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INTRODUCTION

Sustaining engagement? On symmetries and asymmetries in Greek–Turkish relations

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1999 was an important year for change and promise in Greek–Turkish relations when the two states embarked upon a new journey of rapprochement in defiance of their historical burdens of suspicion and antagonism. This entailed reframing the relationship as a positive-sum interdependence in the context of a common European future and engagement in new areas of economy, trade, civil society relations (Anastasakis, Nicolaidis, and Oktem 2009). The time, namely the early 2000s, was one of European optimism, characterized by the EU's central and eastern enlargement, economic growth and prosperity and a trend towards democratic change.

The transformation of bilateral relations marked for some a 'regional success story' (Rumelili 2007) – a new vision many argued – in a geography long characterized by conflict in its Balkan and Middle Eastern theatres. While long-standing security or high political issues in the Aegean and the division of Cyprus remained frozen, there was engagement in many other spheres at the economic, societal and cultural levels. Over the course of the past 15 years, this undoubtedly created a dynamic and multifaceted bilateral relationship and allowed the two countries to look at their common border not exclusively as a dividing line but as a space for cooperation.

Yet how enduring was this new configuration predicated on engagements at the level of 'low politics'? In the view of one scholarly assessment, the Turkish-Greek story entailed a transition from the 'fragile détente' that had punctuated earlier eras to a new threshold of 'sustainable rapprochement' (Onis and Yilmaz 2008). Sustainable rapprochement occurs when high-level engagements foster and, in turn, are galvanized by contacts at the non-governmental level. The value of 'bottom-up' engagements was clearly demonstrated in the 2000s, when initial diplomatic contacts at the foreign ministerial level yielded agreements in diverse areas from trade and tourism to telecommunications and cultural activities. In the same period, civil society contacts flourished between businesses, tourists, students, scholars, journalists and artists among others.

Yet, for these new dynamics to settle into an enduring form of reconciliation – 'durable partnership' – progress on so-called low politics must be accompanied by addressing outstanding security problems, as had happened between France and

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Germany during the post-WWII period. In the case of Turkey and Greece, these concerns are still unsolved or being 'swept under the carpet'. During the past decade and a half, both parties have instead and implicitly agreed to re-conceptualize their bilateral engagement in two ways:

First, they have revisited priorities and given emphasis to new forms of bilateral cooperation or new areas of competition. Instead of focusing, for example, on the monothematic issue of Aegean delimitation, the two sides aimed at the introduction of new areas of cooperation and bilateral agreements. There have also been new areas of disagreement such as over illegal movement of immigrants from Turkey to Greece. In addition, both sides avoided direct confrontation and competition over the Cyprus issue which not only remained unsolved but created new sources of potential antagonisms such as the energy question or the freezing of accession chapters in Turkey's EU talks.

Second, by re-contextualizing and multi-lateralizing their relationship in the European and regional contexts, the two sides adopted new agendas that have a far wider regional and global scope. This created new sources of cooperation as well as friction relevant to Greek and Turkish engagement in the Balkans, the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Part and parcel of this framework was that Greek–Turkish relations were conceived in the context of the EU environment and Turkey's compliance with the EU rules and norms.

So today the question is not whether rapprochement between the two states has reached consolidation and irreversibility, as much as it is a question of what kind of relationship has emerged in the course of the last 15 years of action and inaction in the Greek–Turkish field. What are the new parameters and aspects of the relationship, and what are the emerging conditions that strengthen or weaken Greek–Turkish engagement?

Undoubtedly, a new and uncertain bilateral context is emerging conditioned by three main influences. First among these are domestic developments in the two countries which affect the internal balance of power, ideological discourses and actual policies pursued vis-à-vis each other. Today, both countries are faced with intense internal challenges which originate from different domestic changes. On the Greek side, the economic crisis has unavoidably weakened the country's diplomatic and economic power. Economic debilitation limits the negotiating power Athens wields on difficult bilateral issues and may be giving a comparative advantage to Turkey in the bilateral context. Turkey, by virtue of its economic growth, is now the more confident partner in the Turkish–Greek framework, and has a much more active and influential foreign policy agenda. Yet, despite this asymmetry of power, the two states have avoided any disturbance in the Aegean, and nationalistic tendencies have been kept well under control by both political establishments. On the one hand, Greece, conscious of its economic position, has no appetite for security antagonisms with Turkey. On the other hand, Turkey is consumed by its internal Kurdish problem and the war in Syria, ensuring that its strategic energies are absorbed by its south-eastern flank rather than Aegean sea. Both sides for their own internal purposes – and thinking rationally – have wanted to keep their relationship on the peaceful side. In addition, the latest protests in cities across Turkey have shown that political stability and the limitless authority of the Erdogan government cannot be taken for granted, and that domestic upheavals put Turkey on par with many other protesting societies in Europe and the world. Indeed, the fact that Turkish citizens mobilized across constituencies to protest government policies *despite* the (thriving)

economy reminds us of the many challenges Turkey faces in renegotiating its evolving and contested social contract.

Beyond the domestic level, a factor shaping relations is the transforming and economic crisis-ridden European environment and a weakening EU accession framework for Turkey. Today, there is considerable ambivalence in both Greek and Turkish relations with Brussels as the EU itself struggles to cope with its ongoing Eurozone crisis. Turkey's accession process, a source of uncertainty and bitterness for the last few years, suffered a further blow as a result of the Turkish leadership's response to nationwide protests which was deemed by many observers to be disproportionately heavy-handed. On the other side of the border, Greece has become the weakest link in the Eurozone, and the country is still struggling to save its Eurozone membership and move into the next phase of recovery. In this regard, Greece and Turkey display a parallel weakness vis-à-vis the EU, as they are arguably the most problematic member state and candidate country, respectively. But if both are going through a period of alienation from Europe, the source of attenuated relations is different: for Greece, it is excessive dependency and economic weakness; for Turkey it is growing autonomy and strength. Yet, from a rational perspective both countries will wish to keep their convergence with Europe on track, because it is their main source of economic as well as political leverage in the future, not least vis-à-vis the Balkans and Middle East.

For, at a third level, relations are being reconfigured in the context of the neighbourhood. The Balkans and the Middle East represent a tumultuous landscape as the old order in the Arab world is swept away, while Balkan states pursue uneven pathways to stabilization, normalization and European integration. Here again Greek and Turkish pathways appear to be diverging as the former's foreign policy becomes less salient and the latter's more active. From a provocative perspective, it could be argued that Turkey is benefiting from Greece's present regional weakness by confirming its own presence in the cultural, political and economic arenas in the Western Balkans, Bulgaria and Romania (Anastasakis 2012). Once the most powerful presence in the Balkans, Greece's economic bankruptcy has diminished its regional presence. From serving as an engine and magnet for regional banking, trade and investment, Greece is forced to play a much less active economic role. Turkey, on the other hand has been leveraging its cultural, political and economic clout in a region where it has many historical links. It is also benefiting from what some perceive as EU inaction in countries such as Bosnia. As for the Middle East, under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) Turkey has staked a cultural and foreign policy role which in itself has a bearing on Turkish-Greek relations with regard to matters like energy routes, the eastern Mediterranean balance of power and relations with Israel. Nevertheless, the two countries would seem to have more in common than not, especially when it comes to south-eastern Europe. Both can benefit from a stable and European Balkan region – the highway to Europe for both Greece and Turkey – and a potential market for business and trade. Balkan elites, despite their fragmented past, are also practically minded and want to keep their relations open with two important regional states like Turkey and Greece.

The outstanding question then with regard to Greek-Turkish relations is what could be the impact of the recent transformation in the domestic, regional and European contexts? Could it lead to the resurgence of hostilities over unresolved issues like the Aegean and Cyprus, or to new frictions in the fields of energy or illegal migration? Or is the rapidly changing environment leading to new forms of synergies

and cooperation between the two states? In other words, has the period of calmness and bilateral engagement sustained through so-called ‘low politics’ engagement over the past 15 years proven a decisive factor in sustaining bilateral positivity?

Our special edition hopes to start a debate around these questions as to where we stand in these difficult and unpredictable times. It does so by focusing on key areas of engagement that are not related to the traditional Aegean and Cyprus questions, taking instead a more bottom-up, societal-level approach. In so doing, we seek to understand whether the foundations and connections established in the previous decade will be sufficient to weather what may be rough waters ahead.¹

Our contributors display a rather cautious optimism with regard to domestic, regional and international developments and their impact on Greek–Turkish relations. The collection begins with Nora Fisher Onar and Max Watson’s examination of the impact of the Eurozone crisis on the Balkans, and Greece’s and Turkey’s respective engagement of South-East Europe. They argue that while the credibility of the EU/euro anchor for reform has diminished with the recent crises, it has not lost its appeal as a sort of ‘suspended destiny’. Noting that such an end may best be served, in any case, by a more regionally driven reform, the authors suggest that while Greece is currently preoccupied with its own crisis, Turkey has entered regional dynamics through trade, multi-lateral diplomacy, promotion of civil society engagement and cultural exchanges. However, the authors conclude, Turkey’s ability to thereby contribute to Balkan countries’ – including its own – empowerment and relations with a post-crisis EU depends on deepening its own economic and political reforms and acting itself as an example of change.

Another policy area of outstanding importance is the question of immigration. Konstantinos Tsitselikis, writing from the perspective of a minority and migrant rights activist and lawyer as well as scholar, surveys the situation with reference to the themes of social change, citizenship, human rights and sovereignty. Turning to the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, Tsitselikis points to and criticizes important parallels in the way that the two countries are addressing the issue of illegal immigration especially with regard to detention and extradition. While this often is a point of intensity and disagreement, in reality it is a common challenge that can bring Greece and Turkey closer together as they modernize their practices to address one of the most sensitive matters of the emerging European and regional reality.

Likewise drawing out parallels in historical and contemporary engagement of thorny questions of belonging and identity is the contribution by Kristin Fabbe. Beginning with two historical case studies, she traces how religious categories have been used since the inception of both countries’ nation-building projects to regulate inter-communal relations. She then compares contemporary receptivity to pluralism and liberalism in religious policies, especially in the wake of the Greek and Eurozone economic crises, and in light of Turkey’s transformation under the Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP). She assesses, in particular, the emergence of a xenophobic right-wing politics in Greece epitomized in the Golden Dawn movement on one hand, and of the impact of the AKP’s heightened emphasis on (Sunni) religiosity for Turkey’s religious administrative apparatus (Diyanet), and non-Sunni as well as non-Muslim minorities. She further examines the implications of Turkey’s aspirations to regional leadership at a time when sectarian cleavages increasingly plague the Middle East. Her findings suggest that diligence rather than blind optimism is required if the more open attitudes toward the ‘Other’ that were fostered in the previous era of rapprochement are to endure in an era of tumult.

A similar conclusion is drawn by Dimitrios Gkintidis who offers us a window into the rich realm of bilateral politics at the local level. His piece looks at how the Athens-mandated shift in public discourse on Turkey from the old anti-Turkish nationalism to Greek–Turkish friendship in the 2000s was negotiated by elites in the border region of Evros. He shows that at one level, local political and business leaders appeared to fully internalize the new framework and that this process was clearly incentivized by Athens and the EU. At another level, he reveals, there was an element of ‘double speak’ in which apparent embrace of the language of reconciliation was envisaged as a form of loyalty to traditionally conceived Greek ‘national interests’ as they were understood in the geopolitical context of the 2000s. Thus, Gkintidis argues, for at least some elements in the Greek political elite, rapprochement was less about recognizing the Turkish ‘Other’ than reinventing the national ‘Self’. This could lead, he warns, to the resurfacing of old antagonistic habits if the central Greek state to which local elites ultimately are loyal is captured in the presence of crisis by elements who no longer endorse the story of Greek–Turkish rapprochement.

On balance then, this volume highlights two overarching points. The first is that despite the appearance of power asymmetries and divergent priorities, there are important parallels in areas beyond the high politics realm in the fields of economy, migration, local politics and religion. Second, the contributors all suggest that while the new economic, political and social realities require careful, measured action to prevent the (re)emergence of nationalist hostilities between Greece and Turkey, the resilience to date of the bilateral relationship means we should by no means lose hope for ongoing mutual recognition in times of turbulence. At the end of the day, the costs of a relapse into antagonism over high political yet ultimately resolvable issues – squandering the gains of rapprochement driven by low politics of the past decade – will be as intolerably high for Greece and Turkey as for their partners across and beyond the region.

Note

1. The articles emanate from an ongoing discussion between collaborators on both sides of the Aegean launched at a conference held at Bahcesehir University in Istanbul, Turkey and supported by the Strategic Research Center and South East European Studies at Oxford (SEESOX), St Antony’s College, University of Oxford.

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