

**THE CONTRACTION IN
GREECE-TURKEY-EU TRIANGLE:
RAPPROCHEMENTS AT THE EDGES**

by

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March 2004

*** We would like to thank Prof. Ziya Onis, International Relations Department,
KOC University, Istanbul, Turkey, for his contribution with his invaluable
resources.**

Abstract

When the treaty of Rome was signed in 1957 the original EEC countries were only six (West Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands and Luxemburg). In formal terms, Turkey, together with Greece, was one of the first countries to develop relations with the emerging European Community (EC) in the early 1960s, signing an associate agreement in 1963 ¹.

In retrospect, the position of Greece and Turkey regarding the rapprochement to the European Community in the early 1960s represents remarkable similarities. However, the period starting from the mid 1960s until the end of 20th century was generally not successful in terms of Turkey's relations with both EU and Greece, in contrast, Greece gained the EU-membership in 1981. The followed strategy in foreign affairs eroded by Turkey's internal conflicts and its long-standing bilateral disputes with Greece not only alienated Turkey from EU and its member, Greece, for 40 years but also slowed down its economical improvements and transformation through its democratization.

On the other hand, after the Helsinki Summit of December 1999, by the combination of the EU incentives, transforming Turkish identity through implementing structural reforms on the smooth way of accession to EU-membership, and the recent changes in Greek strategy, the new era started for Turkey in terms of rapprochement with both ends of the triangle; the EU and Greece.

The Turkish-Greek Rapprochement

The year of 1999 was a remarkable year in terms of steady improvement in Turkey's relations with both Greece and European Union; on the contrary, a tragic year in terms of destructive earthquakes occurred first in Turkey and next in Greece.

The traditional Greek-Turkish adversity, as is typically the case in most long standing conflicts, embodies an important psychological dimension ². The striking rapprochement of Greece and Turkey had its roots to two tragic earthquakes occurred in both countries just one after the other in the second half of 1999. The mutual dispatch of emergency teams and the adequate promotion by the TV channels and the mass media, generally, altered the public opinion in both sides of Aegean that the opposite side is not the "King of Devil". These two major events have prepared an important psychological counter-shock in both sides. Whilst the earthquake occurred in 1999, the roots of rapprochement were already evident in the forced resignation of the hardliner Theodoros Pangalos, from his position as the Foreign Secretary and his replacement by the moderate George Papandreou. This event clearly signaled the beginning of self-questioning and self-criticism within PASOK and the Government of Costas Simitis following the Abdullah Ocalan affair in early 1999 ³.

This in turn, has precipitated a movement from below, resulting in a self-questioning and self-criticism in both societies, helping to pull the two societies together and to undermine psychological bases of conflict in the process ⁴. Thus, the

recent Greek-Turkish rapprochement has an important romantic or idealistic dimension based on mutual trust and co-operation, originating from civil initiatives in both countries and signaling the path through which co-operation could be built in the future ⁵. Moreover, the architects of this rapprochement, the two Foreign Ministers of that time, G. A. Papandreou (son of the prime minister of 1980s A.G. Papandreou, and grandson of the prime minister of 1960s, Georgios Papandreou) and Ismail Cem gambled their political future and image to the risky project where both would have been either prominent historical legends or ruined their political careers.

The second striking effect in terms of improving the rapprochement was the European Council decision at the Helsinki Summit of December 1999 to categorize Turkey as a candidate country for full-membership. For the first time for many years, there exists considerable optimism concerning the future of the Greece-Turkey-EU triangle ⁶. This optimism was reflected to the later Greek support for Turkey during the Copenhagen Summit of December 2002 and push for an early conditional date for Turkey to initiate accession negotiations for full-membership.

After the earthquakes and the policy of approximation, Greece altered the diplomatic strategy that has been followed until this period towards Turkey. Greece, more specifically, abandoned the substantive and rigid veto that blocked any positive development of EU for Turkey and decided to support the candidacy of the neighbor country in order to achieve “greater region stability”. The above veto was always presenting as a huge victory of Greek diplomacy from the Greek media to the public and, in Turkey, Greece was always the target and the cause of non-acceptance in the grounds of the EU. Characteristic is the declaration of Greek prime minister C. Simitis “Turkey has to be accepted in the EU as it has reached to Vienna in the past” (Interview at the French Newspaper, Le Monde) as an answer to the declaration of the

former President of French democracy and president of the Committee for the Constitution of Europe, Giscard D'Estaing that "Turkey is the end of Europe".

Behind this diplomatic approximation strategy, the economic factors and the movement of "popular capitalists" created a very strong backbone. While C. Simitis's realistic policy, which was setting the economic growth as his primary target in order to reach the upper EU living standards was forming the upper vertebrae, the boom of Athens Stock Exchange in the late 1990s that brought a "popular capitalism" in Greece with more than 1,3 million active codes along with an unprecedented stance of economic thinking was forming the rest vertebrae of the backbone. The mass of the Greek population that joined this wave of "popular capitalism" and "EU convergence" was creating a massive pressure to the Greek diplomacy for the economic growth, as well as the stability not only in Greece but also in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean region.

On the other side, by the mix of conditions and incentives created in Helsinki summit, during the course of 2000-2002 era, there emerged a strong "pro-EU coalition" led by powerful civil society organizations such as TUSIAD, the representative of big business in Turkey. The pro-EU coalition formed substantial pressure on Turkish diplomacy not only for undertaking the kind of economical and political reforms needed to accomplish a steady progress towards EU membership but also for solving bilateral long-standing disputes with Greece, which are the prerequisites for the EU membership. Furthermore, the leadership of the "Justice and Development Party" (AKP) led by R.T. Erdogan, that emerged as the winner of the general elections of November 2002 established itself as the key elements of the pro-EU coalition perhaps more than any other political party in Turkey. In spite of its

Islamic roots, AKP raised the tension on the “rapprochement strategy” to the EU and Greece⁷.

Initially, leaving aside the prickly problems, such as the Cyprus dispute and the Aegean conflict, two states at first started to build socially mutual relationships of meeting each other rather than upper level strong political approximation. Such as:

1. Emerging of several mutual-investments: National Bank of Greece, establishment of Anatolian Fund - venture capital of 100 million USD with Turkish Garanti Securities; Cardico, dried fruit, takeover of Kardalco in Kerasounta; Silver and Baryte Ore Mining Co., takeover of 2 mines for elaboration of baryte; Medical Center of Athens, establishment of hospital unit in Turkey, etc.
2. The establishment of the Greek-Turkish Chamber of Commerce: In order to promote and facilitate the trading activities between two countries Greek-Turkish Chamber of Commerce was established on the 19th of February, 2001.
3. The rapprochement of societies in addition to both states: Several individuals started visiting to the other side of Aegean for holidays. For Greeks, Istanbul was amongst the most 3 most popular destinations for the Christmas Holidays of 2003 (Hellenic Organization of Tourism, Istanbul).
4. Crossing over the borders: Apart from the economical relations, the athletes of both countries have passed borders officially for the first time; Turkish basketball player, Ibrahim Kutluay (played in AEK and Panathinaikos in Greece); Greek basketball player, Efthimis Rentzias (played in Ulker in Turkey); Turkish football player, Erol Bulut (played in Panionios in Greece). Because of the fact that these sports clubs has

considerable amount of fans in both countries, these transfers had profound impacts on two nations' rapprochement and changing the people's point of view from both sides.

It became evidently clear that after the Summit, the change in Greek attitudes towards Turkey's EU membership was not merely strategic or tactical, but also reflected the inner transformation of the Greek society itself⁸.

Furthermore, under this rapprochement, as an important external dimension, the growing pressure on the part of both United States and the European Union should not be neglected.

The EU can play as a catalyst for change and reform in candidate countries. Potential European Union membership creates both conditions and incentives, constituting a powerful engine of democratization and economic transformation in candidate countries in the process. Democratization and the political stability was one of the main concerns of the EU for its primer expansions during the 1980s. Thus, the EU has clearly contributed to the democratization process of Greece over time as well as to the democratization process of Turkey more recently⁹.

The EU, especially recently, has been the heart of the Greek-Turkish relations. The EU prepared the conditions and stimulates the transformation in both Turkish society and Turkish government through implementing structural reforms for fulfilling Copenhagen Criteria and improving Greek-Turkish relations. These conditions are providing Turkey the prospect of full-membership and specifying the resolutions of bilateral disputes with Greece as one of the pre-conditions in the context at its Helsinki Summit in 1999. On the one hand, making an incorporation of the Republic of Cyprus into the EU without finding a mutually compromised final solution of the Cyprus dispute in the first place, the EU has clearly given Southern

Cyprus an upper hand power for the negotiations with the Northern Cyprus which could affect the resolution path and Turkey on the way of its EU membership ¹⁰. Yet, in Copenhagen Summit, a more favorable date would certainly have created mix of incentives and increased the momentum to implement EU-related reforms and to resolve the Cyprus dispute. A distant date of December 2004 has created a certain disappointment among the members of “pro-EU coalition” in Turkey that support the EU-Turkey rapprochement, while at the same time strengthened the power of “anti-EU coalition” that is rather apprehensive about the territorial implications of the Annan Plan ¹¹.

Indeed, there has been certain improvement in Greek-Turkish relations preceding the Helsinki Summit. However, this recent rapprochement has not yet resulted in major progress with respect to the grand disputes involving the two countries and the Cyprus dispute occupies a very special role in the context ¹². Bilateral conflict with the EU member constitutes a natural barrier to Turkey’s full membership to the EU. The complex and the politically costly resolution of Cyprus dispute will enable Turkey and Greece to weaken their attachment to the historical problems and allow all involved parties to focus on their other vital interests. From Turkey’s point, the resolution of Cyprus dispute means EU-membership, democratization, substantial reforms and structural transformation in the economy as well as focusing its complex problems in its eastern borders with Syria, Iran and Iraq especially Kurdish problem arises at the Iraq border after the Iraq War in 2003. From the Greece’s point, the resolution means the credibility in the political arena, stability in EU Community, strengthening the peace in Eastern Mediterranean as well as in the Aegean Sea and creating long-run security, which enables Greece to focus its main goals of economic growth and real convergence to the average EU standard of living.

On the other side, from the EU point, such rapprochement would increase its credibility and make easier the stabilizing role of the EU and NATO in strategic areas such as, Balkans, Eastern Mediterranean and the North Africa ¹³.

For the resolution of Cyprus dispute, not only the main parties who are directly involved in but also external powers who are facilitating the resolution should take up seriously “win-win” approach, instead of having tactical successes which may direct all parties to “lose-lose” outcome rather than any kind of “win-lose” expectations.

In the new era, started with the Copenhagen Summit and followed by the transformation in Turkey through implementing EU-related reforms and improving its international relations, Europe has to force itself to think seriously about what Turkish membership entails ¹⁴. Ambiguous signals provided by the EU and the vision of full membership, as a long-term possibility tends to strengthen the position of the powerful anti-EU coalition and to slow down the momentum of resolution for Cyprus dispute. Whilst taking a decision for Turkish membership, under its expansion strategy as a community with 25 or 30 members, the EU should consider seriously that, if the EU isolates Turkey that fulfils Copenhagen criteria and categorizes as a “major outsider” rather than a “natural insider”, then reaching to a conclusion as “the EU’s discrimination to Turkey” is not misleading. However, it could have been concluded as “The EU’s Privilege for Turkey” if the EU would have given the membership to Turkey without fulfilling its Copenhagen Criteria when having 9-12 members at the very beginning.

CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the rapprochement to the European Community, Greece and Turkey represent remarkable similarities in the early 1960s, however, after the mid of 1960s, Greece and Turkey under the influence of external players, especially the United States and the EC, followed a completely diverse path.

By the help of two tragic earthquakes taken place in Turkey and Greece just one after the other in 1999, Greece and Turkey changed their views to each other by implementing “mutual convergence strategy”. However, this recent rapprochement has not yet resulted in major progress with respect to the grand disputes, such as, Cyprus dispute and Aegean conflict.

Furthermore, having in one side C. Karamanlis, the leader of New Democracy Party or G. Papandreou, the new leader of PASOK and one of the key starters of Turkey-Greece rapprochement and having on the other side, R.T. Erdogan, the leader of AKP government as the key member of pro-EU coalition in spite of its Islamic roots, accompanied with their complete commitment in their “rapprochement strategies”, a new era starts not only for Greece and Turkey but also the EU and the Cyprus.

As a consequence, in Turkey-EU-Greece triangle, incomplete commitment of each member seems to be loosening their inter-relations, slowing down the resolution of grand disputes and the process of transformation of Turkey on the way of the EU-membership. The EU’s potential rejection for Turkey’s membership, where one of the main reasons may be the failure of the Constitution due to the recent expansions, would be the worst outcome for the future relations of the members in this triangle.

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* Some comments on the resources belong to Prof. Ziya Onis.

¹ The History of Turkey-EU relations has been extensively investigated. See among others, Heinz Kramer, *A changing Turkey: The Challenge of Europe and the United States* (Washington, DC: Brooking Institution Press, 2000); William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy, 1774-2000* (London; Poland, or: Frank Cass, 2000).

² For a penetrating analysis of the deep psychological roots of the Greek-Turkish conflict or adversity, Volkan and Itzkowitz (1994).

³ On the Consequences of the Ocalan affairs and its delineation on the starting point of improvement in recent Greek-Turkish relations, see Ayman (2000).

⁴ For an excellent discussion of the psychological process and self-criticism in both societies following the earthquake in Turkey and the subsequent course of Greek-Turkish rapprochement, see Ayman (2000). Heraclides (2002) also provides a valuable account underlying the détente period between Turkey and Greece before and after Helsinki Summit whilst drawing attention to some of the hurdles that need to be overcome in the relations between the two countries.

⁵ Greek-Turkish Relations and The Role of The EU: Perpetuator of Conflict or Contribution to Peace?, Ziya Onis, (2002).

⁶ Greek-Turkish Relations and The Role of The EU: Perpetuator of Conflict or Contribution to Peace?, Ziya Onis, (2002).

⁷ Erdogan's statement is available on NTVMSNBC,
<http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/news/186173.asp>

⁸ Greek-Turkish Relations and The Role of The EU: Perpetuator of Conflict or Contribution to Peace?, Ziya Onis, (2002).

⁹ Domestic Politics, International Norms and Challenges to the State: Turkey-EU Relations in the Post-Helsinki Era, Ziya Onis (2003).

¹⁰ For valuable discussions concerning the problems, which would be posed for the future of the Greek-Turkish relations through premature incorporation of the Republic of Cyprus into the EU without an adequate resolution of the Cyprus dispute in the first place, see Kramer (1997), Dodd (1999) and Nugent (2000).

¹¹ Greek-Turkish Relations and The Role of The EU: Perpetuator of Conflict or Contribution to Peace?, Ziya Onis, (2002).

¹² Domestic Politics, International Norms and Challenges to the State: Turkey-EU Relations in the Post-Helsinki Era, Ziya Onis (2003).

¹³ T. Kouloumbis, Prof. International Relations in Athens University and General Director of the Greek Institute for European and Foreign Policy (2001).

¹⁴ An Awkward Partnership: Turkey's Relations with the EU in Comparative Historical Perspective, Ziya Onis (2000).

¹⁵ Dis politika ne devlet ne de Allah emridir, (Foreign Politics is the order of neither Government nor the God), 23/01/2004, M. Ali Birand, Milliyet Newspaper.