



Weekly Briefing

**Greece external relations briefing:
Greek-Turkish relations: enhancing the positive climate
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Greek-Turkish relations: enhancing the positive climate

Summary

The briefing presents the most recent developments on the Greek-Turkish relations. Both countries are working towards improving the relations and enhancing cooperation, especially in areas of mutual importance, such as the migration and climate change. A plethora of high-level meetings have been held during the last months to support the Greek and Turkish leaders will to find a common ground of communication and cooperation, as well as prepare the ground for the 5th High Level Cooperation Council held in December, which has been frozen since 2016.

Introduction

Calm in Greek-Turkish affairs was never a given. However, during this year the good climate between the two countries has been reaffirmed. Both sides are showing the will to cooperate and establish good neighbouring relations, even if thorny issues still exist. In 2022 the channels of communication were completely deactivated, in comparison to 2023 when numerous high-level meetings have taken place. The Greek PM and the Turkish President have discussed the way forward in the framework of improving the relations of the two countries. Both leaders have assigned to their Foreign Ministers the task to find ways and fields of cooperation and explore the positive agenda, as well as prepare the upcoming 5th High Level Cooperation Council, to be held in Athens on 7 December. Of course, disputes between the two countries still exist, but improving communication, cooperation and in general the relations between the two countries is important not only for the benefit of its respective people but will contribute to the security and stability of the wider region of Southeast Europe and Eastern Mediterranean, which is much needed nowadays, at times of geopolitical instability.

Background

Although neighbours and NATO allies, the relations between Greece and Türkiye diachronically characterized by tensions and disputes. The last couple of years the Greek-Turkish relations can be characterized by rather negative developments but also with positive

once. Specifically, in 2022 relations between the two countries reached a low point, following the statement of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis “no longer exists” for him and the accusation by the Turkish President that Mitsotakis was trying to block the F-16 fighter jets sale to Türkiye. Following these statements, the Turkish provocations in the Aegean Sea had increased and the channels of communication between the two countries were deactivated (1).

The year 2022 was characterised by the deteriorating relations between the two countries. However, on the 6th of February 2023 a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck southern and central Türkiye and northern Syria. The large earthquake was followed by series of aftershocks. Thousands of people lost their lives and whole cities were transformed to ruins. Upon such a devastating event, the Greek government immediately supplied humanitarian aid to the affected areas. The immediate response of Greece and the visit of the then Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias to the neighbouring country created a positive climate in the public sphere of the two countries. The “earthquake diplomacy” worked as a turning point for the Greek-Turkish relations. Thus, since the damaging earthquakes the channels of dialogue have been activated and the two countries are working towards improving the relations, despite thorny issues still remain unsolved.

The Vilnius meeting

In early July the 2023, the NATO Summit took place in Vilnius, Lithuania. Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had the opportunity to meet and discuss on the way forward in the framework of improving Greek-Turkish relations. Specifically, the two leaders agreed to open a new chapter in the relations of the two countries, which is of a great importance considering the almost four years of continues tensions. Moreover, the two sides agreed to open the channels of communication which will contribute to the normalization of the relations. Mitsotakis and Erdoğan also decided on restarting the High-Level Cooperation Council which has been frozen since 2016, as well as the Confidence Building Measures, the Positive Agenda and the political dialogue. The two Ministers of Foreign Affairs George Gerapetritis and Hakan Fidan will take over the leads of communication between the two sides. Thus, the main message of the meetings between the two leaders was to re-establish good relations starting with small but meaningful steps despite issues remaining (3).

The meeting of the two Ministers in Ankara

On the 5th of September 2023 another important meeting took place between the Greek and Turkish Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Ankara. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss bilateral relations and issues of the wider region, as well as curve the way forward under a spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding. The mission of the two Ministers is first to address the major issues that arise in the Greek-Turkish relations, so that tensions will be reduced; second to guide and monitor the discussion at all levels, such as the political dialogue, the Positive Agenda and the Confidence Building Measures in order to deliver beneficial results; and third to prepare the meeting between the two leaders. Furthermore, both Ministers agreed the roadmap for the upcoming period will include three levels: the political dialogue; the implementations and strengthening of the Confidence Building Measures and talks to promote the positive agenda in sectors such as investment, tourism, climate crisis etc. (4).

It should be mentioned that Gerapetritis and Fidan announced that they both will focus on the preparations of the meeting between the Greek PM and the Turkish President on the 20th of September in the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, as well as the High Council of Cooperation between Greece and Türkiye expected to be held at the end this year. Moreover, the Cyprus issue, Türkiye's European perspective, the migration issue and minorities, as well as the situation in the broader region in the framework of the Russian aggression in Ukraine were also discussed during the meeting. The Ministers concluded their statement by highlighting "the importance of establishing a long-lasting relationship of good neighbor relations for the mutual benefit of our people and long-lasting peace in our broader region" (4).

The NY Mitsotakis-Erdogan meeting

Following the preparations of the ministers of the two countries, as it was scheduled, the Greek Prime Minister and the Turkish President met in New York on the 20th of September in the margins of the 78th United Nation General Assembly. The two leaders met in the presence of the Foreign Ministers of the two countries, Gerapetritis and Fidan. During the meeting Mitsotakis and Erdogan confirmed the roadmap and timeline of contacts between Greece and Türkiye including the meeting in mid-October of the Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs which are responsible for the positive agenda and the political dialogue and the November meeting for the Confidence Building Measures. Most importantly the two leaders agreed that the High Level Cooperation Council will be held on the 7th of December in Thessaloniki. Moreover, the two leaders had the chance to discuss a number of common issues and challenges, such as the

illegal migration and the consequence of climate crisis in the Mediterranean region and agreed to further cooperate in order to tackle the latter common challenges (5).

The deputy ministers' meetings

On the 16th of October the Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Greece and Türkiye, Mr. Konstantinos Fragogiannis and Ambassador Burak Akcapar, respectively met in Athens for the 5th round of discussion on the Joint Action Plan of the Positive Agenda. The Ministers reaffirmed their common goal, which is to provide concrete outcomes on items of the Positive Agenda such as tourism, energy, economy, technology, environment, education, social security, sports etc., for the upcoming 5th High-Level Cooperation Council meeting (6).

Within the political dialogue framework on the 17th of October another high-level meeting took place in Athens, between the Greek Deputy Foreign Minister, Ambassador Alexandra Papadopoulou and the Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister, Burak Akcapar. The Ministers discussed issues of bilateral, regional and international relations. Moreover, both sides agreed to build on the positive atmosphere currently prevailing between the two countries and identify areas of cooperation both at a bilateral and international level. In addition, the two sides expressed their commitment to keep dialogue channels active, aiming to reach a common understanding. Confidence building measures and exploratory talks were also discussed. It should be mentioned that during the ministers also reviewed the preparations for the upcoming High-Level Cooperation Council, which according to the latest announcement of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs will be held in Athens.

Conclusion

It is evident that both countries are looking forward to the High-Level Cooperation Council as a milestone for the Greek-Turkish relations. It is expected that the cooperation agreements will improve further the relations between the two countries and enhance the mutual understanding. Migration is an issue of concern for both countries and it is a possible field of cooperation. The same occurs with the effects of climate change and the increasing natural disasters in the region. From the above it is evident that both countries seem determined and strong enough to overpass existing obstacles in order to improve the climate between the two countries and find fields of cooperation. Thus, following years of stagnation, a slight optimism is present. Of course, in order to solve the existing disputes between the two countries requires

compromises too close to the existing red lines of both countries. Thus, the good climate does not mean that the chronic problems between the two countries will be solved, but rather is a small start towards this end.

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