



## PERSPECTIVES

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# In the Aegean, Energy Sustainability = Increased Security

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The challenging geography of Greece makes it hard for the country to take full advantage of its natural resources and expand its energy grid. Though it has doubled its share of renewables, it needs to redouble those efforts to reach the EU's ambitious goal of covering a third of its energy needs from renewable sources by 2030. The Greek islands that have been at the forefront of the migration and refugee crises would particularly benefit from a targeted policy to reach that goal, as the transition would increase their energy security, reduce their energy costs, and diversify their economies. Greece has the potential to be a model of sustainability that would enhance the stability of the entire Eastern Med.

Even the smallest Greek islands have the potential to become energy self-sufficient. EU initiatives can help, and the 3+1 energy working group – operating within the framework of the Greece-Israel-Cyprus trilateral partnership, with American support – offers the potential for larger-scale technology sharing and investment in renewables. The more prosperous and dynamic islands would be in a much better position to address migration pressures, which are making a comeback in the Aegean. Investing in renewable energy is a good step in that direction, as it promotes both sustainable growth and energy security, which would contribute to greater stability for the wider region of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Environmental scientists joke that there is nothing like a good crisis to help reduce carbon emissions. Indeed, Greece saw its carbon emissions fall from 108.9 million metric tons in 2008 to 76.2 million last year. As the joke implies, the fall was mostly due to the loss of a quarter of the country's national GDP during the decade-long crisis. To be sure, during the same time, it doubled its

share of renewables from less than 8% of its energy needs to 16.3% in 2017. But Greece will have to redouble those efforts if it is to reach the EU's ambitious goal of covering 32% from renewable sources by 2030.

Bold initiatives are needed. With most Greek islands overly dependent on fossil fuel imports, which are particularly expensive due to transportation costs from the mainland, one idea is to make the smallest, most isolated islands energy self-sufficient. The island of Tilos is an intriguing example. With a permanent population of only 780 (3,000 in the summer), it is the first island in the Mediterranean to cover all its energy needs from renewable sources.

Small Greek islands with limited energy needs should be as ambitious as Tilos and follow its blueprint. Local communities are taking note: 44 island municipalities have organized themselves into the Dafni network, which helps them pursue a sustainable development paradigm based on smart solutions, including renewable and desalination projects. This network receives valuable support from the European Commission, which helps islands across the EU access the support, expertise, and funding they need to generate clean, low-cost energy from renewable sources. Such a transition would help diversify their economies, which are overly reliant on tourism. As the island communities become more sustainable, some of the geopolitical challenges facing the Greek Archipelago could be alleviated.

To that end, a bold renewables strategy should not be reserved for small islands alone. Consider Lesbos and Chios, which have been at the epicenter of the refugee and migration crises. With populations of more than 100 and 40 times that of Tilos, respectively, their use of renewable energy is only at around 10% – while the planned link to the mainland energy grid is an expensive and long-term project. A national commitment to achieve the EU's goal of an expansion of renewable energy to a third of the country's total needs by 2030 could kick-start a transformation that would help transition the larger islands' economies and make them a model of sustainability at a time when the Greek tourism sector needs a paradigm shift. In Santorini, local authorities have warned that the island is at saturation point, as during the busy summer months its local grid is operating at maximum capacity.

With its abundance of light and wind, Greece has the resources to become a leader in the use of renewable energy sources. Such an ambition would require a concerted, multi-year strategic effort, including a determined government policy that fights bureaucratic hurdles and provides incentives for local authorities, consumers, and businesses to invest in renewable technologies. Transitioning to renewable energy has the valuable support of the EU's Clean Energy for EU Islands Initiative, which funded the Tilos transition. For the largest islands and the mainland, there is increased interest in partnerships

with companies from Israel and the US, which are among the most advanced in renewable technologies. Technology sharing and investment in renewables would also help drive the energy agenda of the trilateral partnership.

Greece is undergoing an energy transformation that gives it an increased role in European energy diversification. As it completes the Trans Adriatic Pipeline traversing the country with gas from Azerbaijan and works to add inter-connectors to the Balkans, expanded facilities to import LNG are already bringing US gas to the local market and may soon be used to import Eastern Mediterranean gas all the way to Ukraine, thus expanding and strengthening the European north-south corridor. An ambitious focus on renewable energy as a means of energy transformation for Greece and the Eastern Med would lead to a more secure, efficient, and sustainable future for the region – a result that would also strengthen the EU.

The incoming European Commission has created the post of Commissioner for Protecting the European Way of Life, a VP position that oversees the migration, security, education, and employment portfolios. The title is controversial, but modernizing the asylum system and protecting Europe's borders are almost as necessary for securing the European social model as investing in youth and creating employment opportunities. They all need to come together to tackle the challenges faced by the European south – particularly the Greek islands, which constitute Europe's southeastern border. More prosperous and dynamic islands would be in a much better position to address migration pressures, which are making a comeback in the Aegean.

Investing in renewable energy is a good step forward, as it creates both growth opportunities and energy security. Only thriving islands will be able to address the economic and social challenges their insular geography creates.

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