

There is virtually no Greek policy towards Turkey outside the framework of the EU

by Blog Admin

Do Turkey and Greece need the EU to improve their relations? Looking at Athens' support for the 'Europeanisation' of Turkey, [Kyriakos Mousoutzis](#) argues that the Turkey/Greece relationship is no longer a bilateral one. He writes that the 1999 Helsinki decision to recognise Turkey as a candidate country, and the rules that the EU has imposed since, have provided the main framework for relations between the two countries.



Recently, in a rather optimistic [article on this blog](#) James Ker-Lindsay argued that Greco-Turkish relations are likely to improve regardless of developments in EU-Turkey relations. While those who favour the improvement of Greco-Turkish relations might feel tempted to share this optimistic view, there is a striking contrast between the latter and the logic underlying Greek policy towards Turkey during the past fifteen years. In fact, there is virtually no Greek policy towards Turkey outside the framework of EU-Turkey relations. Given the current state of the latter, substantial improvement in relations between Greece and Turkey seems unlikely. Optimistic predictions regarding further progress are based on a common misunderstanding of the beliefs and calculations that resulted in the initial improvement in relations between the two countries in the late 1990s.

The decision by Greece to refrain from blocking Turkey's candidacy for EU membership at the December 1999 European Council summit in Helsinki has indeed been attributed to a belief that 'a European Turkey would be a peaceful and cooperative neighbour'. This change in Turkish policy will be the outcome of what is often referred to as a process of 'Europeanisation' of Turkey. This argument indicates a limited understanding of the logic underlying the shift in Greek policy that Greek Prime Minister Konstantinos Simitis pursued in the second half of the 1990s. The Europeanisation of Turkey as a benefit of the Helsinki decision for Greece was a decidedly secondary consideration. Greek foreign policy makers were aware of the fact that it was not certain at all that this benefit would materialise because it was clear that the pursuit of EU membership and the process of Europeanisation would be contested in Turkey. Furthermore, they understood that the Europeanisation of Turkey would require a considerable period of time. By contrast, the Helsinki decision provided that the European Council would assess progress in the resolution of outstanding disputes by the end of 2004. Finally, Greek foreign policy makers could not be certain that the Europeanisation of Turkey would result in the resolution of Greco-Turkish problems in a manner consistent with Greek preferences, unless the specific provisions that Greece had proposed were incorporated in the Helsinki decision.

If the Europeanisation of Turkey was a secondary consideration, what was the main reason why Greece changed its policy? PM Simitis – and a small group of Greek foreign policy makers who shared his views – believed that the previous policy based on preventing progress in EU-Turkey relations had failed. They believed that Greece should argue that Greco-Turkish problems are not bilateral, but 'European' and that it should allow progress in EU-Turkey relations within a framework of EU rules for Turkey's behaviour towards it. If Greece could secure such a framework, the EU would ensure that its rules were observed. This is the point where the contrast between James Ker-Lindsay's optimism in his [previous article](#) and the logic of Greek policy becomes striking. Hardly anyone in Athens would concede that 'the Aegean is a strictly bilateral issue' and Greece never 'abandoned its longstanding efforts to link improvements in bilateral relations to Turkey's EU accession process.' Greece succeeded in its efforts to establish precisely such a link in Helsinki.

In 2004, the Conservative government did not pursue the implementation of the Helsinki decision in the manner in which its Socialist predecessor had intended and it modified the rules that the EU's framework for its relations with Turkey included. Greek policy, however, remained firmly embedded in that framework.

The Socialists were opposed to these changes and under George Papandreou's leadership (he succeeded Simitis in 2004) they argued the need for a 'new Helsinki (decision)' that would restore the original rules. When they were returned to power in 2009 and before the preoccupation with the economic crisis left little room for a proactive foreign policy, they indicated that they would attempt this during the December 2009 European Council summit, although this did not translate into concrete results. Regardless of disagreements regarding the precise point in time at which Greco-Turkish problems should be resolved, both the Conservatives and the Socialists agree that the successful conclusion of Turkey's accession negotiations should be conditional on the resolution of Greco-Turkish problems.

The 2010 bilateral agreements did not constitute a major innovation and they are not particularly promising either. In the late 1990s, similar attempts at cooperation in so-called 'low politics' issues also resulted in a series of bilateral agreements and even in the early 1980s attempts were made to explore the possibility of cooperation in economic issues, despite the fact that the Greek government had terminated negotiations on territorial issues. None of these attempts, however, made a positive contribution to the resolution of Greco-Turkish problems. The framework of EU rules that Greece initially secured in Helsinki is intended to achieve that. As several EU member-states have grown increasingly sceptical regarding Turkey's accession and Turkey has begun to prioritise reforms on the basis of domestic needs rather than EU conditions, Greek policy is unlikely to be successful. EU member-states will be reluctant to ensure Turkey's compliance with EU rules on its behaviour towards Greece in order to promote Turkish accession if they do not fully support it and Turkey will be equally reluctant to comply if it is not certain that accession is on offer. Stolen artefacts might be returned, but given the current state of EU-Turkey relations, Greco-Turkish relations are unlikely to improve substantially.

Readers may also be interested in Kyriakos Mousmoutzis' latest book chapter on the role of the EU in the shift in Greek policy towards Turkey discussed in this article: Mousmoutzis, K. (2012) 'Being Clear Enough to Be Wrong: Europeanisation Refuted and Defended'. In Exadaktylos, T. and Radaelli, C. M. (eds) [Research Design in European Studies: Establishing Causality in Europeanisation](#) (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

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