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Eastern Mediterranean and Limits of Disaster Diplomacy in Greek-Turkish Relations

Doğu Akdeniz ve Türk Yunan İlişkilerinde Afet Diplomasinin Sınırlılıkları

Zuhal Mert Uzuner¹  

¹ Marmara University, Faculty of Political Science, Department of Political Science and International Relations, İstanbul, Türkiye



Abstract

Disaster diplomacy has emerged as a critical motivator for governments seeking to establish a positive agenda in the aftermath of crises. It compels us to ask how political preferences can shift after such disasters. As a case study, Greek-Turkish relations in the Eastern Mediterranean are evaluated in this study to understand the probable impacts of disaster diplomacy. After a year of high tension in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Greek and Turkish navies came to the edge of a hot conflict. On the 6th of February, 2023 an earthquake in south-eastern Türkiye created a humanitarian tragedy, and Greece's solidarity with the Turkish people after the earthquakes, before any other disagreements in the Eastern Mediterranean, raised a question about the probability of another rapprochement between Greece and Türkiye as it happened after the 1999 earthquakes. This study aims to answer the following question: What are disaster diplomacy's limits and prospects for overcoming expanding and multi-layered problems in the Eastern Mediterranean? The influence of leaders and the media on shaping public opinion and its relationship with changes in foreign policy priorities were examined in two separate cases from 1999 and 2023.

Öz

Afet diplomasisi, krizlerin ardından olumlu bir gündem oluşturmaya çalışan hükümetler için önemli bir manevra alanı sunmakta ve ilişkileri daha olumlu bir yola sokmak için fırsatlar sunmaktadır. Öte yandan, siyasi tercihlerin nasıl ve ne ölçüde değişebileceğini sorgulamamız için de pek çok sebep bulunmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, Doğu Akdeniz'deki Türk-Yunan ilişkilerine afet diplomasisinin olası etkileri ele alınmaktadır. Doğu Akdeniz'de 2019 sonrası giderek yükselen gerilimlerle dolu bir süreç yaşanmış ve Yunan ve Türk donanmaları sıcak bir çatışmanın eşiğine gelmişken, 6 Şubat 2023'te Türkiye'de meydana gelen büyük depremler sonrası oluşan insani trajedi sonrası Türk-Yunan ilişkilerinde söylem dönüşümü olmuştur. Bu süreçte Yunanistan'ın Türk halkıyla dayanışması, çok daha önce de gerçekleşen ve yine çatışmalı bir sürecin sonunda 1999 depremleri ardından yaşanan süreci akıllara getirdi. Son yaşanan depremler sonrası daha önce olduğu gibi Yunanistan ve Türkiye arasında bir yakınlaşma sürecinin ne ölçüde gerçekçi olduğu önemli bir soru olarak gündeme geldi. Bu çalışma, Doğu Akdeniz'deki genişleyen ve çok katmanlı bir hâl alan sorunların üstesinden gelmek için afet diplomasisinin sınırlarını sorgulamayı ve beklentilerin özelliklerini ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. Liderlerin ve medyanın kamuoyunun şekillenmesindeki etkisi ve dış politika önceliklerindeki değişimlerle ilişkisi, 1999 ve 2023 yıllarında iki ayrı vaka örneği üzerinden incelenmiştir.

Keywords

Disaster Diplomacy • Seismic Diplomacy • Greek-Turkish Relations • Eastern Mediterranean • Media

Anahtar Kelimeler

Afet Diplomasisi • Sismik Diplomasisi • Türk Yunan İlişkileri • Doğu Akdeniz • Medya



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✉ Corresponding author | Sorumlu Yazar: Zuhal Mert Uzuner zmert@marmara.edu.tr



Introduction

After the 1999 earthquakes in Izmit and Athens, Türkiye and Greece had a rapprochement period called seismic diplomacy. The tragic impacts of the two disasters in both countries created an outburst of empathy between the people of the two countries, adjusting the patterns of the bilateral relations. Indeed, the process created a positive atmosphere for cooperation and dialog. However, arguing a success story about overcoming the main differences and disagreements is difficult after decades-long exploratory talks and efforts to solve significant disputes. After rising tension in the Eastern Mediterranean in the 2010s, Türkiye faced another natural disaster, and more than 50,000 people died in a vast area of the country in 2023. Humanitarian relief played a vital role, and Greece's support reminded us of the days of 1999. As in the 1999 earthquakes of Izmit and Athens, the 6 February 2023 earthquakes in the southeast of Türkiye and the head-on collision of trains in Tempi, Greece, on 28 February 2023 came after a trend of rising tension in bilateral relations. The death of many people in a very tragic way raised empathy between the two countries, and that helped to alleviate tensions and foster a better relationship. In this frame, the disaster diplomacy concept is frequently referred to as an essential motivation of governments to create a positive agenda. It is legitimate to ask how political preferences may be modified after the disasters. This study argues that disasters alone cannot create a positive agenda, and political resolutions require more than emotional empathy. Therefore, the first concept of disaster diplomacy is defined. Then, the role of disaster diplomacy in Greek-Turkish relations in different periods is compared with the countries' international, regional and domestic priorities.

1. Disaster Diplomacy in Theory

Advocates of disaster diplomacy describe humanitarian assistance in response to large-scale disasters as an essential game changer in international relations for facilitating cooperation and dialog. The mass destruction of cities and the loss of lives after the earthquakes created emotional empathy, with seismic or disaster diplomacy. However, as Kelman says, no proof exists to argue that disasters greatly ease the existing tension in international relations.¹ As a part of non-traditional diplomatic conduct, disaster diplomacy is overstated to overcome the barriers created by the political, diplomatic, and bureaucratic mechanisms by bringing an alternative channel of conduct.

Shared threats encourage cooperation and foster a sense of unity, allowing people to empathize and understand each other like never before. This happened in Greek-Turkish relations many times, as in the interwar years against the common fascist threat of Italy. Today, it is inevitable that the threats are not only related to interstate relations but also to the daily lives of individuals. Thus, natural disasters and the subsequent efforts for humanitarian relief promote the understanding of "us" as human beings facing tragedies with families and loved ones, especially today in the age of communication. Indeed, visual materials present the tragedies of the people infected by natural disasters, creating secondary traumas for those watching from the media. Increased levels of sympathy may be a result of the media broadcasts. However, contemporary national governments have a manipulative capacity over the media to influence public opinion.

The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) defines 'disaster' as "serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts" (UNDRR Terminology). Humanitarian efforts or humanitarian diplomacy

¹ Ilan Kelman, *Disaster Diplomacy: How Disasters Affect Peace and Conflict* (NY: Routledge, 2012), 114.

use diplomacy to manage or respond to hazards and vulnerabilities. Keller asks a critical question here: could disasters achieve or cause diplomacy? What is meant by disaster diplomacy is related to this question. Is it possible to argue that triggering cooperation or more joint actions is the same as causing diplomacy? People may use post-disaster situations to rationalise their arguments and push the country's political agenda forward. Therefore, the potential of disaster-related activities to catalyze a rapprochement is related to the conditions supporting the evolution toward a positive atmosphere.²

Many academic studies discuss the roles of disasters in political processes. Kelman and Koukis investigated disaster diplomacy, its meaning, and its implementation. They underline that there is no evidence that disaster diplomacy significantly impacts conflict resolution.³ While disaster-related activities may briefly affect peace processes, long-term influences fade due to leadership changes, ongoing political enmities, or the prioritization of historical grievances. Despite several scientific activities in disaster diplomacy, their purposes and targets are also problematic.⁴

Disasters are considered to be connected with decreasing tensions because of empathy and emotional processes. Therefore, the limitations of disaster diplomacy can be explained by referring to the foreign policy-making literature. Foreign policy as a product of decision-making mechanisms shall be evaluated together with mental processes. Assumptions and values are found deep in decision-makers' minds and are the first step of the thought process. These are the existing and shared acceptances in society and among individuals that constitute the society, and they are generally formed and reinforced through historical events engraved in the society's memory, widespread education, and, more recently, the press and broadcasting/media.

Change in foreign policy can be seen only with the change in these key elements. A change in values, as the concrete forms of assumptions, can create the most profound and most permanent effect on the outcome that may occur at the end of this thought process. Because this effect will change the entire thought structure, it can cause a meaningful and important leap. So, what could trigger a change in values? This change can occur in many ways. It can occur because of an ongoing evolutionary transformation or a sudden and significant shock.⁵ In this framework, it is understandable that feelings of empathy may be weak in creating such an impact to transform the ideational background.

Disaster diplomacy relies heavily on the strong will of political leaders. In this context, diplomacy can be viewed as a relationship between governments and professional diplomats. Leaders play a crucial role, which is closely tied to leader diplomacy due to the significant influence of personal relationships and effective communication.

Disaster diplomacy can vary depending on the involved actors. For instance, science diplomacy can play a significant role in disaster prevention, management, or risk reduction related to a common threat, with scientists serving as key participants. Additionally, disaster diplomacy may involve the initiatives of like-minded NGOs. The contributions of civil society and public participation in collaborative efforts to address hazards should also be acknowledged.

One of the most important examples of disaster diplomacy, which may be considered seismic diplomacy in 1999, came from the Greek and Turkish leaders' role in catalyzing diplomatic progress by surprise. They

²Streich and Mislan, "What follows the storm? Research on the Effects of Disasters on Conflict and Cooperation", *Global Change, Peace and Security* 26 / 1 (2014): 85.

³I. Kelman and T. Koukis, "Introduction", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 14 / 1 (2007): 214.

⁴Ilan Kelman, "Governmental Duty of Care in Disaster Related Science Diplomacy" *DPM*, 26 / 4 (2017): 419.

⁵Zuhal Mert Uzuner, "Dış Politikada Değişim Tartışmaları", in *Mekan Kimlik, Güç ve Dış Politika*, Ed. by Güliden Ayman, (İstanbul: Yalın Yay., 2012), 371.

did not go public so early and attracted the media's interest with their positive feelings about changing the political climate to overcome the national hardliners' opposition.⁶

2. The Role of Disasters in Greek-Turkish Relations in Contemporary History

Greece and Türkiye faced several natural or artificial disasters in the 20th century; during each one, they sent relief to each other. During the Second World War, despite the German threat, Türkiye tried to support Greek society in fighting against starvation. Later, they became NATO allies and continued cooperating until tensions rose in Cyprus. The horror in Cyprus targeting Turkish Cypriots and what happened to the minorities in Greece and Türkiye led them to become a source of threat against each other.

The end of the Cold War did not help resolve bilateral disagreements. The 1990s were difficult for Greek-Turkish relations, continuing the difficulties of the earlier decades. Greece's view of European integration as a balancing tool for US hegemony in the early 1990s led to the instrumentalisation of the EU in Greek foreign policy. The establishment of the EU in 1993 with the Maastricht Treaty, Europe becoming an important power center, and especially the transition to a common currency and the increase in the share of EU companies in global capital markets, increased the impression that the US would not have economic hegemony.⁷ The 1993 Maastricht Treaty aimed to harmonise national foreign policies and advance a unified European foreign policy. These foreign policies, called "new" or "changed," were foreign policies that expressed adaptation to the new situation because they were still taking their primary references from the national level. In this context, Athens aimed to persuade the EU to take a favorable position on the issues of Cyprus and the Aegean Sea toward Ankara.⁸

Greece and Türkiye had severe disagreements in the 1990s in search of a new role and foreign policy. In this process, PASOK, under Andreas Papandreou's leadership, played a critical role. The Greece-Southern Cyprus Common Defense Doctrine was signed in 1993 due to the continuous policies of PASOK since 1974. In the following years, fighter jet accidents and the 1995 Turkish Grand National Assembly's decision of *casus belli* that considered the extension of Greece's territorial waters to 12 miles as the reason for war, and in the 1996 Kardak crisis, Türkiye and Greece came to the edge of war. In 1997, the Greek Cypriot leadership decided to buy the S-300 missiles from Russia, and that was another diplomatic crisis of the 1990s. The continuous veto of Greece of Türkiye's candidacy to the EU was another bilateral problem. In 1997, the adverse decision of the Luxembourg Summit about the candidacy of Türkiye for EU full membership, with the Greek veto, had an impact. Between 1997 and 1999, Türkiye had a tense relationship with the TRNC (Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus), and they signed several treaties. In the following year, 1998, the Ocalan crisis damaged bilateral relations. PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan has been captured in the Greek Embassy in Kenya, and the Turkish leadership considers that a clear support to terrorism. Turkish President Süleyman Demirel argued that Greece should be listed among the countries that support and abet terrorism.⁹

In this process, the Greek Prime Minister (PM) Kostas Simitis and the PASOK government had a complicated response until the Ocalan crisis because of the nationalist flank of the party. These nationalist flanks were keen to use every means for national interests, which could harm national interests more than any rival actor. However, the operation against the Greek Consulate in Kenya against Ocalan created a complex

⁶James Ker-Lindsay, "Greek-Turkish rapprochement: the impact of 'disaster diplomacy'?", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 14 / 1 (2000): 217.

⁷Yonca Özer, "Tek Kutuplu Dünyada Çok Kutuplu Düzen Arayışları: Kutuplardan Biri Olma Yolunda Avrupa Birliği", in *Tek Kutuplu Dünyada Yaşamak – Gerçekler Yanılgılar ve Beklentiler*, Ed. by Yonca Özer (İstanbul: SODEV, 2006), 74-75.

⁸Güliden Ayman, *Neo-Realist Bir Perspektiften Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Yunan Dış Politikası* (Ankara: SAEMK, 2001), 52.

⁹Fuat Aksu, "Abdullah Öcalan ve PKK Bunalımı", accessed on 17 December 2017. <https://turkishgreek.org/index.php/ikili-iliskiler/uyusmazliklar/diger-yusmazliklar/item/40-1998-abdullah-oecalan-ve-pkk-bunal-m>



international problem for the Greek government¹⁰ because even the PM was not informed about it. To fix the destroyed international reputation of Greece as a supporter of terrorists against its ally, Simitis had a new strategy with progressive figures such as George Papandreou.

He was the leading politician in Greek politics, supporting the modernization movement and promoting the European way of diplomatic conduct. He supported the idea that EUization is the best way of solving Greece's problems, from economic to foreign policy, and he strongly supported the EUization of Cyprus's problem. Under the atmosphere of failure of hardliner policies with the Ocalan crisis, he had the opportunity to apply his modernizing strategy for Greek foreign policy. The 19 August earthquake happened in this atmosphere. Seismic diplomacy under the leadership of foreign ministers Papandreou and İsmail Cem, governments tried to gain support from public opinion for progress in the Greek-Turkish disputes. Humanitarian relief in Türkiye after the 7th of September earthquake in Athens promoted this positive atmosphere and support from public opinion. On the other hand, many criticisms were derived from previous nationalist discourses. It is possible to see them in the cartoons drawn in those days in Greek newspapers.

Image 1 presents a cartoon example from the left-wing *Ta Nea* newspaper, illustrating the confusion in Greek people's minds between empathy and hesitations derived from political thoughts. Obviously, there is a high level of empathy between people, but there are reservations about the Turkish government. In the second image, another *Ta Nea* cartoon highlights concern, particularly about the military's role in Türkiye. It stems from the military threat, *casus belli*, regarding extending territorial waters to 12 miles. Another hesitation was observed in the third image from *Ta Nea* regarding one-sided sacrifices, claimed that the Greek approach might be viewed as naïve.

This critical approach was mainly related to continuous political discussions. On the same day, Türkiye received candidacy status with Greece's support in the 1999 Helsinki Summit. The Simitis government faced much opposition from Greek politics regarding changing Greece's policies regarding Türkiye's EU membership. It can be argued that the policy was connected to the Prime Minister's modernizing approach. The Helsinki process argued that Türkiye's EU integration could address issues in bilateral relations. However, hardliners criticized this view, claiming it amounted to a concession made to Türkiye. Some Greek politicians partially supported the Helsinki process as a continuation of the EUization of the Cyprus problem by making Cyprus a member state. This process started in 1990 and has been the backbone of the Greek policies uninterruptedly until the membership process was completed.

On the same days, the Turkish media positively presented the events. In images four and five, appreciation of the Turkish rescue team AKUT's support to rescue people from the rubble by the Greek people is given in short columns, kept in the archives of the AKUT website. With a more romantic perspective, there were many hesitations about the intentions of the Greek state. According to Güliden Ayman, rapprochement resulted from new strategic preferences in flesh and blood after the Ocalan crisis.¹¹ In other words, as Eric Siegle argues, skeptics perceive the rapprochement process as "the redefinition of long-term foreign policy priorities".¹²

Greek hard-liners' opposition to that policy was also closely related to the era's international developments. The Kosovo war and Turkish soldiers sent to Kosovo became a big topic of discussion in Greece. There were demonstrations to protest any probability of usage of Greek lands to transfer Turkish soldiers and against NATO bombardment against Serbian forces in Kosovo, as it happened in Crete on the 29th of

¹⁰Philip Robins, *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy Since the Cold War* (London: Hurst & Company, 2003), 116.

¹¹Faruk Sönmezoğlu & Güliden Ayman, "The Roots of Conflict and the Dynamics of Change in Turkish-Greek Relations", in *Greece and Turkey in the 21st Century*, Ed. by Christos G. Kollias, Gülay Günlük-Şeneser, Güliden Ayman (NY: Nova Pub, 2003), 41.

¹²Eric Siegle, "Greek-Turkish Relations- Continuity or Change?", *Perspectives*, 18 (2002): 40.

March, in Thessaloniki on the 2nd of March and in Athens on the 4th of March 1999 with the participation of Serbians and Greeks.¹³

Even during the earthquake, it is also possible to see a differentiation of the Turks. As the cartoon below shows, Türkiye is represented as a country governed by an army. Despite being considered good people, Turks are led to mistreat other people because of their political and military leaders.

3. Major Disagreements in Greek-Turkish Relations and the Importance of the Eastern Mediterranean Toward 2023

The exploration and discovery of the hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean started in 1999 during the Greek-Turkish rapprochement in the 2000s. As a parallel development to the ongoing efforts to solve the Cyprus problem with the Annan Plan between 2002 and 2004, the discovery of hydrocarbons was considered a critical development as an economic and political game-changer. The discoveries and continuing potential developments were considered an integral part of the failure of the Annan Plan, with the refusal of the Greek Cypriot public together with the EU membership of the RoC. In the second half of the 2000s, following the decline of the EU's prospect of Türkiye with the vetoes of the RoC and France on opening the negotiation chapters and the economic crisis after 2008 in Greece and the RoC, deteriorated Greek-Turkish relations in the Eastern Mediterranean. By 2010, regional rivalries had created political and economic turmoil, radicalism, and a continuous civil war. The humanitarian crisis following several security problems created migration and armed conflict waves. It came together with the declining momentum in Türkiye's EU membership prospects.

New explorations in the region drew attention as an energy-hungry region. Together with the efforts of the EU countries for alternative energy resources to Russia, Regulation 347 / 2013 brought the construction of the East Med pipeline to the agenda of the European Commission. It was defined as a Project of Common Interest, and the Commission contributed €34.5 million during 2015-2018. However, the project was shelved because of several feasibility problems and technical difficulties and replaced with the Euroasia Interconnector project¹⁴ with a €100 million EU contribution in October 2022.¹⁵

Rising disagreements between Türkiye and the regional countries supported Greece's influence in the region because of the EU effect, which can be defined as the interest of the regional countries to cooperate more and more with developed European welfare zones. In this context, the Greek government argued that the Greek interests were the European interests and should be supported against the challenging actors such as Türkiye. Although Türkiye is a candidate country, as a non-member country, it had limitations, and Türkiye expressed its concerns about potential European support for the Greek arguments. Consequently, the disagreements between Greece and Türkiye became increasingly influenced by European dynamics in the 2010s.

Because of the RoCs' membership, the EU's role increasingly became harmful regarding the impact of energy on bilateral relations toward the end of the 2000s. Despite the letter of diplomacy between Papan-dreou and Erdogan in January 2010, the Greek-Turkish rapprochement ended. The region's hydrocarbon potential provoked more and a more sovereignty-sharing competition between the Turks and Greeks, and

¹³"NATO'da Yunan rahatsızlığı", *Hürriyet Newspaper*, accessed on 15 May, 2025. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/natoda-yunan-rahatsizligi-39079222>

¹⁴Svetlova, Ksenia, "The EastMed Pipeline Is Dead, Long Live the EuroAsia Electricity Project", accessed on 15 May, 2025. <https://mitvim.org.il/en/publication/the-eastmed-pipeline-is-dead-long-live-the-euroasia-electricity-project/>.

¹⁵"Ending Energy Isolation- The Project of Common Interest 'Euroasia Interconnector'", accessed on 15 May, 2025. https://commission.europa.eu/projects/ending-energy-isolation-project-common-interest-euroasia-interconnector_en.

the tension gradually increased. The new projects constructed on the emerging conflictual positions of the actors, such as the East-Med Pipeline Project, deteriorated relations among regional countries. The ambitions of the regional actors to be an energy transportation route and an energy hub were considered strategic targets and assets for national relative power positions. Even though the construction of energy corridors, such as the TAP project to transfer Russian gas to Italy through Türkiye and Greece, requires more cooperation among regional actors, competition about the extension of the Exclusive Economic Zones in the Eastern Mediterranean has become the main discussion point as a continuation of the previous conflicts. The potential dramatic impact to shift the national power position led Greece and Türkiye to be more assertive in their foreign policy, including utilizing existing multilateral initiatives or creating new ones. Despite continuing High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council meetings between Greece and Türkiye in the 2010s, bilateral relations weakened dramatically.

In addition to regional players, global actors have become integral to emerging conflicts, just as always. For instance, the visits of the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle to Cyprus, the increasing number of US-NATO bases in Souda, Crete, and the approval for a new US base in Alexandroupoli highlight the growing interests of external forces. As a result, relationships in the Eastern Mediterranean are often perceived as a zero-sum game.

Another severe erosion of trust in bilateral relations emerged after the coup d'état attempt in Türkiye on 15 July 2016.¹⁶ Especially after the Greek court released Gulenist fugitives, the Turkish government decided to cease the readmission of the migrants from Greece.¹⁷ In the following days, tension in Evros would increase with the detention of two Greek soldiers in March 2018 by the Turkish authorities and the detention of Turkish soldiers in September 2018 by the Greek authorities. A point of the Evros border came with the decision of Turkish authorities to release control over the flow of immigrants in 2019. This was considered to be related to the relations with Greece because the migrants were only allowed toward the Greek border, while the Bulgarian ones remained silent.

Türkiye's military activism on other Turkish borders for security reasons, such as *Operation Euphrates Shield* in Syria, was also problematic for Greece. Turkish operations in Syria, as a parallel development with rising tension in the Eastern Mediterranean, have been evaluated as "militarization of Turkish foreign policy" by several researchers.¹⁸ The Turkish naval activism policy in the Eastern Mediterranean was considered because of the increasing influence of the Turkish Navy and prominent admirals by late 2016. In 2018, the *Blue Homeland* doctrine became more vocal in the Turkish Mediterranean policy. Rising energy interest in the seas may be seen in the previous policies of Türkiye. Türkiye bought a new seismic exploration ship, Barbaros Hayrettin Pasha, in 2012 before three other drilling ships, Fatih (2017), Yavuz (2019) and Kanuni (2020), in addition to Oruc Reis (2015). Türkiye's naval and maritime activism poses challenges for Greece as it is seen as a sign of Türkiye's revisionism in its neighboring regions. Various ideological factors influence this perception in Greece.

The names of the ships and military exercises chosen by Greece and Türkiye are another area of tension. Preferred names were mainly chosen from historical figures to remind of glory and victory, which could challenge other grand national narratives. From the Greek perspective, the Turkish government's ideological baggage of political Islam is combined with sympathy for radicalism in the region based on the Turkish

¹⁶Kostas Ifantis, "Greece's Strategy and Perceptions toward Turkey: The End of Consensus and the Return of History?", *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 15 / 58 (2018): 97.

¹⁷"Turkey suspends migrant readmission deal with Greece," *Reuters*, accessed on 15 May, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/turkey-suspends-migrant-readmission-deal-with-greece-anadolu-idUSKCN1J31TD/>

¹⁸Sinem Adar and Ilke Toygür, "Turkey, the EU and the Eastern Mediterranean Crisis Militarization of Foreign Policy and Power Rivalry" *SWP Commentary* 62, (2020), accessed on 15 May, 2025. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020C62/>

government's so-called "neo-Ottomanism", which means it demands the revival of the Ottoman Empire. Islam is considered an essential part of the Turkish identity in Greece. The image of the rising activities of political Islamic groups for democratic demands in the Middle East and their partial cooperation with the "Islamist" Turkish government were created as proof of the threat of a tide of Ottomanism of Türkiye in the mass media of Greece. It is surely connected with the rising Islamophobia in European public opinion. In addition, this media image creation process may be considered a political strategy to propagate the idea that Türkiye is a country under a radical Islamic government. This image could lose its reputation in the international community, which may lead the international community to support Greece against Türkiye. Indeed, Greece is presented as a pillar of stability with shared norms and rules with the Western world.

Despite serious efforts to control high tension levels, such as the declaration of Erdogan and Mitsotakis to regenerate the High-Level Cooperation Council between Greece and Türkiye after the 74th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2019, it is possible to see consistent efforts to utilize all possible means for national objectives.¹⁹ For example, Türkiye's drilling activities in the west of Cyprus were discussed with the EU November 11, 2019 and February 2020. Greece was anticipating a decision regarding sanctions against Türkiye. Following the meeting, restrictive measures were adopted against entities involved in unauthorized drilling activities. An asset freeze was imposed on two senior Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) officials in the following days. It was extended until 12 November 2021 by a decision from the European Council on 6 November 2020.²⁰ This decision deeply disappointed the Turkish government because it is considered to disregard Türkiye's position as a candidate country and permission to the RoC and Greece to use the EU mechanisms.

A significant turning point in the 2010s was the Memorandum on maritime borders signed between Türkiye and Libya's recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) on November 27, 2019. This memorandum clearly challenged the Sevilla map proposal concerning the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and prompted Greece to engage in diplomatic efforts to sign counter-agreements with regional states. The Greek government deems the memorandum unlawful and nonexistent regarding Türkiye's military presence in Libya. Greece, France, and other European countries have emphasized the UN Security Council's decisions that oppose the arming of warring factions in Libya. The military presence of Türkiye in Libya is categorized as a foreign intervention by many actors, including Greece, with accusations of paramilitary groups sponsored by Türkiye. Greek diplomacy invited regional actors to bloc the activism of Türkiye in the region by declaring the Memorandum invalid.

In the following days of the Türkiye-Libya deal, NATO became much more active in the region.²¹ The NATO meeting on December 21, 2019, could not ease the growing tensions in the region. Subsequently, Israel, the Republic of Cyprus, and Greece, with support from the United States, signed the East Med Pipeline Project on January 2, 2020. The US and NATO became the critical partners of the Greek governments in the 2010s. Despite the high anti-NATO and anti-US feelings among Greek Cypriots due to the 1974 operation of Türkiye, NATO membership in the RoC was discussed in 2018 with the support of France and US officials.²²

¹⁹"Erdogan ile Mitsotakis Yüksek Düzeyli İş birliği Konseyi'ni Yeniden Hayata Geçiriyor", 26.09.2019, *Sputnik News*, accessed on 15 May, 2025. <https://tr.sputniknews.com/abd/201909261040260235-erdogan-ile-micotakis-yukse-duzeyli-isbirligi-konseyini-yeniden-hayata-geciriyor/>

²⁰"EU Sanctions against Turkey", *Hellenic Shipping News*, accessed on 15.05.2025. <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/eu-sanctions-against-turkey/>

²¹Şerife Çetin, "NATO'nun Libya Politikasında Değişim Sinyalleri", *Anadolu Agency*, accessed on 15 May, 2025. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/natonun-libya-politikasinda-degisim-sinyalleri-/1886583>

²²Damon Wilson, "NATO Membership for Cyprus. Yes, Cyprus", *Atlantic Council*, accessed on 15 May, 2025. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/nato-membership-for-cyprus/>

2020 was also a challenging year for bilateral relations between Greece and Türkiye because of the continuous declarations of NAVTEX in the Eastern Mediterranean. Because of the rising tension, both governments did not hesitate to use naval forces, and the collision of the frigates Kemal Reis and Limnos brought both sides to a very dangerous confrontation. On the following days, comprehensive range naval exercises and the invitation of the US and Israel to Greece for the construction and renewal of naval, air and land power bases dominated Greek-Turkish relations. These steps were considered a part of the policies against the Libya deal. In the Greek diplomatic position, there was an insistence to maintain direct contact between Greece and Cyprus' EEZ. On the other hand, Türkiye asks for access to the open seas without Greece's control.

The dangerous rise of frictions in the field led the relevant actors to promote direct talks between Türkiye and Greece. With the efforts of Germany, it has succeeded in rescheduling the restart of the exploratory talks between Greece and Türkiye. In fact, on the same days, other developments shadowed these initiatives. For example, Greece signed an EEZ agreement with Egypt on the 7th of August, and the settlement of American soldiers and equipment in Alexandroupoli is scheduled for August 2020. Türkiye and Greece also used NAVTEX diplomacy and military exercises as a part of their politics in 2021. Additional military arsenals were added to the Aegean islands with new bases of non-Aegean actors.

2022 was more difficult for bilateral relations. The armament of the Aegean islands created much more tension, and the Turkish President said, "We may come one night suddenly". That sentence was not new in Greek-Turkish relations because it is part of a famous Turkish song and symbolized the Turkish operation in Cyprus in 1974. Before the 1974 operation, Greek Cypriot radios played another famous Turkish song with the lyrics, "I wait for you, but you did not come". That was a message saying that Türkiye could not and would not conduct any operation in Cyprus. In response to the song, Turkish Cypriot radios played a track featuring the lyrics, "One night I may come suddenly". In this framework, the Turkish President's talk created a great reaction in the Greek public. It symbolized Türkiye's "offensive" and "irredentist" intention to take the Greek islands.

4. Rise of Positive Agenda in 2023 after the 6th of February Earthquake & Train Accident

The continuous rise of tension in the Eastern Mediterranean was directly related to the decisiveness of the governments in protecting national interests. Significantly, before the national elections in both countries, nationalist rhetoric increased more. Mitsotakis faced intense challenges from national flank leaders Samaras, Karamanlis, and Dendias in his party, Nea Demokratia. There was also a rising threat perception of immigration and rising populism in Greek politics after the failure of the SYRIZA government in 2015. Under these circumstances, policies toward Türkiye could not be softened. However, on a rational basis, Greece could not engage in a war without the full support of any more prominent actors, such as the US or France. Before the war in Ukraine, there were discussions to deter Türkiye through strong coalitions with more powerful actors and buying high-technology artillery and fighter jets. In the following days of the Ukrainian war, the Turkish position was strengthened geopolitically, and the NATO alliance became more critical. In addition, shared interests in new conditions promoted disagreed actors in the Eastern Mediterranean to cooperate more. Thus, unlike the 2020s, 2023 is easier to ease tension in bilateral relations.

From the Turkish aspect, rising economic difficulties and the dysfunctional loneliness policy have changed the track for returning to traditional foreign policy. Developments in the Eastern Mediterranean

that isolated Türkiye despite its relative importance led the government to revise its policies. Changing international dynamics after the Ukrainian crisis is another determinant in this shift.

In this frame, the 6th of February earthquakes created a new atmosphere to decrease the tension between the countries. Such a devastating disaster, with a high level of vulnerability and weak construction of buildings, created a colossal tragedy. Vulnerability was also related to the disaster's size because the disaster management organization against the disaster had collapsed. Humanitarian sensitivities were created when Greece sent humanitarian relief, and social media were critical in following the development of bilateral relations. Ultimately, the Greek government also contributed to the rising political antagonistic discourse in domestic politics to attract nationalist votes.

This colossal disaster impacted 13 million people, creating massive solidarity in the international community. It was impossible for any state to cope with such a wide disaster within its capacity, and rescue teams started to be transferred to help people. The Greek government was one of the neighboring countries of Türkiye that sent rescue teams and humanitarian aid. The Greek PM wrote a Turkish message on his social media account on the 7th of February, saying that the Turks and Greeks are fighting to save lives together. The Greek Foreign Minister also visited the ruined cities on the 12th of February and presented his solidarity to Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu.

These days, the Turkish official news agency, Anadolu News Agency, published news about the solidarity between Türkiye and Greece, as shown in image 6. Similar news was also seen in other newspapers and TV channels, as shown in image 7.

It is also essential to refer to the Cypriot dimension of the developments. Unfortunately, Turkish Cypriot child volleyball players were in Adıyaman during the earthquake, and they lost their lives in the ruins of the Isias Hotel. Greek Cypriot leaders presented their solidarity with the Turkish Cypriots and the Türkiye. Karatzias from the Greek Cypriot Foreign Ministry stated that (Image 8) they would aid Türkiye, but their offer was not accepted. He emphasized that while political responsibilities are understandable, they should take a backseat during disasters like this. He voiced his concern that political sensitivities are prioritized even during natural disasters and tragedies.²³ Two days later, the spokesperson of the Greek Cypriot Government, Demetriou, wrote on his Twitter account (Image 9) that Türkiye's decision to accept rescue teams from the Greek Cypriot government was sent through EU mechanisms.

Turkish public opinion highly valued the support from the Greek rescue team. However, the tensions that escalated between 2019 and 2022 continue to impact Greek public opinion. A month before the earthquake, in January 2022, Turkish President Erdoğan stated that militarizing the Eastern Aegean islands threatens Türkiye and is inconsistent with international agreements. He noted, "We may arrive unexpectedly one night." This phrase reminded him of the Cyprus operation. During the earthquake days, these words were still in mind, as given in image 9, in a caricature of *To Pontiki* magazine on the 9th of February.

Similar to the disasters in 1999, in one month, on the 1st of March, a train accident happened in Larissa, and many young people died. Türkiye was still overwhelmed by the earthquake in those days, but the Turkish people and government presented solidarity with the Greek people. As a sign of goodwill, the Turkish government extradited the father of the machinist of the train, who lost his life in the accident, to enable him to attend the funeral. *The Kathimerini* newspaper appreciates it as a sign of sympathy for Greek-Turkish relations. In images 11 and 12, it is possible to see examples from Turkish newspapers.

²³"Ankara Kabul Etti: Güney Kıbrıs Yardım Gönderiyor!", *Medyascope*, accessed on 15 May, 2025. <https://medyascope.tv/2023/02/08/iddia-dort-kitadan-turkiyeye-yardim-eli-uzandi-ankara-guney-kibrisin-yardim-teklifini-reddetti/>

By May 2023, Greek-Turkish relations had started to improve. Especially after the elections, together with the contacts in the Vilnius Summit in July 2023, the Positive Agenda was more frequently referred to by both countries as progress in soft politics issues and confidence-building mechanisms.

Conclusion

The 6th of February earthquakes in Türkiye created a massive tragedy for ordinary people and reminded us that human life is the most important thing on earth. The media played a vital role in making people feel the pain and understand the tragedy more deeply through visual materials and sad stories. The underlying importance of different layers of security problems facing humanity has been seen again with the need to cooperate against them. Natural disasters or any other artificial problems push governments increasingly to act together despite their disagreements. Disaster diplomacy is essential for cooperation and working together against humanitarian tragedies. However, it is impossible to think that the intergovernmental problems, mainly categorized as national issues, are not easily transformed, as is clear in Greek-Turkish relations.

Greece and Türkiye have many disagreements, primarily because of sovereignty-sharing issues. Third actors and international politics have always been integral to this competition. Sympathy toward each other at the individual level is not a matter of discussion for intergovernmental problems. Therefore, government policies are critical for shaping public opinion concerns in our age.

Great earthquakes and Turkish empathy during the Larissa train accident created a better atmosphere for public and political discourse. However, it was not only related to the emerging empathy between people. As it happened during the post-1999 earthquake, the earthquake in Türkiye and the train accident in Greece legitimized diplomatic approachment. Some other earthquakes in 2020 hit Sisam and Kuşadası. However, it could not produce a rapprochement despite the political analysts of those days referring to the earthquakes in 1999 and the rapprochement following the humanitarian relief of both countries to each other. Again, in November 2017, there were floods in Attiki, Greece, but despite the Turkish Vice Prime Minister sending his condolences in Greece, that was not enough to change the climate as it happened in 1999.

Another critical point to underline is that contemporary efforts are still hesitant and depend on many international developments. Mitsotakis and Erdoğan stated that both countries insist on their positions, although they may discuss problems. Efforts depend more on keeping the tension under control and, if necessary, to agree on not to agree. Therefore, the reason for changing policy preferences may be the acceleration of tension and rising risks for them and the international order. There is still a need to see an essential shift from national positions when talking about a rapprochement, as observed during the Helsinki process. Today, neither is motivated to go further in relations than soft political issues such as environment, tourism, economy, etc.

At that point, it is necessary to define the normalization and good relations. Greek and Turkish leaders and newspaper columnists use the term “good relations,” but they do not mean the resolution of the problems through several probable concessions from their governments. However, good relations, solutions or normalization terms shall be used in this framework. As the Greeks and Turks are in prolonged conflicts, to define the decreasing tension as normalization is incorrect. Maybe it is because of the simple meaning of the word normal in dictionaries as “typical, usual, expected”.



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Author Details

Zuhal Mert Uzuner (Prof. Dr.)

¹ Marmara University, Faculty of Political Science, Department of Political Science and International Relations, İstanbul, Türkiye

0000-0003-3387-2553 zmert@marmara.edu.tr

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Appendix

Figures, Tables and Graphics

Image 1

Ta Nea, 20 August 1999, Turks on the ruins say, "Alive!"- "It is government; let it be there."



Image 2

Ta Nea, 13 August 1999, "There are people alive under the ruins" on the bag "Military Rule!"





Image 3

Ta Nea, 21 August 1999, "I was always a neighbor; I do not remember any hot confrontation."



Image 4

AKUT- Turkish Rescue Team in Athens, 1999: "Long Live Akut"



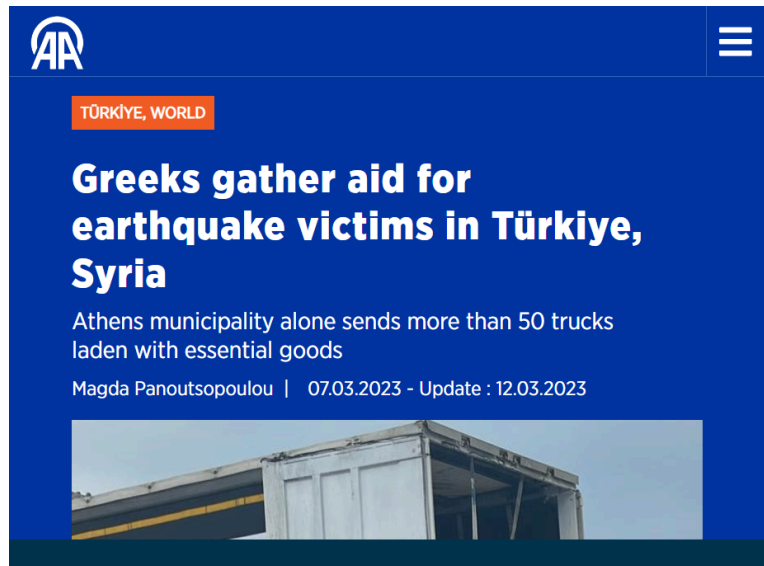
Image 5

The Greek state is grateful to you



Image 6

Anadolu Agency News on 7 March 2023, about the Greek people's solidarity



**Image 7**

News from Daily Sabah about the humanitarian aid campaign in Greece

Greece launches nationwide campaign for Türkiye, Syria quake aid

BY DAILY SABAH WITH AGENCIES | ANKARA | FEB 10, 2023 - 6:12 PM GMT+3 |

**Image 8**

Marios Karatzias' social media message



Kornelios S. Korneliou Retweeted

Marios Karatzias @MariosKaratzias · 20h

#Turkey refused a rescue team from Republic of #Cyprus said the DG @kkorneliou of @CyprusMFA

Cyprus expressed immediately the wish to assist victims of #earthquake

Η Τουρκία αρνήθηκε την αποστολή ομάδας διάσωσης της Κ.Δ για σεισμό @Sigmalivecom



sigmalive.com

Κορνηλίου: Η Τουρκία αρνήθηκε την αποστολή ομάδας διάσωσης της...





Image 9

The spokesperson of the Greek Cypriot Government, Demetriou's social media account



Image 10

To Pontiki: Friend! Friends come at night or in the daytime



Image 11

"Condolences from Erdoğan to Greek President Sakelloropoulou and Prime Minister Mitsotakis", *Sputnik*, 01 March 2023

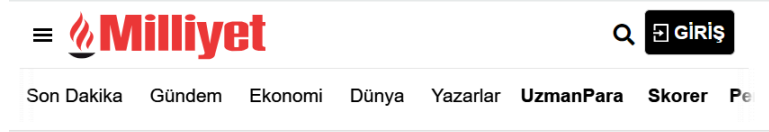
Erdoğan'dan Yunanistan Cumhurbaşkanı Sakelloropoulou ve Başbakan Miçotakis'e taziye mesajı

17:42 01.03.2023 (güncellendi: 17:48 01.03.2023)



Image 12

"Greek Media: Positive Signals from Türkiye", 08 March 2020, *Milliyet newspaper*



Yunan medyası: Türkiye'den pozitif sinyal

milliyet.com.tr

08.03.2023 - 16:21 | Son Güncellenme: 08.03.2023 - 17:11

#Türk Yunan ilişkileri

#Tren Kazası

#Nikos Nalbantis

Ankara'nın tren kazasında yaşamını yitiren makinistin babasına cenaze izni vermesi, Atina'da yankı buldu. Kathimerini gazetesi, ortaya çıkan sonucun Türk-Yunan ilişkilerinde bir gerilim bulunmadığının belirtisi olduğunu yazdı.

