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**Greek-Turkish Relations: The Post-Helsinki Era**

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*Abstract*

*This chapter examines the development of Greek-Turkish relations under the influence of the European Union and the limits of the rapprochement between the two countries. The European Union has been the catalyst for the pacification of the relations of several European states whose competition had led them to recurrent conflict. The 1999 lifting of the Greek veto on the improvement of EU-Turkey relations triggered an improvement in bilateral relations which has remained unprecedented since the 1950s. Bilateral relations underwent a paradigmatic shift which allowed for zero-sum game-based approaches to be challenged. Economic and civil society ties grew stronger; minority problems were mitigated while long-standing bilateral diplomatic disputes remained unresolved and far from international adjudication. Turkey's faltering EU membership ambitions weakened a crucial catalyst of Greek-Turkish rapprochement, yet there was no relapse to the pre-1999 problematic relations. Turkey's possible drifting away from Western institutions poses another strategic challenge on the Greek government.*

*Despite the severe economic and social crises that hit Greece and Turkey in the last decade, Greek-Turkish relations have not been derailed. In both countries, bilateral disputes and the Cyprus issue have declined in importance compared to other foreign policy issues. This allowed both sides to focus on urgent questions, but removed a strong incentive to take risks for conflict resolution. The costs of postponing a bitter compromise appear low, and this provides a strong incentive to political leaders to refrain from necessary political risks. This poses substantial risks for the future and sets a limit to the development of even closer economic and social relations. The inability to resolve outstanding problems through unpleasant but necessary compromise can be juxtaposed with the chronic inability of Greek governments to reach unpopular but necessary solutions in a number of crucial domestic political issues. Institution-building and leadership are sine qua non for the overcoming of the seemingly intractable Greek-Turkish disputes.*

## **Introduction**

Turkey has been one of the main preoccupations of Greek foreign policy for obvious reasons. Besides Turkey being Greece's largest neighbour, Greek and Turkish national identity have to a significant degree been defined against each other, as the Balkans and Anatolia painfully shifted from the empire to the nation-state era (Özkırımlı & Sofos, 2008). Following a decade of military confrontation, the 30 January 1923 Population Exchange Convention and the Treaty of Lausanne of 24 July 1923 became the cornerstones of the bilateral relationship between Greece and Turkey. They were followed by an unexpected rapprochement that delivered the Venizelos-Ataturk accords of 1929 and the 1930 Treaty of Friendship (Ladas, 1932). The end of the Second World War and the outbreak of the Cold War found both states in the same camp. Greece and Turkey's 1952 NATO membership was meant to consolidate the Western orientation of both countries and facilitate a security partnership between them. Nevertheless, the outbreak of the Cyprus question would eventually end the rapprochement and bring to surface several latent bilateral disputes, especially with reference to minorities and borders. The 6-7 September 1955 pogrom against the Greek minority of Istanbul linked to the outbreak of the Greek Cypriot armed struggle for union with Greece became a watershed (Alexandris, 1983). The independence of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960 did not smooth relations, as already in 1963, a constitutional crisis led to the *de facto* end of the bicomunal character of the state and intercommunal violence. Greek-Turkish relations came to the brink of war in 1964 and in 1967 due to Cyprus. The July 1974 events with the Greek-instigated military coup and the Turkish invasion of Cyprus brought Greek-Turkish relations to the lowest point since 1923. While an all-out war was avoided, Turkey rose to the position of Greece's top security threat. Greek strategic planning was reconfigured: security forces were no more focusing on preventing a Soviet bloc assault across the iron curtain that divided Europe and went along the northern borders of Greece. Instead they built up Greece's defence capacity against Turkey along the Evros and the Aegean islands. Meanwhile, old disputes were rekindled, and new emerged: The parties disagreed on the delineation of their territorial waters, continental shelf and flight information zone (FIR) (Heraclides, 2010). The signature of the International

Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in Montego Bay, Jamaica on 10 December 1982 could not provide a blueprint for a solution, as Turkey refused to become a signatory. Recurrent aircraft dog fights over the Aegean would become a dangerous and costly reminder of the absence of a solution.

*The EEC as a Novel Factor-The Road to Helsinki*

Meanwhile, Greece's EEC membership in 1981 became a watershed for Greek foreign policy towards Turkey. The unanimity rule in issues pertaining to EEC foreign relations and enlargement meant that Greece acquired leverage upon the future of EEC-Turkey relations. As following the 1980-1983 military regime, Turkey acquired an interest in EEC membership and filed a membership application in 1987, Greece made its consent on the improvement of EEC-Turkey relations conditional upon positive developments in the Cyprus issue and its bilateral disputes with Turkey. Vetoing any steps towards improving EU-Turkey relations at the absence of any progress became a key point of Greek policy towards Turkey. Short-lived efforts to overcome the stalemate as in Davos in 1985 failed to deliver any tangible results. The crisis of 1987 when Turkey declared that the Turkish exploratory vessel Sismik would conduct hydrocarbon research in disputed regions of the Aegean pointed at how dangerous the situation remained for regional peace and stability. The crisis in bilateral relations had a negative spill over regarding the treatment of minorities. The application of negative reciprocity in minority affairs turned the Greek minority in Turkey and the Muslim minority of Greece into hostages of bilateral relations (Grigoriadis, 2009; Kurban & Tsitselikis, 2010). This reflected a dominant view that minority members did not enjoy their rights as fully-fledged citizens of the state but in the context of the treaties signed by both Greece and Turkey and the extent they remained applicable or valid.

Turkey's weight in Greece's security calculations was reinforced with the end of the Cold War, which removed the last vestiges of a Soviet threat from Greece's northern borders. While both states competed for regional influence in South-eastern Europe and the Black Sea, Greek-Turkish relations went through two severe crises in the 1990s. The Imia/Kardak crisis of January 1996<sup>1</sup> and the Ocalan crisis<sup>2</sup> of February 1999 highlighted the risks that the absence

of any dialogue and inertia harboured. Both sides eventually realized that the prolongation of the *status quo* was no safe option, and urgent diplomatic action was needed. The first steps taken by Foreign Ministers George Papandreou and Ismail Cem in early 1999 at the outset of the Kosovo war gained traction following two calamities that befell upon the two countries. The August 1999 earthquake near Istanbul and the September 1999 earthquake near Athens caused major damages and thousands of deaths. The two earthquakes painfully reminded both Greeks and Turks of their geographic proximity and common human security threats. They offered a rare opportunity for the manifestation of mutual solidarity. The delivery of humanitarian aid across the Aegean had a catalytic effect on public opinion, and the two foreign ministers captured the historic opportunity (Tsakonas, 2010). What was coined as “earthquake diplomacy” culminated in the December 1999 Helsinki European Council decision. Greece lifted its veto against the EU candidacy of Turkey, while at the same time securing a path for the resolution of bilateral disputes through international adjudication and the EU membership of the Republic of Cyprus. Turkey would become a candidate for EU membership, while the resolution of the Cyprus issue while desirable would not be a precondition for the EU membership of the Republic of Cyprus. Regarding the bilateral disputes, both sides were invited to conduct bilateral negotiations. If these failed to produce a result by the end of 2004, the issues would have to be referred to the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

### **The Helsinki Watershed-Recasting Greek-Turkish Relations**

The Helsinki decision proved a watershed for Greek-Turkish relations (Tsakonas, 2010). For the first time Greece considered Turkey’s socialization into the European political values and norms as an essential strategic objective. Greek policy towards Turkey had shifted from conditional sanctions to conditional rewards (Couloumbis, 1999). The Greek-Turkish frontier was no more envisioned as the border of the European Union and the European continent itself but as an area of communication and trade. Greece became a stakeholder in Turkey’s democratization process. Turkey’s Europeanization process was hoped to influence government offices and the government to endorse European political values (Evin, 2004). EU-initiated political reform in Turkey offered a crucial instrument for the improvement of bilateral

relations and breaking the stalemate in the Cyprus conflict and bilateral disputes and contributing to their resolution upon the basis of international law. It was agreed that the emergence of a prosperous, democratic Turkey would serve Greek national interests, as this would facilitate the resolution of the Cyprus question, the bilateral disputes and boost trade and civil society relations. In other words, Greece would not have to deal with an angry and aggressive neighbour anymore but with a partner of growing significance (Grigoriadis, 2008a).

Tapping on the potential of growing bilateral trade, tourism and energy partnerships offered mutual gains and underlined the unrealized peace dividend. Confidence-building measures were hoped to prepare the ground for the resolution of diplomatic disputes. As the UN-facilitated bilateral negotiations came to a high point with the Annan Plan, several rounds of high-level bilateral talks between Greece and Turkey raised hopes about a breakthrough. The 1999 Helsinki decision had set 2004 as a crucial year. In 2004, the political conditions for the resolution of Greek-Turkish disputes were optimal. Greece enjoyed an unprecedented prosperity and political stability, while the AKP government put serious efforts to achieve the start of Turkey's EU accession negotiations and challenged many of the stereotypes of Turkish foreign policy. Its opposition to the secularist military-bureaucratic allowed him to take positions against long-standing Turkish official views of the Cyprus conflict and the Aegean dispute. Civil society actors also benefited from the favourable political environment. Greek-Turkish NGO cooperation was legitimized and supported by the European Union and Turkey's EU membership process (Rumelili, 2005).

#### *A Double Opportunity Missed in 2004*

On the other hand, the ability of civil society to catalyse a change had its own limits. At the heyday of Turkey's reform process and EU optimism and the Greek-Turkish rapprochement, the sides appeared not prepared to capture the historic opportunity and take the courageous step of conflict resolution. While the Simitis government had worked hard to create the conditions for a success in the Cyprus peace negotiations, the Karamanlis government proved unwilling to put the same effort and indulgent with the non-compromising attitude of the Cypriot President Papadopoulos that had succeeded Glafkos Klerides in early 2003 (Grigoriadis, 2012).

On 24 April 2004, the most comprehensive effort to resolve the Cyprus question failed, when the Greek Cypriots rejected in a referendum the comprehensive plan prepared by the United Nations. This meant that Cyprus would become a member of the European Union without a prior solution of the conflict. While the failure of Annan Plan referendums did not prevent the entry of Cyprus into the European Union on 1 May 2004, the Cyprus problem remained an obstacle to Turkey's EU accession negotiations and continued poisoning Greek-Turkish relations, as well as Turkey's EU accession process (Evin, 2005). While the Cyprus question was far from being the most important obstacle to the conclusion of Turkey's EU accession negotiations, it complicated the relationship even further (Ker-Lindsay, 2007).

In December 2004, at the Brussels European Council, when the start of Turkey's EU accession negotiations would be decided, the Karamanlis government opted not to enforce the term of the 1999 Helsinki European Council decision on the referral of the bilateral disputes with Turkey to the International Court of Justice as a condition for the start of Turkey's EU accession negotiations. This meant that Turkey would start its EU accession negotiations without a prior referral of its disputes with Greece to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The Greek government appeared twice unprepared to make historic decisions and missed the opportunity to change the course of Greek-Turkish relations. The significance of this negligence could be better evaluated when the permissive conditions that made a breakthrough deal in Cyprus and adjudication of the Aegean disputes possible expired. The deterioration of EU-Turkey relations, the declining prospects of Turkey's EU accession, the slowdown and eventual backslide of the reform process all removed strong incentives for. EU-Turkey relations have persistently soured ever since, and this meant that the transformative power of the European Union over Turkey would go constantly weaker. The European Union could no more play the crucial role in promoting the Greek-Turkish relations and conflict resolution (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2008).

### **The Achievements of the Rapprochement**

While the opportunity to resolve the Cyprus question and the Aegean disputes was missed, it should be stressed that the rapprochement maintained its momentum and delivered spectacular results in low politics issues.

### Economic Relations

Bilateral economic relations enjoyed an unprecedented boom. Trade rose from 273.8 million USD in 1993 to 3212.8 million USD in 2007, while Greece ranked third with 10.7 billion USD in foreign direct investment (FDI) between 2002 and 2007 (Tsarouhas, 2009). The decision of the National Bank of Greece (NGB) to acquire the Turkish Finansbank in 2007 raised controversy in both countries. Nevertheless, it proved one of the smartest investments in the history of Greek banking (Grigoriadis, 2012). Through its profit and the premium acquired by its sale to QNB in December 2015, Finansbank investment bolstered the NGB balance sheet at a time the Greek banking system came to the brink of collapse under the ramifications of the Greek economic crisis.

Tourism was another key growth area. The number of Turkish tourists to Greece rose to 921.000 in 2017, comprising one of the most dynamic groups in Greek tourism. Greece was the second most visited country by Turkish tourists in 2017. About 595.000 Greeks visited Turkey in the same year. The number of Turkish tourists to Greece soared, despite the failure of EU-Turkey negotiations to reach an agreement on the abolition of visa for Turkish tourists visiting EU member states. In fact, the Greek government requested and secured a special visa regime for those Turkish tourists wishing to visit Greece's eastern Aegean islands.

### Energy

Energy emerged as another key cooperation area. While in the 1990s energy strategic planning of both countries used to bypass each other and, the rapprochement highlighted that Greek-Turkish energy cooperation would be mutually beneficial. Energy rose in significance in bilateral relations. On the one hand, it pointed at the potential of improved cooperation. Energy was an important new area of cooperation, which could serve as an instrument for peace or an amplifier of existing conflict. The EU interest in gaining access to Caspian and Middle Eastern natural gas provided with such an opportunity. This was meant to diversify the natural gas



supply in the European energy market in particular when EU-Russian relations for numerous reasons and access to non-Russian natural gas was considered a security priority for the European Union. The construction of a pipeline bringing Azerbaijani natural gas from Turkey to Greece with the aim not only to supply the Greek natural gas market but further supply the Italian and Balkan energy markets was such an example. Aiming to reduce the dependency of the European natural gas market on Russian natural gas imports the project was ample proof that Greece and Turkey whose conflict has been one of the biggest security liabilities within NATO could emerge as energy security assets for the European Union through their cooperation. Two projects aimed to realize the potential of Greek-Turkish cooperation in natural gas transport. The first was the Interconnector Turkey-Greece-Italy (ITGI) project. It aimed to construct a pipeline connecting Turkey and Italy via Greece (Grigoriadis, 2008b). The second was the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) project aiming to construct a pipeline from Turkey to Italy via Greece and Albania. The connection of the Greek and Turkish natural gas networks was achieved already in 2007 and allowed the export of Azerbaijani natural gas to Greece. Nevertheless, the construction of the pipeline connecting Greece to Italy met with complications both because of the Greek economic crisis and because of the existence of two competing projects. On the Turkish side of the border, the Trans Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) project aimed to improve the infrastructure capacity of Turkey and transport natural gas across Turkey to the Greek-Turkish border so it could be further exported to the European market. Meanwhile, the construction of an interconnecting line to Bulgaria and the discussion about constructing an interconnecting pipeline from Albania across the Western Balkans further raised the significance of this project. Such projects would forge long-needed interdependence links and raised the interest of the European Commission (Winrow, 2013).

### Minority Rights

Significant improvements were noted in the field of minority rights. In some cases, the role of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) proved crucial. Its decisions identified violations of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) by Greece and Turkey and paved the way for the rectification of violations. Turkey's EU reform process also helped in

that direction. Some confiscated immovable assets including churches and other community buildings were restored to Greek minority foundations. On the other hand, negative reciprocity in human rights declined but did not disappear. On the contrary, addressing fundamental human rights questions often was linked to the situation on the other side of the border. Criticisms against the violation of the rights of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Greek minority in Turkey were often responded with countercriticisms on the treatment of the Muslim minority in Western Thrace (Grigoriadis, 2009). The demographic decline of Turkey's Greek minority was presented as proof for its sufferings, while the relative demographic resilience of Greece's Muslim minority was presented as evidence that things are not as bad as Ankara would claim. Similarly, the election of the Ecumenical Patriarch by the Holy Synod was given as example of how the Greek minority was allowed to elect its own religious leaders while this was not possible for the minority in Western Thrace. While the state of minority rights in both Greece and Turkey notably improved, there were still considerable shortcomings. The reopening of the Religious Seminary in the island of Heybeliada (Halki) was repeatedly promised but never materialized. Occasionally the issue was connected to the resolution of the mufti question in Western Thrace. The appointment of the muftis by the Greek state met with the opposition of a sizable part of the minority which claimed its right to elect its own mufti. The Greek government responded that muftis were not elected but appointed in Turkey itself and that muftis in Greece also had judicial duties, in accordance with the Treaty of Lausanne, which made their election impossible. Turkey also raised the question of the construction of a mosque in Athens, as an example of Greek intolerance towards Muslims, although this issue rather referred to Greece's Muslim immigrants than the Muslim minority of Western Thrace.

### **The Effects of the Crisis and the Arab Uprisings**

#### *Greece's Strategic Puzzle*

The outbreak of the Greek crisis in 2009 inevitably shifted public attention from foreign policy issues, including relations with Turkey. Greece's diplomatic capital declined, as the country had to face an economic and social crisis of momentous proportions. Greek foreign policy was recalibrated to manage the new crisis. Ambitions were curbed, and emphasis was put on bailout

and memorandum negotiations rather than Greece's relations with its neighbours. The relative decline in significance of the Greek-Turkish disputes also meant that both sides could afford reducing their ranking in the priority list of foreign policy making. Negotiations with Greece's creditors emerged as the key item in Greece's foreign policy. Meanwhile Turkey's ambitions in playing a pivotal role in the transformation of the Middle East following the 2011 Arab uprisings meant that less attention would be paid to Greek-Turkish relations and Turkey's EU membership perspective. While some feared that Greece's relative weakness and fragility could be an opportune moment for Turkey to score diplomatic and political points against Greece, bilateral relations remained rather calm. In fact, the significance of Greek-Turkish relations compared to other items in the diplomatic agenda of both states fell. This could have potentially contributed to a more dispassionate approach contributing to the resolution of the bilateral relations. Greece has become one of the least troublesome neighbours for Turkey. Nevertheless, this was complicated by rising populism and polarization in the domestic politics of both Greece and Turkey. As both countries entered a crisis of different dimensions but severe in its effect, the rise of anti-Western anti-EU sentiment in both countries, which was carefully manipulated by political actors on both sides of the Aegean started undermining the bilateral relations.

Greece also had to face a strategic dilemma and critical questions regarding the future Greek strategy vis-à-vis Turkey. Given that the European Union was the framework that Greece chose to develop its relations with Turkey, the weakening of Greece's position within the European Union and the relegation of Turkey's EU accession negotiations to a formality spelled risks for bilateral relations. Since EU membership appeared no realistic objective in the foreseeable future, Greece remained in search for an alternative strategic framework of its relationship with Turkey. Turkey's mixed signals about the future of its Western strategic orientation did not only become source of concern in NATO. The fading of Turkey's EU membership prospects and the shift of Turkey's foreign policy away from the West towards seeking an independent role weakened the influence and socialization mechanisms on Turkey which Greece had considered as essential to promote its vision of bilateral partnership. Developing an alternative strategy aiming to decouple Greek-Turkish relations from the

European Union emerged as a big puzzle especially given the widening gap between the GDP and military capabilities of the two states. The economic gap between Greece and Turkey has widened, as the Turkish GDP soared in the years between, while the Greek GDP slumped following the economic crisis. In 1980 Greece's GDP was percent of Turkey, this figure slumped to percent in 2017.

In addition, the declared intention of the United States and the declared intention of the United States to reduce its involvement in Europe and the Middle East. Greece's participation in the first speed of European integration in terms of common foreign and security policy (CFSP) was an obvious option. Yet Greece's ability or willingness to remain in the core group of European integration became challenged during the economic crisis. On the other hand, it remained unclear whether the European institutions would grow fast enough to meet Greece's security needs against Turkey.

Similarly, risky was the attempt to instrumentalize foreign policy issues to bolster failing domestic political support. The temptation to instrumentalize foreign policy for domestic political objectives has been particularly strong, as it has historically proven to be paying off well on both sides of the Aegean. Deflecting attention from domestic failures and grievances towards a foreign policy dispute where there is a consensus within the public opinion, normally has a galvanizing and polarizing effect, which normally is beneficial in terms of votes. Under these circumstances reigniting the bilateral disputes and raising tension to levels not seen for several years underlined how fragile the achievements of the rapprochement were without a resolution of the diplomatic disputes.

#### *Balancing Turkey in the Region*

Beyond the European Union, seeking ways to balance Turkey through regional partnerships appeared as an alternative. The development of an axis with Cyprus and Israel and Egypt was being discussed, while similar high expectations were put on developing Greece's strategic relations with Russia. Nevertheless, it was clear that convincing countries like Russia or Israel to forebode their strategic relationship with Turkey in favour of Greece would not be an easy task. Opportunities that appeared when Turkey's relations with Israel suffered a major setback

following the Mavi Marmara incident or when Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft operating in Syria in November 2016 proved more apparent than real. Both Israel and Russia sought to repair their relations with Turkey, even though previous levels of cooperation were not met. The case of Egypt was different given the refusal of the Turkish government to recognize the government of General Abdelfattah al-Sissi who had toppled the elected Muslim Brotherhood government under Mohammad Morsi. The links between the AKP and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood remained too strong for the resumption of diplomatic relations following the military coup, and Egyptian-Turkish relations fell to a minimum. Nevertheless, even under these circumstances the Egyptian government did not go as far as to antagonize Turkey in the key issue of the delineation of maritime zones in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup> Greek-Egyptian relations fell short of acquiring strategic dimensions. It would be particularly difficult for Greece, particularly in its current economic and diplomatic state, to find a credible and strong regional strategic partner vis-à-vis Turkey beyond the European Union. Hence attempting to balance Turkey through the course of EU-Turkey negotiations on issues other than EU membership, such as the refugee crisis, the update of the customs union agreement or the potential signature of a privileged partnership agreement. On the other hand, it was clear that removing the normative element and underscoring the transactional side of EU-Turkey relations substantially limited the ability of EU institutions -and indirectly Greece- to influence domestic political developments or even the definition of Turkish national interest. EU influence on Turkey remained commensurate with the degree of integration offered.

#### *Energy Cooperation and its Limits*

Greek-Turkish energy cooperation could potentially acquire wider dimensions when sizeable natural gas reserves were discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean. The discovery of natural gas in the Cypriot, Israeli and Egyptian EEZs in the Eastern Mediterranean introduced the region as a prospective natural gas supplier of the European energy market. The most cost-effective way to transport the Eastern Mediterranean natural gas to Europe would be via pipeline to Turkey and Greece. This could further reinforce the role of the two countries as energy security assets for the European Union (Grigoriadis, 2014). Nevertheless, the absence

of a breakthrough in the Cyprus peace negotiations was suspending such projects. While it was hoped that energy discoveries could provide an additional incentive to pursue conflict resolution and energy cooperation, they instead rekindled Greek-Turkish confrontation over maritime zones in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. The prospects of energy reserves in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean have added a new dimension to Greek-Turkish maritime zone disputes in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey challenged the right of the Republic of Cyprus to conduct natural gas exploration drillings citing the rights of Turkish Cypriots and its own views on the delineation of the maritime zones in the Eastern Mediterranean. This inevitably dragged Greece into the confrontation, as there is no delineation between the EEZs of Greece and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean. Efforts to achieve a common understanding between Cyprus, Greece, Egypt and Israel in issues of natural gas maritime exploration and monetization became reminiscent of efforts to isolate or bypass Turkey in the 1990s. The political and economic dividend of Greek-Turkish energy cooperation appeared too weak to influence the terms of competition in the Eastern Mediterranean, as sovereignty questions were also involved. The monetization of the reserves remained dependent upon global energy prices and the diplomatic relations between the regional actors. It remained up to the leaders to present energy as a catalyst for peace in the region or yet another issue which would eventually foment further confrontation.

#### Civil Society

Civil society encounters continued unabated in the crisis years. Tourism was not the only instrument of promoting better understanding bottom-up. The same objective was served by the entertainment industry. Turkish TV series, already very popular across the globe, found an unexpected market in Greece. Against social stereotypes, the Greek audience could relate with the normative and cultural underpinnings of the Turkish TV series and found out that commonalities between the Greek and Turkish society are stronger than once thought. Meanwhile, while the Greek crisis had a toll on the volume of trade and FDI, it also had some unexpected positive effects. Greece's decision to introduce a "golden visa" program, thereby introducing the possibility of acquiring a residence permit in Greece following a real estate

investment of at least 350,000 Euros allowed thousands of Turkish citizens to become legal residents in Greece. Turkey's growing domestic social rifts interestingly became one of the reasons boosting tourism and relations on the civil society level. Turkey's secularist middle class, which would normally view with suspicion and nationalist bias Turkey's Greek minority and Greece, made a U-turn in its approach. Following the AKP political hegemony and the polarization of Turkish society between the conservative majority and the secularist minority, Turkish secularists could come closer to the country's non-Muslim minorities. As they felt themselves becoming a minority within their own country they could develop empathy for their non-Muslim co-citizens. Considering that transformation, Greece's image was also transformed. It was no more the archenemy, but commonalities in lifestyle and popular culture were stressed instead. Many secularist Turks started feeling more comfortable in Greece than in a Turkey increasingly defined by Sunni Islam under the hegemony of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

#### *Mental Barriers to Compromise*

The relative relegation of the importance of the Greek-Turkish disputes has improved opportunities for conflict resolution. Nonetheless, while increased contact helped raise awareness on both sides of the Aegean regarding the commonalities between Greeks and Turks, this did not affect public opinion views on bilateral issues and the Cyprus question. The Greek public opinion appeared unwilling to endorse efforts to overcome the existing stalemate. This was not a surprise given that exceptionalism, self-victimization and propensity to conspiracy theories featured strongly in public opinion perceptions. Moreover, framing the diplomatic disputes as "national issues", securitizing almost every aspect of the bilateral relations and making them look pertinent to the very survival of the nation, sentimentalized the debate and limited the manoeuvring grounds of any government wishing to negotiate a solution. In line with its Turkish counterpart, the Greek public opinion appeared convinced that Greece was 100 percent right in all bilateral disputes with Turkey or that Turkey's claims were part of a coherent strategic plan to challenge Greek sovereignty and territorial integrity in the Aegean. This was no surprise given the way history was taught in schools (Millas, 1991), the quality and diversity of mainstream print and electronic information circulating in both countries through print and

electronic media. Under these circumstances, it was rather difficult to argue for the necessity of negotiation and compromise. If one side is completely right and victimized, then any negotiation is likely to lead to unacceptable concessions. In fact, compromise was not seen as a virtue but rather as a vice or a selloff of “national rights”. Win-win solutions appeared hard to conceptualize -let alone achieve- as the primary concern would be the relative gains of Turkey and not the absolute gains of Greece.

This mentality helped consolidate the *status quo* which meant that opportunities to resolve the disputes would be forfeited. The adamant position of the parties would be protected at the discourse level without making any effort to address the losses that both sides incurred because of deliberate procrastination. Rhetorical emphasis on the significance of the problems combined with procrastination and unwillingness to take any risks for their resolution pointed at a strong-rooted hypocrisy. This appeared to be in harmony with public opinion priorities which influence political decision making. Under these conditions entertaining the stereotypical view of the disputes and inertia appeared to be the most desirable option for governments which evaluated the risks to their public opinion approval rates as a result of a breakthrough agreement and chose to back off.

#### *The Effect of Domestic Politics and Cyprus*

This resonated with the increasing influence of domestic politics on Greek and Turkish foreign policy. As political parties were engaging in efforts to outbid each other in nationalism, any attempts to promote moderate views in the bilateral disputes were feared to backfire electorally. Belligerent statements against became more common and Turkey’s invasion of northern Syria cause ire within the Greek public opinion. The non-permissive international and domestic political environment on both sides of the Aegean meant that it would be even more difficult to expect from political leaders the sense of responsibility necessary to embark on a conflict resolution process. The virtuous constellation of political leadership, international environment existing in 2004 appeared nowhere in the horizon. If leadership had been a scarce commodity even back then, finding it now would be even more difficult.



Turkey's democratic backsliding and the declaration of a "state of emergency" following the abortive coup of 15 July 2016 have further complicated the relationship and raised additional concerns. The flight of Turkish citizens to Greece, which the Turkish government accused of being members of the Gülen movement and coup conspirators added new problems to the agenda. The case of eight military officers who fled Turkey for Greece at the night of the abortive coup on board a military helicopter and accused by the Turkish government of being implicated to the abortive military coup of 15 July 2016 was only the tip of the iceberg. As the continued extension of the "state of emergency" in Turkey meant that the rule of law and fundamental human rights and freedoms remained suspended, it was impossible for Greek judicial authorities to approve the extradition of Turkish fugitives.

One should not underestimate the enduring ability of the Cyprus question to affect Greek-Turkish relations. The Cyprus question may no more be a priority for the public opinion of Greece or Turkey. Yet a crisis in Cyprus could still endanger the rapprochement and all steps made towards the promotion of peace and stability. While optimism had risen since the election of Nicos Anastasiades and Mustafa Akıncı, the failure of the latest round of the peace negotiations has increased the risk of a crisis. A possible collapse of the UN-facilitated peace process in Cyprus is likely to trigger a series of negative developments. As alternative plans for the future of Cyprus would be discussed, the possible annexation of the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" to Turkey would have disastrous consequences not only to Greek-Turkish relations but to EU-Turkey relations as a whole.

### **Conclusion**

The reasons for the failure of conflict resolution in Greek-Turkish disputes and the Cyprus problem are reminiscent of the reasons that contributed to the Greek economic and social crisis. Postponing hard but necessary decisions indefinitely to the future may have been endorsed by the public opinion and served the fortunes of specific political parties or leaders in the short term but burdened domestic and foreign policy making. At some point politics was understood as *ad infinitum* management of problems without the intention of solving them. The paralytic procrastination proved more powerful than the need to launch a new era in bilateral relations.

The leadership shown in 1999 and were able to launch the rapprochement, a historic opportunity was missed in 2004. Lack of leadership meant following public opinion attitudes and not shaping them through reasoned argument. While the instrumentalization of foreign policy to rally domestic support turned into an increasingly common and rather damaging practice in both Greece and Turkey, nationalism remained a handy tool in the toolkit of leaders. There has been no tool more effective in generating nationalist mobilization in Greece than Greek-Turkish relations. Rallying around the flag has always been tempting to political leaders whose government performance has proven less than satisfying and hence had to manage the disenchantment and disillusionment of the public opinion. Since opportunities to resolve the disputes were missed, one had to engage in damage control when escalation occurred. Most importantly it did not allow for the cost of inertia to be clear and the benefits of reform to be accrued. The outbreak of the crisis highlighted that this option was not a wise one and its price was exorbitantly high.

The official visit of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Greece in December 2017 emerged as an unexpected opportunity to reverse this stagnation. The first official visit of a Turkish head of state in more than sixty years provided an opportunity to recast bilateral relations. Erdoğan himself who was embattled in several foreign policy fronts appeared willing to improve Turkey's international profile through a successful visit. Nevertheless, his message of win-win solutions and stronger cooperation were overshadowed by his reference on the need to update the Treaty of Lausanne. This monopolized the interest of the Greek media and the official reception of President Erdoğan by the Greek President Prokopios Pavlopoulos ended up in an unexpected and rather unprecedented public exchange of arguments. Soon after the departure of Erdoğan, Turkey reiterated its claims over Aegean islands and rocks sparking a deeper crisis.<sup>4</sup> The February 2018 Imia/Kardak crisis highlighted that issues that both sides have opted to bypass and not resolve will remain thorns that could reignite tensions if domestic politics provide incentives on that direction. Greece's rather slow recovery to political and economic normalcy and Turkey's democratic backsliding are likely to create conditions where bilateral disputes will become exposed to the risk of an accident.

Missing the conflict resolution opportunities in the past has turned damage control into an essential task. Leadership and responsibility will be again essential when the next opportunity arises. The institutional prerequisites for the cultivation of these virtues are indeed a topic worth academic inquiry in the field of Greek foreign policy and beyond that.

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<sup>1</sup> This referred to a military showdown around the islets of Imia (Kardak) in the east of Kalymnos. While further escalation was averted thanks to US mediation, a helicopter accident cost the life of three Greek officers.

<sup>2</sup> This referred to the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan-PKK*) by Turkish security agents, following his harbouring in the Greek Embassy in Nairobi.

<sup>3</sup> Egypt appeared, for example, unwilling to sign an EEZ delineation agreement with Greece, which would in effect disprove Turkey's claims about the delineation of exclusive economic zones in the Mediterranean.

<sup>4</sup> The crisis was sparked by an exchange of salvos between the leader of the chief opposition party Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu who thought that he could score some points by pointing at the alleged indulgence of the AKP government against defending Turkish territorial integrity in the Aegean. These statements were responded by the Greek minister of defence and eventually invited an official response by the Turkish government which brought all sides to confrontation positions.