

## THE AEGEAN PROBLEM IN RELATIONS BETWEEN TÜRKIYE AND GREECE

## ЕГЕЙСЬКА ПРОБЛЕМА У ВІДНОСИНАХ МІЖ ТУРЕЧЧИНОЮ ТА ГРЕЦІЄЮ

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**Abstract.** *Throughout history, Greece and Türkiye have had a complex relationship characterized by both friendly relations and periods of conflict and confrontation. In the 20th century, there were several instances of war and conflict between the two nations. However, beginning in 1999, the two countries entered a new phase in their relations, characterized by increased cooperation and dialogue. This period was marked by the improvement of official relations between the governments of Greece and Türkiye, facilitated by the Greek government's support for Türkiye's efforts to join the European Union. Nevertheless, certain issues remain unresolved.*

*One of these disputes relates to the delineation of the territorial sea in the Aegean Sea. The issue in the Aegean arises from disagreements over the continental shelf and territorial waters. It should be noted that resolving this dispute is a matter of keen interest not only for Greece and Türkiye, but also for European countries, Russia, and Israel. The discovery of new oil and gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has further complicated the issue. If the dispute is settled in favor of Türkiye, then these areas will belong to Southern Cyprus' territorial waters if it is settled in favor of both Türkiye and Greece. This factor directly affects Europe's dependence on Russian energy. Therefore, in proposing a resolution to the dispute, it is necessary to conduct legal and political analyses.*

*In general, there has been progress between Türkiye and Greece in terms of diplomatic, political, trade, economic, transportation, tourism, cultural, and educational relations. In order to resolve existing issues between the two countries, various mechanisms have been put in place through dialogue, including political discussions, meetings, and the High-Level Cooperation Council. Recently, the number of official high-level visits has increased. The High-Level Cooperation Council meetings take place alternately in Türkiye and Greece, coordinated by the heads of government and foreign ministers from both countries.*

*It can be concluded that the most appropriate course of action would be to grant these islands 3 nautical miles of territorial waters, in accordance with the provisions of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 and the Paris Treaty of 1947. Considering the unchanged positions of both parties, it is advisable to resolve the matter of the delineation of territorial waters in the Aegean Sea in accordance with these principles and methods, in order to avoid this situation escalating into a global crisis.*

**Key words:** *Türkiye, Greece, Aegean Sea, territorial waters, delimitation.*

**Анотація.** *Історично відносинам між Грецією та Туреччиною характерна ворожнеча,*

*протистояння, конфлікти, суперечки одночасно з дружніми відносинами.*

*У 20 столітті між двома країнами було кілька воєн і конфліктів. Проте з 1999 року турецько-грецькі відносини вступили в нову еру, засновану на співпраці та діалозі в різних сферах. У той же час офіційні відносини між Грецією та Туреччиною покращилися в результаті підтримки грецького уряду зусиль Туреччини щодо членства в ЄС, але деякі проблеми не були вирішені.*

*Одна з таких суперечок пов'язана з делімітацією територіального моря в Егейському морі. Проблема в Егейському морі виникає через суперечки щодо континентального шельфу та територіальних вод. Слід зазначити, що вирішення цієї суперечки викликає неабиякий інтерес не лише до Греції та Туреччини, а й до європейських країн, Росії та Ізраїлю. Відкриття нових родовищ нафти і газу в Східному Середземномор'ї ще більше ускладнює проблему. Якщо суперечку буде вирішено на користь Туреччини, то ці родовища будуть належати територіальним водам Південного Кіпру. Це фактор, який безпосередньо впливає на енергетичну залежність Європи від Росії. Тому, пропонуючи вирішення проблеми, необхідно здійснити як правовий, так і політичний аналіз.*

*Метою дослідження є вивчення періоду між Туреччиною та Грецією з кінця 20 століття до початку 21 століття, розвитку двосторонніх та багатосторонніх політичних відносин, торгівлі, економіки, транспорту, туризму, культури та освіти, а також детальний розгляд проблем, що існують між двома країнами. Одним із важливих чинників, що зумовлюють актуальність дослідження, є всебічний розвиток відносин між двома країнами та вивчення існуючих проблем між ними.*

*Загалом між Туреччиною та Грецією є прогрес у дипломатичних, політичних, торгово-економічних, транспортних, туристичних, культурних та освітніх відносинах. Для вирішення існуючих проблем між двома країнами шляхом діалогу створені різні механізми, такі як політичні дискусії, зустрічі та Рада співробітництва високого рівня, а останнім часом збільшилася кількість офіційних візитів високого рівня. Засідання Ради співробітництва високого рівня організовуються по черзі в Туреччині та Греції під координацією глав урядів та міністрів закордонних справ обох країн.*

*Можна зробити висновок, що найбільш вигідним варіантом є надання цим островам 3 морських миль територіальних вод, як це передбачено Лозаннським договором 1923 р. та Паризьким договором 1947 р. З огляду на незмінну позицію обох країн, це рекомендував вирішити питання делімітації територіальних вод в Егейському морі в рамках вищезазначених принципів і методів з метою запобігання цьому криза не стала глобальною.*

**Ключові слова:** *Туреччина, Греція, Егейське море, територіальні води, делімітація.*

**Introduction.** Greece and Türkiye, two coastal states, have legitimate interests and rights in the Aegean Sea, as recognized by international law, including security and economic considerations. There are two main issues regarding the Aegean between these two countries: one relates to territorial waters and the other to the continental shelf.

The disagreements between Greece and Türkiye regarding the Aegean are based on the status quo established in the Treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923, which aimed to establish a political balance between the two countries. Both sides welcomed the provisions of this treaty, but Greece has recently proposed increasing its territorial waters in the Aegean from 6 nautical miles to 12 nautical miles.

It is important to note that both countries have a legitimate interest in securing their territorial waters and ensuring their security in the region. Therefore, it is essential to find a solution that respects the rights and interests of both parties and maintains the stability of the Aegean region. Greece has repeatedly emphasized its rights to territorial waters and the continental shelf in the Aegean Sea, in contradiction to Article 300 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, one of the fundamental principles of international law.

**The purpose of the research** is to study the period between Türkiye and Greece from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the development of bilateral and multilateral

political relations, trade, economic, transport, tourism, cultural and educational relations, as well as a detailed examination of the problems existing between the two countries.

**Literature review.** One of the important factors determining the topicality of the study is the comprehensive development of relations between the two countries and the study of existing problems between them. Many studies have been conducted on this issue. In our articles, we primarily referred to the works of Turkish and Greek scholars. Works such as those by Mustafa Aydin, Kostas Ifantis, Sule Kut, Conostas Dimitri, as well as media reports, can be noted. Throughout history, Greece and Türkiye have experienced a complex relationship characterized by both hostility, confrontation, and conflict, as well as periods of cooperation and friendly relations. In the twentieth century, several military conflicts and tensions occurred between the two nations. However, in recent years, a new phase in Turkish-Greek relations has begun, based on the principles of cooperation and dialogue.

Since 1999, there has been an improvement in official relations between the two countries, particularly in light of the Greek government's support for Türkiye's application to join the European Union. Despite this progress, some issues remain unresolved, such as the dispute over the delimitation of territorial waters in the Aegean Sea, which is linked to disagreements over the continental shelves and exclusive economic zones.

The resolution of this issue is of significant importance not only for Greece and Türkiye but also for other European countries, as well as Russia and Israel. The resolution could have implications for regional stability and the future of regional cooperation in the region.. The discovery of new oil and gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean has further complicated the situation. Should the dispute be resolved in favor of Türkiye, these reserves would be transferred to the territorial waters of southern Cyprus. Alternatively, should the dispute be settled in favor of both Türkiye and Greece, this would have a direct impact on Europe's dependence on Russian energy. Therefore, in order to offer a solution to this issue, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive analysis of both legal and political aspects.

This article draws upon various monographs, books, and internet resources on the subject. One such work is the study by Turkish researcher Faruk Senmezoglu, "The Aegean Problem in Turkish Foreign Policy", which provides an in-depth analysis of Türkiye's foreign policy and the issues surrounding it. Additionally, Conostas Dimitri's book "Greece and Türkiye", published in New York in 1991, is a fundamental work on the issue.

**The main results of the study.** The Aegean problem is in fact not one problem, but a series of problems: they concern restrictions on territorial waters, sovereign rights over the continental shelf and airspace, the management of military and civilian air traffic control zones, and the militarization of the Greek islands.

Thus, the Greek side argues that the only subject of dispute between the parties is the delimitation of territorial waters. However, the Turkish side divides disputes related to the Aegean Sea into 5 different categories (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, Major Aegean Sea Problems*):

- 1) Jurisdiction at sea – territorial waters, continental shelf and their delimitation;
- 2) the demilitarized status of the eastern Aegean islands on the basis of relevant international documents, including the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 and the Treaty of Paris of 1947;
- 3) the legal status of certain geographical features in the Aegean Sea;
- 4) 10 nautical mile claims to Greek national airspace;
- 5) Search and rescue missions.

The most important of these issues for Türkiye is the issue of territorial sea. Under the 1982 Maritime Convention, which Türkiye is not a signatory, Greece has the right to extend its territorial sea to 12 miles, although Greece has so far refrained from exercising this right. Greece expanding its territorial waters from 6 miles to 12 miles could make it difficult for Türkiye to enter major ports such as Istanbul and Izmir. Türkiye has repeatedly stated that any attempt by Greece to expand its territorial waters to 12 miles would lead to a state of war. The threat of force if Greece exercises its right to expand its territorial waters has become a major source of tension between the two

countries. Official circles in Greece are firmly convinced that there will be no rapprochement between Greece and Türkiye, especially as long as Greece threatens to use force to resolve its political activities in accordance with international law (*Constas 1991: p. 130*).

Türkiye and Greece also clash in Aegean airspace. Türkiye does not recognize the 12 miles of airspace claimed by Greece, asserting Greek sovereignty over just 6 miles. To emphasize this point, Türkiye regularly sends its aircraft within 6 miles of the Greek coast. Greece responded by sending a plane to intercept the Turkish plane, regarding this as a violation of airspace. Official fighting and airspace issues are a constant source of concern for Türkiye's NATO allies, who are concerned that an incident or miscalculation could lead to a major conflict between the two countries, as happened during the Imia/Kardak crisis in January and February 1996.

The Republic of Türkiye has repeatedly proposed to initiate a bilateral dialogue with Greece to resolve these issues. However, Greece rejected broad bilateral dialogue, arguing that only one issue should be resolved – the continental shelf. Greece argues that the case should be referred to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Be that as it may, Türkiye preferred to resolve the issue through bilateral negotiations and refused to submit this issue to the International Court of Justice (*Aydin, Ifantis 2004: p.137*).

Another issue straining bilateral relations is Greece's militarization of the eastern Aegean and Dodecanese islands, which Türkiye claims is contrary to the terms of the 1947 Paris Agreement. On the contrary, Greece argues that the militarization of the islands was a defensive response to Türkiye's creation of a 100,000-strong "Fourth Aegean Army" shortly after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, headquartered in Izmir, a few miles from the Greek islands. Until recently, Türkiye refused to release its Aegean army. But in the spring of 2000, Admiral Güven Erkaya, former commander of the Turkish Navy and adviser to Prime Minister Acavit, proposed in a secret memorandum (later leaked to the Turkish press) to release Türkiye's Aegean Army in exchange for a promise not to expand Greece's territorial waters to 12 miles. Although his proposal was initially rejected by the Turkish military, who stated that Greece should agree not to extend its territorial waters beyond 12 miles, it is seen in some Turkish circles as a favor that, combined with Greek reciprocity, could lead to an escalation of the Aegean dispute (*Aydin, Ifantis 2004: p.139*).

Since mid-1999, Türkiye's relations with Greece have softened considerably. But the Aegean dispute continues to cloud relations and may even derail current muted tensions. For example, in October 2000, disagreements over access to the islands of Lemnos and Icaria led Greece to withdraw from NATO exercises in the Aegean Sea to bring Greece and Türkiye closer together. Although both sides tried to declare their commitment to easing relations, this incident made it clear that disagreements over the Aegean Sea continue to burden relations (*Turkish-Greek Relations, Aegean Problems 2000: p. 90*).

In addition, the EU appears to have resolved Türkiye's differences with Greece by demanding Türkiye's accession to the EU. In December 1999, the official message of the EU summit in Helsinki called on candidate states to try to resolve border disputes and other related issues or, failing that, to refer the dispute to the International Court of Justice within a reasonable time. The Council stated that it would review the situation regarding the accession process by the end of 2004. Thus, with no resolution to the dispute, Türkiye's application for EU membership continued to be extended until today.

In January 2002, Greece agreed to begin a bilateral dialogue with Türkiye on the Aegean Sea. Greek diplomats wanted the dialogue to be limited to the continental shelf. At the same time, other issues needed to be discussed during the dialogue, such as airspace control and disagreements regarding the Ecumenical Patriarch (the spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians, who lives in Istanbul).

At first glance, the complex Aegean conflict seems zero-sum and difficult to resolve as it involves sensitive "national issues" such as sovereignty, sovereign rights, oil reserves, freedom of the high seas and air, access to ports, security and influence. However, unlike the Cyprus problem, the motto "no solution can be solved" does not apply to the Aegean conflict. As can be seen from the two settlement attempts (1975-1981 and 2002-2003), both sides came to a strong agreement on

the basic principles and parameters of a proper and fair settlement, as well as the latest negotiations, which seem promising since May 2010 (*Turkish-Greek Relations, Aegean Problems 2000: p. 73*).

At the Aegean level, it must be clearly demonstrated that Greece does not want to “strangle Türkiye” by turning the Aegean into a “Greek sea”; Türkiye, for its part, is not thinking about “occupying the Greek islands”. Resolving the Aegean conflict still requires more time than dialogue carried out in the spirit of *détente* – the easing of tensions in the Aegean Sea for more than a decade.

Critics of this approach note that attempts in 1975-1981 and 2002-2003 did not produce any results, and negotiations continued in 2004-2009 also led to failure: one or both sides failed to take important steps for various reasons. As for the more recent renewed negotiations (from 2010), Recep Tayyip Erdogan seemed ready to make a deal, but Greece, under the leadership of George Papandreou, who initially seemed more positive in this direction, agreed to extend the deal for a longer period due to concerns about internal costs. Moreover, given that Türkiye’s prospects in the EU are diminishing, EU membership is becoming less popular even within Türkiye. Due to Türkiye’s growing influence vis-à-vis the EU and the perception of Türkiye as a constructive and friendly state in the region, there is little incentive to consider resolving the Aegean conflict as a priority.

But over time, the Greek side seems hopeless in solving the problem due to the country’s economic problems. (Greece has been constantly on the verge of bankruptcy since 2009). Such a grim situation is unlikely to be conducive to a bold reconciliation at the Aegean level since, given Greece's current weakness and international influence, it will almost certainly be structured as a bribery of the opposition and the public.

The economic problems provoked another negative reaction from Greek nationalists and like-minded “experts”: Greece should acquire the entire Aegean Sea (the traditional Andreas Papandreou line of the 1970s and 1980s) and possibly the eastern Mediterranean (around the small island of Kastellorizo), which would likely provide oil and other mineral resources and thus save Greece from bankruptcy. In this context, in addition to the other “six concepts” in the Aegean Sea, another promising dispute arises – about the exclusive economic zone (*Kut 2004: p. 124*).

Despite the centuries-long conflict between Greece and Türkiye, the Aegean Sea dispute is still a fairly new conflict that requires resolution for many reasons. Despite the possibility of an armed conflict, now is the time to begin a serious process of its resolution. The earthquakes that occurred in 1999 brought not only the population closer together, but also politicians and the media. However, in the 2000s, relations between Greece and Türkiye repeatedly reached the point of armed conflict.

For example, President Erdogan’s visit to Athens in 2017 took place in a very tense format. Both sides have laid a long list of historical claims against each other stemming from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire more than a century ago. Finally, Erdogan mentioned the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923, which formalized the end of the *de facto* war between the two countries and the final fall of the Ottoman Empire. This agreement largely determines the relationship between both countries. Erdogan said that many years after the agreement was signed between the countries, “new problems have arisen”. As an example, he cited the situation of the Muslim minority in Greece. The countries have long disagreed on a variety of issues, including where their continental shelf begins and ends, energy resources, how to fly over the Aegean Sea and more.

Cold relations between Athens and Ankara have begun to soften amid the devastating earthquake that Türkiye faced in February 2023. After this, Greece immediately sent aid to the neighboring country. Two rescue teams arrived in Türkiye to search for people under the rubble. Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias has instructed the country’s permanent mission to the UN in Geneva to take measures to provide urgent humanitarian assistance to Türkiye and Syria through the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Deputy head of the department Andreas Katsaniotis, in turn, took on the responsibility of coordinating the activities of organizations and individuals wishing to help collect humanitarian aid for the affected regions of Türkiye and Syria.

After the earthquake, Mitsotakis called Erdogan and promised to help in eliminating the

consequences of the earthquake. It was the first phone call in months. Relations with Greece really warmed up after providing assistance to Türkiye after the earthquake. However, it should be noted that a number of factors influence the warming of relations. This is due to changes in the internal economic and internal political situation in Greece and Türkiye, changes in the foreign policy situation around Türkiye, relations between Türkiye and the EU, a fundamental change in the situation in the Middle East and the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Elections took place in Greece, which strengthened the position of the ruling majority and leader and gave it room to maneuver. In addition, Greece now feels more confident. He signed military agreements with France and the United States. At the same time, it is extremely important to take into account the results of the Turkish elections in Greek foreign policy. Of course, although the economic relations between Ankara and Athens are not so good, they are important for Greece. The possibility of doubling trade turnover has a positive effect on Greek foreign policy.

The benefits of establishing relations with its neighbor for Türkiye are obvious and they are quite multifaceted. Erdogan, who has consistently demonstrated an independent foreign policy, demonstrates through his actions his commitment to the obligations of the NATO alliance. Türkiye has its own position in everything and balances its actions in other areas through dialogue with Greece. A clear proof of the warming relations between the two countries was the visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to the Greek capital in early December 2023.

During the visit, 16 documents were signed between Athens and Ankara: declarations, agreements and memorandums, including the “Declaration of Friendship and Friendly Good Neighborhood Relations”. The signed documents cover various areas of interaction between the two countries, including education, economics, social services, sports, tourism, research and innovation.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced in a joint press statement with Erdogan that Athens will issue visas to Turkish citizens for year-round weekly visits to 10 Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. Mitsotakis noted that this initiative “carries a strong message, but also expresses the great truth that the Greek islands are a bridge of communication and friendship between the two countries”. According to him, the next step in restoring bilateral dialogue could be an approach to delimiting the continental shelf and exclusive economic zones in the Aegean and East Mediterranean seas.

The President of Türkiye specially emphasized: “We want to turn the Aegean Sea into a sea of peace. We want to be an example for the whole world with the joint steps of Türkiye and Greece”. According to him, there are “no insoluble problems” between the countries (*President Erdoğan spoke at the joint press conference with Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis 2023*). On the eve of his meeting with the Greek Prime Minister, Erdogan gave an interview to the Kathimerini newspaper, called him a “friend” and called for a “new page” to be opened in relations between the two countries after many years of tension. “I think Mr. Mitsotakis understands and sees that we want to overcome the problems between Greece and Türkiye and further develop our relations. I feel a similar position in him and it makes me happy...”.

He said that Türkiye has never viewed neighboring Greece as an enemy or an enemy and that it has no problems with its neighbors that it cannot overcome. “We have the same geography, the same sea. We breathe the same air. We are connected by our past. There are many problems between us that we have not yet been able to solve and which we are aware of as two countries. Let's build trust between our countries. Let's expand our cooperation in the areas of economy, trade, transport, energy, healthcare, technology, education and youth policy. Let us mutually protect the historical and cultural heritage of our peoples” (*Message from President Erdoğan to Greece: We want friends, not enemies*).

**Conclusion.** Thus, on the basis of international agreements, the legal position of both states and the approach of the International Court of Justice in similar cases, as well as consideration of the methods and principles applied, it can be concluded that the Aegean Sea should be divided between Türkiye and Greece based on the center line principle applied by the International Court of Justice.

It is clear that this decision – the resolution will decide what activities each country allows

and where, minimizing the possibility of military action between Greece and Türkiye in the Aegean Sea. Moreover, the resolution will bring greater political, military and social stability and security to the region and ultimately to NATO and the EU. Both countries will gain more political respect and influence than they currently have and will increase their national prestige. Both Greece and Türkiye will benefit from increased economic opportunities, from resources on the continental shelf to increased tourist numbers and business partnerships. The resolution will ensure uncontested passage for ships of all countries from the Aegean Sea to the Black Sea and back.

NATO can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of crisis management planning and related measures and begin to view the Aegean as a strong point in the overall security and stability architecture, rather than as weak spots in Greece or Türkiye that each country must defend. Both countries, on the other hand, could reduce the excessive amount of money they currently spend on national defense compared to other European countries due to the “threat”. The resolution will give greater legitimacy to UN Declaration III and enable it to be accepted worldwide as the only true maritime regime. Finally, the Greeks and Turks (and America, which actually places great strategic importance on the region and spends a lot of time and money trying to prevent violence and resolve disputes) will be able to live easier knowing that the threat of war has been eliminated once and for all.

Undoubtedly, Türkiye’s EU membership proposal could help the settlement process. Moreover, Türkiye has wanted to become a member of the European Union for decades. Following his re-election in May amid an economic crisis, Erdogan said he intended to improve the country's relations with Western partners and allies.

It should be noted that Türkiye has a long way to go before it is accepted as a full member of the EU, but this path of acceptance will have a cyclical connection with the Aegean dispute. The more Greece and Türkiye try to resolve their disputes, the more likely it is that Türkiye will fully comply with membership requirements and therefore be accepted into the EU. Likewise, if Türkiye becomes a member of the EU, the European Union will help resolve the Aegean Sea dispute.

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