

GREEK-TURKISH RAPPROCHEMENT AND TURKEY'S EU MEMBERSHIP QUEST: TURNING RHETORIC INTO REALITY

The rapprochement between Greece and Turkey that was initiated at the end of the 1990s has managed to contribute not only to the maintenance of peace and stability in this particular hot-spot of Southeast Europe but has also resulted in the enhancement of Turkey's European Union (EU) accession quest. This article holds that this achievement is a result of the political and socio-economic capital that has been accumulated during this process. It is argued that the continuation of this rapprochement will eventually benefit not only Turkey and Greece but also the EU.

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Relations between Greece and Turkey have been a source of concern among political and military leaders both on a regional and international level throughout the 20th century and up to the present day.

Despite these ongoing concerns, since 1999 a rapprochement has been developing between the two countries that appears to have achieved at least two things. Firstly, it contributed greatly to the maintenance of peace and stability in the area and, secondly, it significantly strengthened Turkey's EU membership quest.

This article argues that these achievements are due to the political and socio-economic capital that has been accumulated since 1999 as a result of this rapprochement. In a way this process has taught both states how to live with their differences on "high politics" issues not only absent from conflict but even more importantly in a cooperative and mutually beneficial manner. In outlining this argument, the outcomes of the Greek-Turkish rapprochement are firstly presented and evaluated. The role of the EU in this process of altering relations between the two countries is then analyzed. In conclusion, several policy proposals are presented.

Evaluation of the Outcomes of Rapprochement

The decisions taken at the Helsinki European Summit of 1999 are considered a turning point both for EU-Turkey relations and for Greek-Turkish relations. Soon afterwards, nine bilateral agreements were signed between Greece and Turkey on "low politics" issues, i.e., areas not related to matters of national security. These agreements include cooperation on tourism, finance, technology and science, sea transport, culture, customs, protection of investments, protection of environment, the fight against international organized crime and illegal immigration. This cooperation was later expanded to issues of agriculture, energy, and the fight against natural disasters. In addition, the foreign ministers of both countries agreed on the creation of a Joint Task Force—a special committee of Greek and Turkish officials—that was meant to assist Turkey, based on the Greek experience, with the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*.¹

All in all, from 2000 to 2013 more than 100 bilateral agreements were signed that contributed greatly to the political and socio-economic development of both sides. As a result, trade between the two countries flourished. The reciprocal foreign direct investments (FDI) of Greek and Turkish companies, bilateral tourism, and cooperation in cultural and scientific fields have all increased, while railroads connecting the two countries have been improved. A series of Confidence Building Measures

¹ Dimitris Droutsas and Panagiotis Tsakonias, "Turkey's 'Road Map' to European Union: Implications for Greek-Turkish Relations and the Cyprus Issue," *Hellenic Studies*, Vol.9, No.1 (2001), pp. 71-100.

(CBMs) was put into force and joint ventures were undertaken for the construction of the Interconnector Turkey-Greece-Italy (ITGI), a natural gas pipeline that will connect the three countries. Additionally, the Council of Strategic Cooperation was established in which both prime ministers meet annually.

Bearing all this in mind, the Greek-Turkish rapprochement process initiated in 1999 can be characterized as the most successful bilateral endeavor since the 1950s given that all similar attempts since then did not deliver any lasting results. First and foremost the current rapprochement has eased tensions between the two countries. Since 1999, there has been no major Greek-Turkish crisis; this is reflected in the new political discourse on both sides of the Aegean. The emerging peaceful climate has enabled both countries to concentrate on their internal political priorities. Since 2002, under successive Justice and Development Party (AKP) governments, Turkey has managed not only to recover from a severe economic crisis but has also experienced an unprecedented economic boom. Furthermore, this rapprochement can be seen as significantly strengthening Turkey's EU membership prospect, which was furthered by the EU officially initiating accession negotiations with Ankara in 2005. In other words, the adherence of Turkey to the Helsinki European Summit decisions that required the peaceful resolution of bilateral issues with Greece and Turkey's support for the resolution of the Cyprus issue under the aegis of the UN opened the way for the initiation of accession negotiations with the EU.

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Greece has also benefited domestically from the easing of tensions with neighboring Turkey, successfully organizing the 2004 Olympic Games and qualifying for the European Monetary Union. Today, Greece's stabilized relationship with Turkey has enabled Athens to curtail its defense budget drastically at a time when Greece is going through a severe economic crisis with acute social and political repercussions.

Furthermore, energy cooperation between Greece and Turkey through the construction of the ITGI pipeline is bound to provide mutual benefits and to increase the importance of both countries to the energy security of Europe. For example, one of the basic principles of the EU's Energy Security Policy is the diversification of

supplier countries.² As of today, Europe can only fulfill 50 percent of its energy needs through internal sources. By 2030, this percentage is projected to decline to 25 percent.³ Greek-Turkish energy cooperation therefore not only contributes to the EU's energy security policy, but also enhances Turkey's prospects for EU membership, assuming that Ankara can use this geopolitical advantage as a tacit leverage for its entrance into the Union. In other words, the EU as a whole gains from the Greek-Turkish rapprochement.

At the same time, due to the favorable political conditions created and the domestic support the policy of rapprochement enjoys in both countries, bilateral economic relations have also expanded. When considering that cumulative trade transactions between Turkey and Greece totaled 200 million dollars just before the Helsinki European Summit and subsequently increased to 6.5 billion dollars by 2012, it is clear that Greek-Turkish trade volume has enjoyed tremendous growth.⁴

Increased bilateral trade has in turn had “spillover effects and paved the way” for attracting FDI.⁵ The number of Greek companies established in Turkey increased significantly from 76 in 2003 to 346 in 2008, making Greece the third biggest source of FDI in Turkey. In 2013, Greek FDI inflows into Turkey reached 6.6 billion dollars.⁶

The importance of FDI development for the Greek-Turkish rapprochement process is twofold. Firstly, bilateral investments indicate not only the existence of mutual trust but “the willingness of the investors to share the destiny of the country in question.”⁷ During the 2000s, Greek investors (and the Greek state in the case of the National Bank of Greece), demonstrated their trust not only in the political future of Turkey but also in the future of Greek-Turkish relations. The second important element of increased FDI between the two countries is that it creates interdependence of interests and involves non-state actors in the foreign policy decision-making process, which can be expected to lower the risk of a possible deterioration of bilateral relations.

Intercultural dialogue and exchanges through touristic, educational and cultural activities have also increased between the two societies. In terms of bilateral tourism,

2 “Green Paper: Towards a European Strategy for the Security of Energy Supply,” *European Commission* (2001), http://ec.europa.eu/energy/green-paper-energy-supply/doc/green_paper_energy_supply_en.pdf

3 See: Gawdat Bahgat, “Europe’s Energy Security: Challenges and Opportunities,” *International Affairs*, Vol.82, No.5 (2006), pp. 963-4.

4 “Statement of the Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan During the Press Conference with its Greek Counterpart Antonios Samaras,” *Kathimerini*, 3 March 2013.

5 Mustafa Kutlay, “A Political Economy Approach to the Expansion of Turkish-Greek Relations: Interdependence or Not?,” *Perceptions* (Spring-Summer, 2009), p. 102.

6 *Kathimerini* (2013).

7 Paul Krugman, Maurice Obstfeld and Marc Melitz, *International Economics: Theory and Policy* (New York: Pearson Addison, Wesley, 2006), pp. 609-14, quoted in: Mustafa Kutlay (2009), p. 102.

the number of Greeks visiting Turkey rose from 146,000 in 1999 and to 669,823 in 2012, while the number of Turks visiting Greece rose from 114,453 in 2001 to 466,166 in 2012.⁸ Tourism provides clear mutual benefits by contributing to economic development as well as building trust between people.

In the 13 years of the current Greek-Turkish rapprochement, numerous civil society initiatives and NGO activities have brought the people of both countries closer to each other. The process of societal reconciliation particularly intensified when earthquakes struck both Turkey and Greece in 1999. Both sides provided immediate help to each other, which brought their societies closer and “exploded myths alleging eternal Greek-Turkish enmity and the burden of history.”⁹ Friendship groups and other multilateral contact routes were established through civil society organizations. Cooperation increased between local governments, NGOs, universities, various think tanks and distinguished individuals from both countries.¹⁰ The Greek and Turkish media also served to spread the feeling of mutual gratitude throughout their populations. As a result, popular support has been generated for the “step by step” process of rapprochement.¹¹

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In addition, Turkish television series broadcast on Greek TV channels over the last 10 years have garnered top ratings. Greek television series are also broadcasted by Turkish TV channels. As a result of their widespread distribution, these series have been conducive in partially breaking down longstanding prejudices and misperceptions.

The fruits of these exchanges are also demonstrated in opinion polls carried out in both countries over the 13-year period. According to a 2001 opinion poll, 29 percent

8 Statistics for the year 2012 are drawn from [Kathimerini.gr](http://www.kathimerini.gr), <http://www.grtrnews.com> and for the previous years from: Mustafa Kutlay (2009), p. 107.

9 Theodore Couloumbis and Thanos Veremis, *Greece and the Balkans: A Critical Review* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 1999), p. 152.

10 See: George Koukoudakis, “The Role of Citizens in the Current Greek-Turkish Rapprochement,” *Paper for the 56th Annual Conference of Political Studies Association*, University of Reading (4-6 April 2006). This is the only available source regarding public opinion on Greek-Turkish rapprochement.

11 See: James Lidsay, “Greek-Turkish Rapprochement: The Impact of Disaster Diplomacy,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol.14, No.1 (Autumn-Winter, 1999).

of Turks considered Greece as the main enemy of Turkey.¹² In 2004, that percentage declined to 16.9.¹³ In a 2000 opinion poll in Greece, 72.3 percent of Greeks considered Turkey as the main enemy of Greece. However by 2002, this percentage had declined to 64.1.¹⁴

Some Setbacks in the Process

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Despite all this progress made in “low politics” issues, the rapprochement seemed to have partially lost momentum when the last effort undertaken by then-UN General Secretary Kofi Annan for the resolution of the Cyprus issue failed in 2004. However, this negative development did not necessarily end the process of Greek-Turkish reconciliation, it simply slowed it down. At the same time, other “high politics” issues (delimitation of the continental shelf, minority issues, etc) remained unre-

solved. The establishment of an exploratory committee in 2003 for the resolution of these issues has not produced any positive results to date. Further, the revelation in 2010 of Operation “Sledgehammer,” in which the Turkish Armed Forces were believed to have been preparing a *coup* in 2003 against the elected AKP government and were working on a scenario of the invasion of a Greek island, also produced a negative psychological effect on the continuation of the process.

The Role of the European Union

Improvement in Greek-Turkish relations was, and still is, a very important factor for Turkey’s accession into the EU. In turn, the role of the EU in fostering Greek-Turkish rapprochement has been of paramount importance.

Turkey’s longstanding aspiration of joining the EU has become a concrete goal due in no small part to Greece’s consent. The strengthening of the European prospect for Turkey facilitated significant structural reforms domestically, and was also based on Ankara’s commitment to peacefully resolve its bilateral problems with Athens.

12 This opinion poll was published in the Turkish newspaper *Radikal* on 10 April 2001.

13 “Foreign Policy Perception,” *International Strategic Research Organization* (October 2004).

14 Theocharis Papadopoulos and Defne Paker (2005).

The EU's foreign policy emphasis on promoting peace and stability as well as the expansion of democratic principles and values through its enlargement policy was also manifested in Greek-Turkish relations.¹⁵ In other words, EU membership candidacy provided Turkey common ground with Greece. As Prime Minister Erdoğan noted in 2004: "If Turco-Greek rapprochement is possible today, it is because we have a common ground through which mutual perceptions are formed most accurately. That common ground is the EU."¹⁶

“Although the rapprochement process has not managed to solve “high politics” issues between the two countries completely, it has contributed significantly to the maintenance of peace and stability between Turkey and Greece.”

Indeed the EU has been, at least at the beginning, a great supporter of Greek-Turkish rapprochement, funding and promoting many civil society initiatives.¹⁷ As an example, the Civil Society Development Program launched in 2002 provided eight million Euros over a two-year period to promote Greek-Turkish civic dialogue and to strengthen NGOs in Turkey. It is worth noting the results of a 2005 opinion poll in Greece, which revealed that 55 percent of Greeks believe that Turkey would be less likely to be a threat for Greece as an EU member.¹⁸

Over the last years however, the EU has been going through a severe economic crisis that, in combination with its enlargement fatigue and the weakening of its absorption capacity, have prevented it from demonstrating the same enthusiasm and support for Greek-Turkish rapprochement as in its initial stages.¹⁹ Crucially, the EU is unable to provide an immediate prospect for Turkey's accession. Moreover, European public opinion is by and large not supportive of Turkey's accession.²⁰ On the other hand, since 2006, Euro-skepticism has also been increasing in Turkey.

15 George Koukoudakis, "The Ethical Dimension of the Foreign Policy of the EU," *Paper for the EU Foreign Policy*, London School of Economics and King's College London (1 July 2005).

16 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "Why the EU Needs Turkey," *Keynote Lecture at the South East European Studies Program of St. Antony's College*, Oxford University (28 May 2004).

17 See: Grigoria Kalyvioti et al., "The EU Role in the Greek-Turkish Rivalry and Co-operation," Paper Presented at the Seminar: "Learning Conflict Resolution and Producing Peace," *ELIAMEP and IPC*, 2005.

18 The research was conducted by the Greek polling company VPRC and its results were published on 22 October in the Greek newspaper *Kathimerini*.

19 See: Constantinos Arvantipoulos and Nikolaos Tzifakis, "Enlargement Governance and the Union's Integration Capacity," in Constantinos Arvanitopoulos (ed.), *Turkey's Accession to the European Union: An Unusual Candidacy* (Berlin: Springer, 2009), p. 12.

20 "Eurobarometer - Public Opinion in the European Union," *European Commission* (2005, 2006), http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm.

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These developments, combined with the changing priorities of Turkish foreign policy, are considered to be some of the most serious causes of EU’s waning interest in Turkey’s membership.²¹

Policy Proposals and Conclusions

The Greek-Turkish rapprochement has made remarkable achievements in political, economic, and societal terms that, in many respects, constitute the *acquis* of Greek-Turkish reconciliation over the last 13 years. The progress made in “low politics” issues is indeed significant and beneficial for both states. The increase in the involvement of civil society is a promising aspect of rapprochement. In brief, the rapprochement has created its own political and socio-economic capital. Part of this capital can be reinvested for the continuation of the rapprochement effort that has since lost its momentum. To revitalize this process, strong political will, committed leadership, and a conscious civil society on both shores of the Aegean are needed, as well as a re-engaged EU.

Although the rapprochement process has not managed to solve “high politics” issues between the two countries completely, it has contributed significantly to the maintenance of peace and stability between Turkey and Greece. In a way, it has taught both parties how to live with their differences not only peacefully but in a cooperative and mutually beneficial manner. In the opinion of this paper, this is the greatest achievement of this rapprochement procedure.

Concrete efforts should be made for this process to continue. Greece, for example, should try to revitalize interest within the EU regarding Turkey’s accession during the Greek presidency of the EU in the first half of 2014. A supportive gesture such as this might lead to the reduction of Euro-skepticism in Turkey and the reduction of the reservations of the European public as far as Turkey’s European prospect is concerned. In other words, this may be conducive to the elimination of the perceived threat that Turkish EU membership poses to European identity in particular and to the Islamofobia that exists in Western Europe in general. The EU should also continue to provide funding for the Greek-Turkish civil dialogue. Maintaining involvement of civil societies in both countries is crucial to the rapprochement effort.

21 See: Ahmet Davutoğlu, “Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy,” *SETA Foundation*, Washington D.C. (8 December 2009).

Turkey, in turn, should send signals of sympathy and goodwill to the Greek people in their time of devastating financial crisis. The reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary that has been closed since 1971 is an act of goodwill Turkey could take towards Greece specifically and Christian Europe in general.²²

Finally, efforts should be made for the resolution of the Cyprus Problem in a mutually acceptable and viable way that will guarantee the well-being and peaceful coexistence of both Greek and Turkish Cypriots. With the Cyprus issue a main and oft-cited obstacle to Turkey's accession progress, this would further enhance the prospects of Turkey's EU membership.

Rapprochement has been beneficial not only for both Greece and Turkey, but for the EU as a whole. As a result, common logic requires its preservation and continuation.

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²² Ahmet Davutoğlu (2009).



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