

Exploring a rich – but undisclosed – history of Turkish-Greek rapprochement

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'Ah! You speak Turkish! And you're a Greek!!! I cannot believe it ... I am so happy to realise this ... so happy to be able to become friends with you ... !'

The night before I started writing this contribution for *Heritage Turkey*, Haluk, the owner of a cosy café in Kavaklıdere where I have been spending many of my evenings since arriving in Ankara as a BIAA Post-Doctoral Research Fellow a year ago, entered this state of happy 'shock'. Despite his fluent English (which meant that finding a common language was not an issue) and despite having long been aware that I am Greek, it was, now, the realisation that we could share a more direct, unmediated and intimate communication using Turkish that made him feel this willingness to open up: 'you know what we have been taught at school, right?' He continued in Turkish, 'that you are filthy people ... enemies ... Then one finishes school, goes to university and starts, maybe, slowly, to dismantle this image in your head ... and then a trip to a Greek island and that's it! ... then you understand ... that we have been bombarded with lies ... you know this, right?'

This scene, taking place in August 2013 in Ankara, resembles stories and episodes of other similar 'revelatory incidents' (Theodossopoulos 2007: 6) narrated by several of my Greek and Turkish informants and interviewees during the course of my research on Turkish-Greek relations – similar incidents of 'discovering the other'. These are incidents that highlight the common passions vibrating on both sides of the Aegean borders: people exposed to narrow-minded nationalist ideologies who, then, manage to dispose of these stereotypes when they have the chance to meet 'the other' face to face.

Therefore, despite their seeming particularity, histories of encounters like the one I had with Haluk and the sentiments of positive surprise that usually follow such encounters became, concomitantly, significant primary material for my own project: a six-year-long study of the history of Turkish-Greek rapprochement. This project initially took the form of a doctoral dissertation at the University of Essex (2011) and was, then, during the year of my fellowship at the BIAA, expanded and transformed into a book manuscript for a forthcoming monograph to be published by Routledge (2014): *Turkish-Greek Relations: Rapprochement, Civil Society and the Politics of Friendship*.

Turkish-Greek relations have been a theme usually examined by scholars of international relations (IR) theory, mostly through a focus on balance of power and state interests as a method of analysis. This 'conventional' – if we may call it this – IR approach concentrates primarily on the bargaining practices performed at the register of 'high-politics' (i.e. encounters between state representatives, government officials and diplomats, the signing of treaties, agreements, etc.). As some critics have deftly argued, this approach often suffers from a 'policy-oriented bias' (Rumelili 2004: 2; see also Vathakou 2010: 17). I argue that the problem of such a perspective lies also in what we can call an over-emphasis on linear continuities. In other words, conventional IR approaches usually construe the interests of each state as stable unchanging entities, and therefore ignore the significance of processes taking place *inside* and *between* the two societies in question; they overlook the fact that change can also mean a different understanding of one's state 'interests' (i.e. by opting for peace instead of maximising the acquisition of territory or natural resources) or that change can be the result of inter- and intra-societal processes instead of the signing of official treaties.

Of course, there are much more nuanced approaches to be found inside the domain of IR theory, especially within the cluster called 'critical IR studies'. This cluster refers to the work of scholars who make a significant effort to take into account the influence of voting constituencies, civil society groups and independent actors such as intellectual elites and artists in transforming conflicts to peaceful coexistence (see, for instance, Çarkoğlu, Rubin 2005; Rumelili 2007; Heraclides 2010; Vathakou 2010). In this more nuanced case, the relations between states are approached mostly through the perspective of what we can call ruptures and discontinuities; attention is directed towards the breaks with the past and the emergence of the new. In the Turkish-Greek case, for instance, critical IR studies have been helpful in explaining moments when conflicting relations have subsided under the pressure and the emergence of reconciliation initiatives.

Against the backdrop of these two different approaches (the conventional and the critical IR approaches), my research comes to offer an alternative, complimentary but also in many cases corrective, understanding of the conditions that have made possible rapprochement between Turkey and Greece, by focusing on both continuities *and* discontinuities as intertwined processes.

What has been the most enduring element of continuity in the long history of Turkish-Greek relations that has remained largely under-explored in recent literature? Funnily enough, it is the repetition of seemingly insignificant moments of affective excess between 'Turks' and 'Greeks' like the one I experienced with Haluk, or like the ones narrated by my interviewees; moments that, despite their particularity, have been transformed into important factors for the birth, development and growth of a movement for reconciliation between the two societies, creating strong friendships that

have stood against the tide of enmity. These moments are paradigmatically condensed in a small phrase repeated over and over again during the last 90 years of Turkish-Greek relations: Turkish-Greek friendship!

Türk-Yunan dostluğu or *Ellinoturkiki filia* (i.e. the Turkish and Greek language forms of ‘Turkish-Greek friendship’) is a collocation, a motto, that has been an omnipresent denominator of Turkish-Greek encounters from the 1930s until today: projected as a vision for the future by the lips of state leaders Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Eleftherios Venizelos, incorporated in treaty titles in the inter-war period, lending itself to the names of several initiatives and associations in the post-war period, adopted as a claim for peace and disarmament by various social movements after 1974 and even adapted into advertisement campaigns after 1999.

However, this continuous repetition of a message for friendship, which appears to be as old as the interstate tensions between Turkey and Greece, did not translate to a linear continuity, or a faithful replication of a ‘copy’. Instead, in this case, repetition meant that divergent meanings and diverse visions were infused into the little collocation. And it is here that continuity becomes interlaced with rupture.

In other words, throughout the history of Turkish-Greek relations, different people have meant or imagined different things when they discovered, uttered, praised, claimed or hoped for the realisation of a ‘Turkish-Greek friendship’. Their feeling of surprise when they saw their old ‘enemy’ appearing as a ‘friend’ was translated in different demands. For example, the state-oriented ‘friendship’ under NATO during the 1950s to 1960s was later transformed into a claim for a ‘Turkish-Greek friendship of the people’ by radical leftists in the 1970s. Then, in the 1980s, ‘Turkish-Greek friendship’ became the binding motto of left-wing intellectuals and local government representatives of Aegean

municipalities before transmuting into the passionate slogan-stimulus for civil society activists in the late 1990s and, finally, becoming a stable accompaniment to the news on bilateral economic cooperation used by journalists, politicians and businessmen alike during the 2000s.

My forthcoming book unravels this rich and diverse – but so far undisclosed – history of Turkish-Greek reconciliation initiatives using a novel research strategy: it transforms the little collocation ‘Turkish-Greek friendship’ into a prism through which one can revisit the history of Turkish-Greek relations, examining the different actors and the different demands standing ‘behind’ it at every different historical moment.

Equipped with a specially moulded interdisciplinary toolkit combining political discourse theory and original ethnographic study, while taking advantage of extensive archival research into Turkish and Greek sources, national, local, personal archives and a significant number of interviews with pioneers of the rapprochement movement, I explore the successes and failures, difficulties and predicaments of the multifaceted efforts for Turkish-Greek rapprochement.

The results show that events and scenes like my encounter with Haluk have been in constant repetition for almost 90 years now and instead of disconnected private experiences have been important nodal points for transforming feelings of enmity into friendship and nurturing a movement for peace. However, the emergence and repetition of a ‘Turkish-Greek friendship’ has not always led to the same demands and visions of how this peace and friendship could be realised. Continuity and discontinuity are in this case less oppositional than they seem, because, as argued, in most of the cases explored in this research, repetition meant – first and foremost – *change*.

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The boat connecting the Greek island of Mytilene with the Turkish coastal town of Ayvalık decorated with the symbol of Turkish-Greek friendship (Ayvalık, May 2005)