



Weekly Briefing

Greece external relations briefing:
The election results in Turkey and the impact in Greek-Turkish
relations
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The election results in Turkey and the impact in Greek-Turkish relations

Summary

The briefing presents the results of the national elections in Greece and Turkey and their potential impact on the relations between the two countries. The re-election of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan underlines the continuation of the Turkish foreign policy agenda towards Greece.

Introduction

Since the 1970's Turkey's systematic policy of disputes and claims in the Aegean Sea, which are against the sovereignty, the sovereign rights and jurisdictions of Greece, put obstacles to the smooth bilateral relations between the two countries. In addition, the increasing Turkish hostile narrative against Greece and the military provocation in the Aegean worsens the relations. In 2022 the channels of dialogues between the two countries were almost nonexistent. However, in 2023, following the devastating earthquakes in Turkey, the "earthquake diplomacy" improved the climate between the two countries. The recent re-election of the Turkish President Erdogan and the most plausible re-election of New Democracy (ND) party in the second round of national elections on the 25th of June, indicates the continuity of the foreign agenda of both countries. Geopolitical dynamics in the region shaped by the war in Ukraine, as well as Turkey's economic difficulties need to be also taken under consideration from Athens. Despite thorny issues remaining both countries need to work towards establishing an honest dialogue and cooperation, ensuring security and stability in the region.

Elections results

This year both Greece and Turkey conducted national elections. Specifically in Greece, legislative elections were held on the 21st of May, which resulted to the victory of the conservative New Democracy (ND) party by 41%. However, ND did not reach the necessary number of seats, which would have provided the parliamentary majority. The formation of a coalition government proved to be impossible and thus the country will proceed to second round

of elections on the 25th of June. In the first round of elections, ND won with 20% difference compared to the second party SYRIZA. Considering that the second elections will be held under a different electoral system, which re-establish the bonus seats, it is expected that ND will win the second elections and reach parliamentary majority to form a single party government.

In Turkey, presidential elections took place almost the same time period. In particular, on the 14th of May President Erdogan led over his opposition rival Kemal Kilicdaroglu, in contrast to some predictions of the opposition winning. Nevertheless, Erdogan did not reach the 50% threshold needed to avoid a second round of elections. Thus, the repeat elections held on the 28th of May resulted to the re-elections of President Erdogan for five additional years.

Greek-Turkish relations

During 2022 the relations between the two countries had significantly deteriorated. Specifically following the historic address of the Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the Joint Session of the US Congress in May 2022, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused Mitsotakis of attempting to block sales of the F-16 fighter jets to Turkey and declared that he will never agree to meet with the Greek PM again (1). In addition, the following months Turkish hostile narrative against Greece increased, as well as the provocations in the Aegean Sea. Thus, the communication channels between the two countries were closed, despite Greece's position to find a common ground of communication with Turkey.

However, a turning point in Greek-Turkish relations was registered, following the catastrophic earthquakes that hit Turkey and Syria in February 2023. Greece immediately assisted Turkey in order to deal with the earthquakes and send humanitarian aid, as well as trained rescuers and doctors to the affected areas. Furthermore, civil society in Greece immediately collected donations to be send to Turkey. The leaders of the two countries resumed communicating. Mitsotakis, assured the Turkish President that Greece will support Turkey with all its resources. The President of the Hellenic Republic Katerina Sakellaropoulou also conveyed her condolence to the Turkish President. In his return President Erdogan thanked Mitsotakis and Sakellaropoulou for Greece's support. It should also be mentioned that the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias traveled to Turkey and met with his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu, marking the first visit of a European minister following the earthquakes (2). The effective "earthquake diplomacy" improved the relations between Greece and Turkey.

Another positive event occurred in March 2023, when Dendias and Cavusoglu met in Brussels on the sidelines of the International Donor's Conference. Following the meeting, the two Ministers announced that Greece and Turkey will mutually support each other for international body bids. Specifically, Turkey will vote and support Greece in its campaign for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council 2023-2026 and Greece will support the candidacy of Turkey for the position of the Secretary-General of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) (3). In addition, during the spring of 2023 numerous meetings between Greek-Turkish ministers occurred. Nevertheless, on the onset of national elections in both countries the question for the future of Greek-Turkish relations remained.

The re-election of Erdogan and the Greek-Turkish relations

It was argued that a possible change of leadership in Turkey could alter the foreign policy of the country and consequently the Greek-Turkish relations. However, following the re-election of President Erdogan, as well as the victory of ND party in the first elections with a high possibility winning the second round, it is expected that not much will change in the approach of the two countries towards the Greek-Turkish relations.

Erdogan a few days before his re-election as President, in his interview to the Greek Newspaper Kathimerini, expressed his will for establishing a new era in Greek-Turkish relations. In particular he stated ““We can put aside hostilities and competitions with Greece, as these have significantly harmed both countries and should not persist. I hope that the elections in Greece and Turkey will mark the beginning of a new era. From Turkey, we send our warm and friendly greetings to Greece” (4). The Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias expressed his optimism concerning the relations between the two countries, but at the same time he expressed his cautiousness against excessive optimism by stating “In the case of Greek-Turkish relations, as well as the Cyprus issue, it is important not to be naive or entertain illusions”. He further reaffirmed the commitment of Greece to cooperate with the leadership chosen by the Turkish people and the will of the country to enhance bilateral relations while remaining prepared for a possibility of tension (5).

However, following his re-election, President Erdogan during his first speech, stated that Turkey will protect its rights and those of its brothers as the “Blue Homeland” dictates. It should be mentioned that the “Blue Homeland” is a revisionist doctrine expressing Ankara's expansionist ambitions in the Aegean, which directly questions the sovereign rights of Greece and Cyprus. In addition, along the same lines, the new Turkish Defence Minister Yasar Guler,

during the ceremony of receiving the Ministry, also stated that he will “ensure peace and security in our country’s territory, as well as in the Blue Homeland and in the homeland of our skies” (6). Hence, despite the positive climate between Greece and Turkey, during the last months, provocative narrative and aspirations against Greece continue to prevail in the agenda of the Turkish foreign policy.

Moreover, the changes of the geopolitical context in the region needs also to be considered. Specifically, Turkey’s ambiguous position towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine has raised concerns in the West and consequently has undermined its role as a reliable NATO ally. On the other hand, Greece continues its excellent cooperation with the US, as a trustworthy NATO ally in the region. This opens a window of opportunity for Greece to enhance its cooperation with the US and advocate its sovereign rights in the Aegean Sea. The above changes of the geopolitical dynamics in the region, the economic problems that Turkey currently faces, as well as the steady transformation of Turkey towards a more conservative and nationalist society can generate unpredictable consequences for the relations between Greece and Turkey. Athens needs to continue forging strong alliances with neighboring countries as well as deepening the bilateral cooperation with US and EU states in order to counteract Turkey’s revisionist aspirations in the Aegean. In parallel, it is important for both countries to continue an honest and productive dialogue.

Conclusion

Unsolved differences with Turkey, which are directly related to the sovereignty of Greece, disturb any efforts for improving the relations of the two countries. The re-election of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan indicates the continuity of Turkey’s foreign policy agenda towards Greece. However, the US and the EU calls for stability in NATO’s Southeastern flank, especially due to the war in Ukraine. During the next five years of its rule, Erdogan will have to balance between NATO’s calls and his country’s national interests, taking into account the Turkish economic struggles, as well. Greece will continue its policy on focusing on the issue of the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and its continental shelf, while demonstrating the willingness to find a common ground of cooperation with Turkey. The will for cooperation along with the positive climate currently prevailing, may open a window of opportunity for the two countries to improve their relations.

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