasing hardship due to rising inflation and Covid-19, and the new government has been too cash strapped to address many problems. The international community has been reluctant to provide support, demanding a range of difficult reforms in return. The US government's failure to remove Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism has prevented any discussion on restructuring the heavy debt accrued during Bashir's rule.<sup>18</sup> The military component of the transitional government appears to be increasingly emboldened, especially following a failed bomb attack on Prime Minister Hamdok on 9 March, jeopardising gains made throughout the revolution.<sup>19</sup> The international community's failure to support Sudan's transition in a meaningful way raises questions about its stated aims to reinforce rule of law, to confront human rights violations, to reduce suffering and to support emerging democratic systems.

## Conclusion: no place for complacency

European diplomats may be preparing for their summer breaks after a long slog over the EU budget, but their immediate neighbourhood is far from stable. Both the Eastern Partnership and the MENA region face protracted crises and political turmoil that could deteriorate in the coming weeks and months. Most worryingly, several of these crises directly challenge Europe's geopolitical acumen, as they often pit great powers, and even NATO allies, against one another.

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17 Kleinfeld, P., ['A year after al-Bashir's ouster, cash-strapped Sudan too broke for peace'](#), *The New Humanitarian*, April 16 2020

18 Hudson, C., 2020, ['The Sudan Partnership Conference: A turning point for Sudan?'](#); Gallopin, J-B., 'Bad company: how dark money threatens Sudan's transition', Policy Brief, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 9 June 2020

19 Creta, S., ['Battling the generals: a briefing on Sudan's transition to democracy'](#), *The New Humanitarian*, 30 June 2020

### About the Clingendael Institute

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