

Greek Elites and Greek-Turkish Relations: Towards an Impasse?

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/greeceatlse/2016/01/11/greek-elites-and-greek-turkish-relations/

HO
Editor **By Dimitris Triantaphyllou**

2016-1-11

The ongoing economic crisis in Greece since 2008 has had an impact, primarily negative on the social, political, and economic fabric of the polity writ large. The question is whether it has had an impact on policy making as well. A recent study I conducted with my colleague Kostas Ifantis for the Hellenic Observatory with a generous grant from the National Bank of Greece on the perceptions of Greek Foreign Policy elites perceive and how they view Greece's role in the international arena; Turkey and Turkish foreign policy; and Greek-Turkish relations may provide some answers on the impact on foreign policy making.



The elites (diplomats, high ranking military personnel, journalists, businessmen, politicians, and academics) that responded to our closed-ended questionnaire of some 33 questions provided a complex assessment of their perceptions regarding Turkey and Greek-Turkish relations at this particular point in time. First of all, the research provides, for the first time, hard data that the elites support the post-1999 rapprochement strategy. Some 65.3% of those surveyed agreed with the policy. A second interesting finding has to do with 51.6% elite support for the policy supported by every government since 1999 to support Turkey's efforts to become a member of the European Union. Furthermore, 92.2% of those surveyed believe that the resolution of the Cyprus problem is especially relevant for the improvement of Greek-Turkish relations. Also, the respondents, some 62.2%, did not think that Turkish investments in Greece are a threat to Greek national interests – an issue that has received a lot of attention given the growing interest by Turkish companies to invest in Greece properties.

Yet for all the positive outlook that many of the aforementioned answers provide, the spoiler, not necessarily unexpectedly so, has to do with the question regarding trust – can Greece trust Turkey? – where only 11.4% thought trust was possible. Hence, the perennial distrust of Greece's larger and more dynamic neighbor continues albeit a series of changing characteristics of the relationship.

How to interpret these results given today's reality? Do they provide room for optimism or rather complicate further an already complicated relationship? I would tend to support the thesis of further complications on the horizon. To begin with, the rapprochement process is a misnomer. Yes, there is a process of reconciliation between the two countries but unlike the Franco-German process, it is a political one rather than one that is institutionalized with a set of obligations and initiatives by both sides eventually leading to a treaty of friendship and cooperation as was the case of the 1963 Treaty between France and Germany. As long as both countries do not dare to resolve their outstanding differences, the relationship will continue to be marked by mistrust and could turn sour should relations take a turn for the worse. The non-resolution of fundamental differences with regard to the Aegean continental shelf and the delimitation of its seabed, the airspace, as well as other less significant yet potentially explosive issues could rapidly undo all the work done to date which has led to greater interaction among a greater number of Greeks and Turks. The lack of trust expressed by the Greek elites is a function of the inability to dare move the peace process between the two countries. While the interaction at the civil society level grows, the inability of the political elite of the two countries to bridge the gap in terms of their foreign policies could undo much of the goodwill and work since 1999 as a time when both countries are undergoing phases of exceptionalism coupled with populism in Greece and nationalism in Turkey.

Here the resolution of the Cyprus issue is key as it would entail a fundamental compromise between Cypriots and a hands-off commitment on behalf of the anachronistic notion of the guarantor powers, in particular Greece and, to a greater degree, Turkey. Should the hope and expectations of a growing mass of Cypriots be met and the country

becomes a functional, unitary, and European state sometime in 2016, the audacity of hope returns with a bang in the purview of Greek-Turkish relations. Otherwise, the divide will continue to remain and possibly grow (with the distancing of Turkey's EU ambitions and the refugee crisis to name a couple of ongoing developments), the levels of trust will remain low and threaten to undo the whole process of rapprochement as long as the elites remain uncommitted to breaking the impasse.

Dr Dimitrios Triantaphyllou is Director of the Center for International and European Studies (CIES) and Chair of the Department of International Relations, Kadir Has University, Istanbul