

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis' speech at the 78th UN General Assembly

Monsieur Le President, heads of Government and State, ladies and gentlemen,

The theme of this year's General Assembly asks us to "accelerate action... towards peace, prosperity, progress and sustainability for all". It is a laudable goal, and one I would argue matters more now than ever before. But I must also ask if it is anywhere near enough.

I pose this question not because I wish to test the patience of this Assembly, but rather because even though collective multilateral solutions can and often do make a difference, it seems to me that still too many solutions fall short of our ambitions. Our words are never quite matched by our actions, and our achievements never quite meet our expectations.

It is as if, in this United Nations, Nations are not quite United enough.

Nowhere is that clearer to me than in two core areas, tackling climate change and managing migration, both of which will be at the heart of Greece's Security Council candidacy for 2025/2026.

If successful, Greece will make climate and migration central tenets of our time on the Security Council, together with respect for International Law and maritime security. We will do this because, in part at least, the global community's current collective approach to both issues speaks to a failure to match rhetoric with policy delivery.

When we have lived through a summer like the one in 2023, the hottest on record, and when we talk rather than act on tackling the main drivers of irregular migration, or even the implementation of existing trans-national agreements, we are in fact failing.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we must work harder collectively to change that.

Twelve months ago, at this very podium I warned how, without multilateral cooperation, the devastating effects of climate change would soon be the norm rather than the exception. Twelve months later and that new norm has, unfortunately, arrived.

This summer floods, fires, heatwaves, and landslides have gripped the European South, North Africa, and the Mediterranean, bringing unprecedented destruction to the region from Slovenia to Libya, from Italy to Greece.

For Greeks nowhere was this more apparent than across Evros, in the northeast of my country. Here, the largest blaze ever recorded in the European Union burnt continuously for almost two weeks.

In all 20 people were killed, hundreds lost homes and livelihoods, and an area greater in size than this city, New York, was raised to ashes. 700 firefighters from across Europe fought valiantly to contain this devastating megafire, but they couldn't tame it.

And as if that was not enough, ten days later Greece was struck by Storm Daniel. The Thessaly region in the centre of the country saw twice as much rainfall in one day than falls in London in an entire year.

It was the worst storm to hit Greece in over a century. Daniel carved its destructive path not only through my country, but through Libya too, landing upon the coastal city Derna, where the death toll now stands in the tens of thousands.

The impact of these events across the Mediterranean is unprecedented. Lives lost, businesses destroyed, communities upended, social cohesion undermined, the fragile ecology of our most precious natural habitats severely compromised.

I accept, of course, that the climate crisis is not an alibi for everything. But the science is clear: unprecedented temperatures, fuelled by global warming, are creating the conditions that drive these catastrophic events.

This is no longer a crisis of the poorest, or of the Global South. Our own very unequal battle with nature is now being fought out across the European South, and the Mediterranean in particular.

This, Ladies and Gentlemen, is the new reality of climate change.

Greece, and our many friends and neighbours who ring the Mediterranean, now face similar challenges to those countries which have been at the sharp end of the climate crisis. And, like those countries, we need a much more coordinated response.

In Greece we have pumped hundreds of millions into mitigation: we have introduced our first ever climate law; we are driving ambitious proposals around decarbonizing our islands. We are partnering with multinationals in the pursuit of new green technology. We invest heavily in renewables, where given our natural assets of wind, sun and sea, the potential is huge.

And yet while we act decisively on long-term mitigation, we are collectively guilty of not placing enough emphasis on short-term adaptation, even though the need to become more resilient is about change today, not tomorrow. After all, this crisis is already here, it is already affecting our lives, and it is already having a significant impact on our economies.

For the European Union this represents a failure not just of policy but of financial resourcing. We are spending peanuts on adaptation and emergency relief. We have two funds which are completely depleted and this must change.

Which is why earlier this week I wrote to the Leaders of Croatia, Cyprus, France, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain – who along with Greece make up the EU Med 9 group of countries.

In my letter I suggested two solutions to the short-term adaptation issue. First, that we recognize that the circumstances now demand that we act outside the EU's long-term budget framework and state subsidy rules. And second, that we lead EU wide efforts to define and implement a comprehensive, properly resourced strategic plan, that addresses the new challenges we are now facing.

But this isn't just about Europe. The problems faced by the European South and North Africa are after all no different to the issues faced by Canada this summer. Or indeed by the likes of Pakistan last summer when that country also suffered from catastrophic floods.

That is why I am calling for the creation of 'a global adaptation alliance'. A forum from where we can deliver new collective thinking, renewed co-operation, access to new finance to drive short-term adaptation, before it is too late.

Investing more, for example, in sharing new technology in advanced forecasting and modelling, so that we can predict with greater clarity, with greater accuracy how these phenomena are going to behave. Where the floods are coming from, and where the fires are going.

We will, therefore, push for the inclusion of an adaptation alliance at the upcoming COP28 meeting in the United Arab Emirates. Because only by working together can we make a real difference; learning lessons from one another but sharing best practice and solutions too.

Take Greece's early warning "112" emergency number. During devastating wildfires five years ago, it didn't exist. A whole seaside town was razed to the ground and more than 100 people perished. We learned from that mistake, we put it right, and this summer the "112" number played a huge part in minimizing loss of life.

What difference I wonder would such a number, an emergency number would have made in Maui during the devastating Hawaiian fires, or in Libya for example? It is exactly this sort of relatively cost-effective solutions that represent the type of technological adaptation we need globally going forward. A simple yet lifesaving idea.

All of this is critical because at the end of the day our number one obligation is the protection of human life.

Monsieur Le President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me turn to the second great challenge of our time, migration.

My country is at the forefront of the global migration crisis. Greece has, over the last decade, provided shelter and protection to hundreds of thousands of refugees and asylum seekers. Our coastguard has gone above and beyond to save tens of thousands of lives at sea.

Let me be clear: Greece will always be an open and welcoming country for those fleeing persecution and violence, as well as those economic migrants who however seek a new future accessed via legal pathways. After all, our economy is growing again, we are attracting significant foreign investment and there are many job opportunities in my country. But we also need to fill those vacancies on our own terms, not those set by the criminal gangs.

That is why it is critical that the international community works together to establish a far more comprehensive and coordinated approach. One that addresses the root causes of migration. One that more effectively counters human trafficking and migrant smuggling. And fosters legal pathways to mobility.

Take managing the root causes of migration. We must challenge the negative political, socioeconomic and climate trends at source, in the countries of origin, but also the countries of transit.

That means more tailor-made, innovative, multi-stakeholder partnerships to drive forward sustainable development and strengthen resilience, creating jobs and opportunities in the places of origin. No one wants to leave their homes and risk their lives finding work thousands of miles away.

In real terms that's about investing in infrastructure, in education, in healthcare, in the green and digital transition. All of which can reduce poverty, unemployment and inequality. And it's about creating incentives for private sector development, it's about supporting entrepreneurship and small businesses, while always promoting good governance and women's empowerment.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When it comes to migration, Greece's policy is tough but fair. We are focused on preventing irregular migration and improving the effectiveness of return systems. But we are also focused on facilitating safe, orderly, and legal migration, while processing asylum claims expeditiously.

This issue isn't going away. Indeed in recent weeks there is evidence across the Mediterranean that the pressure on our borders is, unfortunately, growing again.

That is why preventing departures must be the starting point. We must break the business model of the traffickers and their networks if we are to stop people from embarking on such dangerous journeys.

Working together, bilaterally and multilaterally, we must strengthen border controls and surveillance mechanisms to detect and intercept smugglers and their activities. And we can do that, through the use of advanced technology, intelligence sharing, and cooperation among border control agencies.

And we must enhance the capacity of law enforcement to investigate and prosecute those responsible for profiting from human despair. As well as disrupting the money networks through the strengthening of tools to identify and freeze traffickers' assets.

We need a whole-of-route approach raising public awareness of the dangers posed by the smuggling routes. At the same time, as I said, we must provide legal pathways through family reunification, humanitarian visas but also labour mobility, something Greece has done with new bilateral agreements with countries such as Egypt and Bangladesh.

But above all, if we want to solve the problem in the Mediterranean we must work together with our partner countries. Türkiye, of course, but also our North African neighbours.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me turn to Greece's relations with our Eastern neighbour, Türkiye. But let me do so in the spirit of openness. Rather than looking at the past I want today to look to the future.

Undoubtedly long-standing geopolitical tensions between Greece and Türkiye remain. Our two greatest shared challenges, however, climate change and migration, are of the present and of the future.

I told President Erdoğan just that when we met yesterday. Don't get me wrong. Our main difference over the delimitation of our maritime zones in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean is extremely important, it remains, but it can be resolved in accordance with International Law, and in particular the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Seas and in the spirit of good neighborly relations. We have made good progress over the past months in terms of normalizing our relationships and it is in our mutual interest to continue down that path.

Turning to Cyprus, this remains, unfortunately, at its core, an issue of an illegal invasion and occupation, in violation of the fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter.

Our commitment to Cyprus' sovereignty, territorial integrity and the solution of one state based on a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation is steadfast. It is a matter of credibility and determination to defend the core values and principles upon which the United Nations are based.

Finding a fair, viable and mutually acceptable solution to the Cyprus issue remains a top priority for Greece, and we will continue to fully support the UN-led efforts to facilitate the resumption of negotiations, always on the basis of the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have today addressed two of the three most important concerns we share today as a global community. Let me end by quickly addressing the third.

Last year in this very spot most of us condemned Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. An act of blatant aggression that has shattered the inviolability of a sovereign border and has cost so many innocent lives.

Overall, the international community has stood firm against Putin's provocative and disastrous attempt to rewrite history.

Today however, the assertion on Russia's part is that NATO, the EU, the other partners that support Ukraine, will eventually lose the stomach to continue that fight.

Let me be clear: this should not happen. This will not happen. We will never walk away from Ukraine, because to do so would be to abandon the very principles of peace, democracy, and adherence to International Law that so many in this room hold dear.

This message was sent out loud and clear by the leaders of the whole Balkans region, on the 21st of August, in Athens, in the regional Summit we hosted together with President Zelenskyy.

Dear friends, to conclude, whether the issue is addressing climate change, managing migration, or fighting the threat to our democratic way of life, all the challenges we face are daunting.

We've said many times, failure is not an option. True leadership will be required by all of us. We cannot just sit idle and hope for a miracle. I have the privilege of leading a mid-sized country that is trying to do its best to address issues of massive complexity. But it is time for the really big players to step up to the plate and deliver.

Thank you very much for your attention.