

DR. DIMITRIS TSAROUHAS

“Greek-Turkish Relations: A New Era?”

Whatever happens in his remaining term in office, Greek Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis has secured a place in history. The first PM to pay an official state visit to Turkey in 49 years, Karamanlis's trip confirmed that the old archrivals have moved a long way from the bitter animosity of the recent past.

Ever since the late 1990s, a host of reasons has led to a marked improvement of the two NATO allies. Turkey's EU vocation, the earthquake diplomacy of 1999, the involvement of civil society and growing financial interdependence have led to the increasing realisation that a 'win-win' scenario in resolving bilateral problems is within the grasp of visionary leaders. It is telling that PM Karamanlis referred to that point in his visit to Atatürk's Mausoleum in Ankara, stressing the contribution by Turkey's founder and his Greek counterpart Venizelos in stabilising relations between the two nations in the interwar years.

In terms of concrete results, the Ankara talks produced little. The two sides have agreed to disagree on a host of issues ranging from the treatment of their respective minorities to the demarcation of their borders. The two Prime Ministers' press conference, two parallel monologues complemented by verbal niceties by the hosts and guests, indicate that the excellent personal relations between the two Prime Ministers are as yet inadequate to transform the structure of Greek-Turkish relations.

And yet it is overtly pessimistic to describe the talks as a failure, or to deny the usefulness and wisdom of such visits. To start with, the two sides decided to intensify their dialogue through a host of technical committees seeking to resolve bilateral disputes. The Foreign Ministries are willing to play a more important role in the process, indicating that without political involvement at the highest level such talks can produce little. What is even more important, however, is the fact that both sides now converse directly, putting their agendas on the table and exploring the possibility of a breakthrough. Prime Ministers Karamanlis and Erdoğan made pretty clear their willingness to open a new chapter in bilateral relations, and both delegations emphasise that 2008 can, potentially, prove a turning point.

Undoubtedly, the Cyprus problem remains a major thorn in that process. The elections scheduled there for February are of utmost importance, as the International Crisis Group (ICG) states in a recent report that 2008 may be the last-chance saloon for a viable solution. Greek and Turkish contributions to support a way out of the current impasse will be decisive. Notwithstanding domestic difficulties besetting both governments, the Greek and Turkish delegations made a significant step forward.

* * *

Dr. Dimitris Tsarouhas is an Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations, Bilkent University, Turkey. This article originally appeared on the Social Europe Blog and the GPSG Newsletter No. 12