

Greek-Turkish relations and the perceptions of their elites

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An interesting study that I recently conducted (completed in mid-December 2016) with funding from my university has revealed much about how [Turkish elites](#) view Turkish Foreign Policy and Greek-Turkish Relations. This study was conducted in the form of a survey with 41 close ended questions which fundamentally looked at three sets of issues: Turkey's position in the world; Greece's foreign policy; and Greek-Turkish relations. It was inspired by an earlier study/survey, whose results were published in November 2014, that I had conducted together with my colleague Kostas Ifantis from Panteion University for the Hellenic Observatory of the London School of Economics, on the [perceptions of Greek elites](#) about Turkey's Foreign Policy and Greek-Turkish Relations. Those surveyed were representative elites from the following categories: business, journalism, diplomacy, the military, politics, and academia.



The focus on elites rather than public opinion reflects the argument that competition among elite groups not only shapes public opinion but helps to formulate policy as well. In terms of foreign policy and foreign policy-making, the perceptions of the elites are ever more relevant given the “high politics”, and thereby, confidential, expert, and sometime secret aspects of foreign policy-making. Elites thus shape to a great degree public opinion when it comes to foreign policy as political, military, and diplomatic elites are actively involved in the policy-making process.

On the other hand, in advanced democracies, public opinion can shape elite behavior and action in foreign policy-making due to the adoption of universal values such as human rights by society writ large. Whether the aforementioned applies to the case of Turkey, and to a greater extent – Greece, is dubious.

In the case of Greece and Turkey, the opinions of elites reflect to a great extent public opinion perceptions about the “other”, given the continued inability to reach some sort of long-term accord on issues that divide the two countries albeit the start of a rapprochement process in 1999. Here are some of the key findings which reflect the mindset of elites in both countries. The first is that there is strong support for the rapprochement process on both sides with 89% of the Turkish elites in favor of it in contrast to 63.5% of their Greek counterparts.

On the other hand, the level of trust towards the “other” is especially low – at some 28% for Turkish elite and 11.4% by Greek elites. This lack of trust obviously affects key aspects of the bilateral relationship. From a Turkish perspective, there seems to be an almost direct correlation between the perceived role and importance of Greece in the European Union and its lack of alternatives and Turkey's need for a greater international role (71.5%) and its distancing from the West (79.1%). While 47.7% of Turkish respondents consider Greece to be an important EU member state, 66.3% think that Greece can influence international politics because it is a member of the EU and NATO while 84% think that Greece has no other alternatives than belonging to the EU. In fact, 50.6% of Turkish elite, considers Greece's EU membership to be a threat for Turkey. This is only reflected in the fact that only 25% think that Greece is steadily supporting Turkey's accession to the EU as opposed to the 51.6% of Greek elites that believe that Greece should continue steadily supporting Turkey's accession to the EU.

Furthermore, both Turkish and Greek elite stressed the overwhelming importance of the Cyprus issue for the resolution of bilateral issues – at 95.9% for Turkish elites and 92.4% for Greek elites. Yet, while 52.3% of Turkish elites perceive Turkey to be a constructive player in the resolution of the Cyprus issue, 72.9% believe that Greece is not constructive.

As a consequence of this lack of trust, 41.9% of Turkish elites and 47% of Greek elites consider Greek-Turkish

relations to be neither good, nor bad while 53.5% of Turkish elites and 47% of their Greek counterparts consider any crises between the two countries within the next five years are improbable or rather improbable.

What does a quick read of the aforementioned results suggest? They encapsulate what I would call a Cold Peace between the two countries, not a rapprochement process which has never been properly formalized beyond high-level bilateral political contacts and a stated desire for bilateral trade and foreign direct investment to grow. They suggest a Cold Peace where there is both an unwillingness or inability to resolve outstanding disputes and move towards the signature of a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation much as France and West Germany did in 1963. This acceptance of the continuance of the status quo has its risks as, for example, the longer relations between the EU and Turkey remained frayed, the more the Greek strategy of supporting Turkey's EU bid becomes less effective and actually complicates bilateral relations. The status quo also reflects the growing disconnect between elites and parts of their societies.

This is particularly evident in the Cyprus context which both sides see as primordial toward the improvement of Greek-Turkish relations (a case of passing the buck, maybe?). In Cyprus, part of the reason that talks have progressed so much over the last few months has to do with a growing and vocal segment of Cypriot civil society (both Greek and Turkish) being dissatisfied with the status quo and their active involvement in the peace process. Whether Athens and Ankara understand this and are able eventually to fundamentally contribute to the peaceful resolution of the Cyprus issue and dare place bilateral relations on a solid foundation that would not be shaken by hearsay, negative discourse, and lack of trust, remains to be seen.

The decision of the Greek Supreme Court to [deny the extradition](#) of 8 military officers that sought refuge in Greece after the 15 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey not only brought about the ire of Turkey with possible negative consequences in bilateral relations; it also had the support of a vocal segment of Greek civil society that took a public stand against the extradition on human rights grounds.

The aforementioned examples suggest that the elites need to understand that without a viable legal and political framework embedding the relations between the two countries, while allowing for their civil societies to have their say, the maintenance of status quo holds far too many risks.

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