Original Paper

The Greek-Turkish Confrontation in the Eastern Mediterranean as a Case Study for Populism's Role in International Relations during the Early 2020s

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the populist discourse dominated Athens' and Ankara's interior and foreign policy, causing the rapid decline of bilateral ties. The prevalence of populism resulted in the recruitment of the polarising civilisational discourse and authoritarian and clientelist politics. These strategies affected both Greek and Turkish foreign policies depending on the intensity with which the respective ruling parties have recruited the recipes of populism. As was expected, populism perpetuated the existing problems in the Greek-Turkish relations and created a new field of controversy, which is the antagonism for the marine areas and energy fields. Greek-Turkish relations of this period may serve as a case study of populism's impact on international relations. Further, they may shed light on the argument that populism complicates existing problems and creates other areas of controversy, such as those originating from resource nationalism.

Keywords: Civilisational rhetoric, Greece, Greek-Turkish relations, Turkey, polarization, populism, recourse nationalism

1. Introduction: Populism's Shadow in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea

In the summer of 2020, two NATO allies, Greece, and Turkey were at the brink of an open military confrontation. The epicentre of the most recent conflict was Turkey's decision to begin separate gas and oil exploration research in areas considered by Greece to be under her jurisdiction. The tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea have been steadily rising throughout the second half of the 2010s.

However, a few years back, diplomats and scholars had described this development as a remote scenario. From the late 1990s until the end of the 2000s, the two countries chose dialogue over conflict. In this framework, Ankara and Athens cooperated in healing the wounds of the 1999 earthquakes and beginning negotiations to solve essential issues in their relations. The change of government in Ankara at the end of 2002 added to the favourable climate between the two countries. Thus, the new government of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, JDP) took steps towards improving the Aegean Sea's general atmosphere, while Greek governments supported Turkey's European perspective. In 2004, these positive steps brought Turkey and Greece very close to solving the Cyprus Problem, a significant thorn in their relations since the mid-20th century. However, the spirit of optimism had no future and soon run out. During the 2010s, Athens and Ankara's internal political climate changed, while the two countries re-entered a collision orbit affecting several open fronts.

What went wrong in Greek-Turkish relations in the 2010s? Why have the two neighbouring countries reached the point of an intensified conflict? This study argues that the phenomenon of populism lies at the heart of the recent deterioration of Greek-Turkish relations. Over the past decade, the populist discourse dominated Athens' and Ankara's interior and foreign policy, causing a rapid decline of bilateral ties. Greek-Turkish relations of this period may serve as a case study of populism's impact on international relations. Further, they may shed light on the argument that populism complicates existing problems and creates other areas of controversy, such as those originating from resource nationalism.

This paper will first put forth a concise theoretical framework of the phenomenon of populism. Based on the writings of renowned researchers in this field, the study will focus on the various aspects of populism and its core argument of an existing conflict between the "pure people" and the elites. Also, it will focus on the populistic strategies employed in the interior political field and their connection to modern international relations. The study will review the link between populism and diplomacy while emphasising new areas of confrontation.

Following the theoretical background's summary, the paper will discuss the role of populism in Greece and Turkey's current internal and foreign policy. Our research will attempt to review the populistic strategies that the Greek and Turkish governments enlist in the face of the modern era's challenges. It will also synopsise the influence populism has on drawing their foreign policy.

The paper will examine three developments that have shaped Greek-Turkish ties in recent years. First, it will review the civilisational approach to the bilateral relations of the two countries. Then, it will discuss the competitive discourse dominating the Greek-Turkish relations and list the strategies employed by the neighbouring countries. The paper will also draw on Greek, Turkish and foreign press covering the recent developments in the Greek-Turkish relations and review their content through a discourse analysis approach.

Finally, it will consider the influence of resource nationalism in recent developments by tracing its roots back to the unilateral international law interpretations and existing realities in Greek-Turkish relations. In conclusion, the paper will argue that the improvement of the Greek-Turkish ties is possible through a radical revision of the populistic strategies enlisted by the two countries.

2. Towards a Concise Theoretical Framework for Populism

According to literature, the confrontation between the elites and the 'pure people' lies at the epicentre of populism. The theory puts forward the view that the 'corrupt elites' hold political, economic, and cultural power at the pure people's expense (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). Modern researchers expand populism's scope by adding the socio-politically under-represented groups to the list of those the 'pure people' are at odds with. In this context, populism presents the 'hard-working, family-oriented, plain-spoken, endowed with common sense people at odds with the elites and the 'outsiders'. As Brubaker underlines:

> *"In the vertical dimension, the people are defined in opposition to economic, political, and cultural elites. The people are represented as morally decent (though not necessarily pure), economically struggling, hard-working, family-oriented, plain-spoken, and endowed with common sense, while the elite—the rich, the powerful, the well-connected, the (over-) educated, and the institutionally empowered—are seen as living in different worlds. The people can be defined not only in relation to those on top but also—still in the vertical dimension—in relation to those on the bottom. Those on the bottom may be represented as parasites or spongers, as addicts or deviants, as disorderly or dangerous" (Brubaker, 2017b, p. 7).*

At the same time, the opposition between 'pure people' and elites and/or outsiders is viewed in civilisational terms. This civilisational approach connects populism to nationalism and stresses the pure people's unique 'civilisational values'(Brubaker, 2017a; Canovan, 1999; Miller-Idriss, 2019; Muller, 2016).

In action, populism remains true to the polarising school of thought which dictates confrontation. As a mass political movement, populism uses polarisation tactics to demarcate frontiers between the genuine 'pure people' and the elites/outsiders (Palonen, 2009). Identifying the 'pure people' as 'sovereign, common and nation' and politicising socio-political problems, the populist movement/party aims to the people's socio-political re-empowerment. As Mudde and Kaltwasser put it:

> *"The notion of the people as sovereign is based on the modern democratic idea that defines 'the people' not only as the ultimate source of political power, but also as 'the rulers. This notion is closely linked to the American and French Revolutions, which, in the famous words of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, established 'a government of the*

people, by the people, and for the people'. However, the formation of a democratic regime does not imply that the gap between governed and governors disappears completely. Under certain circumstances, the sovereign people can feel that they are not being (well) represented by the elites in power, and, accordingly, they will criticize—or even rebel against—the political establishment" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 9-10).

Promising to address issues such as immigration and corruption, the populist party promotes control of all power structures by the 'pure people'(Taggart, 2017). In describing this strategy, Laclau underlines that "populism constitutes the form of political expression of popular sectors when they are unable to establish an autonomous organisation and class ideology" (Laclau, 1977, p. 153). Once in power, if there is a strong legitimacy basis, the sovereign people's 'revolt' may lead to the "reshape of the entire (political) system" (Muller, 2016, p. 45). Populism also puts forth the movement or party's leader as "one of the pure people" (Muller, 2016, p. 51). The charismatic leader who confronts the elites and outsiders offers simplistic solutions to complex challenges:

"Clichés like charismatic leadership, tabloid-style communication techniques or the championing of simplistic solutions to complex challenges are features that facilitate populism. Populists relentlessly defend 'ordinary people' against what they perceive to be fickle and self-interested holders of power, elite values and institutional structures, or procedures that impede the direct and full expression of the vox populi (voice of the people). At the same time, populists reject differences of interests and opinions within the population and thus the possibility of compromise with political opponents" (Balfour et al. 2016, p. 23).

For the above-mentioned authoritarian style politics, the 'pure people' are compensated for their political support and legitimisation, with material benefits (Muller, 2016, p. 4). According to Muller, the clientelist politics level of success depends on the 'occupation' of the state, meaning the state mechanism's total control tasked with distributing wealth. Referring to the cases of Hungary and Poland Muller offers the example of the ruling populists of these countries who aim at "the transformation of the civil service law, so as to enable the party to place loyalists in what should have been nonpartisan bureaucratic positions" (Muller, 2016, pp. 44-45).

In the modern world, the policies of populism are traced to the anti-American and anti-European discourse, the pro-Russian tendencies in Europe, the Brexit in the United Kingdom and the recent developments in countries such as Poland, Hungary and Turkey (Balfour et al., 2016). Intertwined with multiple political trends, the spectrum of populism has many variants (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). The range begins at the left and then moves to the centrist political space where populism regionalism and market-liberal populism are found and ends up on the right where the populist radical right is manifested. The literature also refers to 'pure populist parties' and 'hybrid populist parties' (Coticchia & Vignoli, 2020). In the first category, we find parties with all the essential characteristics of modern populism. The second category contains parties that don't carry populism's basic features. Instead, they pursue populist rule either alone or through collaboration with other populist or non-populist actors.

Populism's rationale and strategy in the domestic political field in the 21st century also affects modern diplomacy. As Guirlando argues, in international relations populism demonstrates "a clear willingness to risk confrontation" and pursues an aggressive zero-sum strategy (Giurlando, 2020, p. 5). Bearing "a realist mindset, prioritizing national interests and perceiving relationships with ideological rivals in zero-sum terms", populists try to project regional or international ambitions (Giurlando, 2020, pp. 3-4). On the other hand, by emphasising the national interests and using anti-pluralist zero-sum strategies, the populist foreign policy also presents "the self and other not in narrowly national but in broader civilisational terms" (Brubaker, 2017a, p. 1191). The construction of this image of the 'pure people' is attempted in civilisational terms based on a protectionist attitude (Chryssogelos, 2017a). Verbeek and Zaslove argue that populism presents the 'pure people' in a state of permanent confrontation with transnational elites and outsiders, such as the international actors, the cross-national organisations, and immigrants:

"The relationship between populism and foreign policy is dynamic: the changing nature of foreign policy, particularly after the Cold War, has created new opportunities for the

rise of populist parties. The distinguishing feature of populist parties is the moral people/elite distinction. (The populist parties) judge foreign policy in terms of its effects on the elite-people juxtaposition. After all, this is what makes them a populist party. In some cases, this is manifested in the isolationist policy of the populist radical right, which entertains a narrow notion of the people; in other cases, it can take on the solidaristic internationalist cloak of the populist left parties, which seek to project a more encompassing notion of a people" (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017, p. 21).

In action, populism adapts its strategy for domestic policy to diplomacy. Rejecting values such as individualism, internationalism, and multiculturalism, populism provides an alternative political perspective. In contrast with the liberal democratic values such as permissiveness and belief in progress, populism "can at times amount to a relatively coherent alternative world-view (Canovan, 1999, p. 4)". At the same time, populism works to project leadership ambitions at the regional level. Therefore, the leadership skills of populist governments' leaders and their central role in the decision-making processes is over-emphasised (Taş, 2020). According to Krieger, populism also enlists new alternative interpretations of international law, downplays the international community's importance, and uses international law as an instrument:

"Populist governments advance an understanding of international law as a law of coordination. However, their practices are not coherent, and the most robust challenges are confined to the level of rhetoric, while, in their legal practices, an instrumental cherry-picking approach prevails. Their policies affect the current state of international law on two different levels: in the political sphere, their practices alter the overall environment in which legal rules are interpreted and, in the legal sphere, populist governments push for changes in the interpretation of established international legal rules" (Krieger, 2019, p. 973).

As we will argue in this paper, based on its zero-sum approach and repeated instrumentalisation of international law, populism complicates existing international relations problems and creates new areas of controversy. One of these controversies concerns the pure people's attachment to the national territory and the resources found in its lands and waters. According to Brown, energy or resource nationalism applies to any raw material, primarily energy resources such as oil and gas. As a backbone of the modern economy, these vital resources are "regarded with a sense of national pride (Brown, 2015, p. 21)". Therefore, governments tend to employ nationalistic terms when referring to such energy resources, which are perceived as part of the nation's natural inheritance.

3. The Role of Populism in Turkey's and Greece's Internal Political Scene and Foreign Policy

During the last decades, the left-populist and the market-liberal populist ruling parties have deeply affected Turkey and Greece. Particularly since mid-2019, the governments of both countries have been implementing market-liberal populist strategies. For this study, we categorise the Greek ruling party, the New Democracy (Νέα Δημοκρατία, ND) as a hybrid populist party and the Turkish ruling party, the JDP as a 'pure' populist party. Indeed, since the beginning of the last decade, the ND's official rhetoric was based on the principles of liberalism. The party's leadership and cadres are filled with politicians promoting a specific political discourse fitting the theory of populism. These party officials are also holding positions in the country's government and other administrative bodies. At the same time, according to modern literature, Turkey's ruling party, the JDP, has all the essential characteristics of a populist party. Also, throughout the 2015-2019 period, when JDP was at the helm of the Turkish government, Greece was governed by the coalition of two 'pure populist' parties, the left-populist Syriza (Συναπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς, Syriza) and the right-winged populist Independent Helens (Ανεξάρτητοι Έλληνες, IH).

The modern political history of both countries offers many examples of governing parties that followed a strategy based on populist characteristics. Namely, the rhetoric of confrontation between the 'pure people' and interior and/or exterior elites in civilisational terms has been utilised by several of Greece's and Turkey's ruling parties. In Turkey, the roots of the dichotomy between the centre and periphery (the pro-Western Kemalist secular elites in power and the rest of the society), found today in the epicentre of Turkey's populist rhetoric, are dating back to the foundation of the Republic of Turkey. According to

Aytaç and Elçi:

> *"Turkey inherited a sociocultural divide from the Ottoman Empire that pitted the ruling elites of the 'centre' against a culturally heterogeneous 'periphery'. In the Republican era, the centre comprised of the quasi-autonomous bureaucracy, especially that of the judiciary and military, in alliance with large, state-dependent businesses and the mainstream intellectual community and academia. The periphery, in turn, consists of a mixture of traditionalist ethnic, religious, and regional groups that have been systematically kept out of the power-wielding institutions of the state. Thanks to their tight control of the state institutions in the early Republican period, the centre adopted a top-down modernization and Westernization program that further alienated the conservative, peripheral masses" (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019, p. 90).*

The JDP's ascent to power in 2002 was based on the dichotomous narrative of an existing struggle between Anatolia's pure, hard-working and devoted people, which have for long been marginalised from the country's political scene and the secular-republican elites which held a ruling position for decades (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019, p. 94, p. 98). During its first years in government, the JDP utilized the liberal discourse to end the rule of the pro-Western Kemalist and secular elites. The Gezi protest in 2013, the rift within the government alliance (Gülen Case) and the failed coup attempt of 2016 caused the JDP to invoke the 'national will' and call on the mobilisation of the masses. As Türk points out:

> *"The success of Erdoğan lies in this personal and erotic relationship between himself and his voters. Erdoğan never quits mentioning the genuine nature of this relationship. He communicates with the people in a common manner as 'one of them', which is one of the major characteristics of populist rhetoric. During the political crises of 2007, 2013 and 2016, it was this relationship between Erdoğan and his voters that made it possible to overcome the challenges. The relationship is built upon Erdoğan's key term 'Milli İrade' ('national will'), which might in short be described as a majoritarian perspective on democracy. 'Milli İrade' is also a part of Erdoğan's populist strategy and functions as a medium of mass mobilization" (Türk, 2018, p. 10).*

In the above context, the idea of an ongoing struggle between the party's 'pure people' voters and opposition elites was the basis of the JDP's polarising discourse. The pure people's ascendancy to power, which was the JDP's central claim, was fully accomplished during the 2010s first by securing Turkey's presidency, second by limiting the role of the army on the political scene through the investigating of various military coup attempts and third by the change of the constitution. At this time, Turkey continued to witness the perpetuation of patronage politics and clientelist tradition. Besides, as Sayari notes, "political clientelism and patronage have long been important components of politics and society in Turkey" (Sayari. 2011, p. 13). In this context, Turkey's transition to the multi-party system opened the way for the emerging party-controlled patronage, which distributes national wealth in exchange for political support.

The perpetuation of Turkey's patronage politics facilitated the intensification of political polarisation. It also enabled the JDP to project Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's populist leadership (Keyman, 2014). Hence, Erdoğan was seen as a leader in the service of the marginalised social groups who were for decades excluded from power but were now offered new opportunities. Indeed, after the failed coup attempt in 2016, the populist civilisational narrative of an ongoing struggle between the 'pure people', guided by charismatic Erdoğan vs interior and/or exterior elites, was intensified. In this framework, a conservative government alliance among the leading JDP, the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, NMP) and the Grand Unity Party (Büyük Birlik Partisi, GUP) was formed. With the NMP and GUP's support, the JDP built Turkey's illiberal democracy, showing obvious authoritarian tendencies (Özpek & Tanriverdi Yaşar, 2018).

Also, the JDP adapted this conflict-oriented civilisational rhetoric to the needs of the Turkish foreign policy. Having spent its first years in power as a predominantly pro-EU party, the JDP then gradually assumed 'flamboyant anti-western (Göksel, 2019) views and sought a foreign policy to define Turkey as a soft power in its region (Kaliber & Kaliber, 2019). Gradually this strategy developed into an attempt for the 'de-Europeanisation' of the Turkish foreign policy through depicting Anatolia's pure,

hard-working, and devoted people in juxtaposition with the West:

> *"The era of thick populism in Turkish foreign policy has been characterised mainly by anti-Westernist discourses in which the West is resituated as the other of the Turkish political identity. In a similar vein, the civilisational discourse adopted by JDP officials differs radically from the discourse of the thin populist era of Turkish foreign policy. In the latter, Turkey was projected as having the ability to fuse the elements of both Eastern and Western civilisations and, thus, as having the means to consolidate intercivilisational dialogue and the will to co-exist. At present, however, Turkey is solidly positioned as a member of the morally superior Eastern civilisation, imagined as having a necessarily confrontational relationship with the Western other for global power and domination" (Kaliber & Kaliber, 2019, p. 12).*

After the Arab Spring, Ankara distanced itself from the zero problems approach with its neighbours. Meanwhile, the JDP's foreign policy further cultivated its bonds with the Muslim Brotherhood-backed political parties and emphasised the contentious Sunni-Islamic identity politics on the broader area (Özpek & Tanriverdi Yaşar, 2018). Region-wise, this diplomatic policy aimed to highlight President Erdogan's leadership capabilities and Turkey's regional captaincy (Türk, 2018). This assertive, over-stretched, zero-sum oriented foreign policy also aimed at the pure people's mass mobilisation within Turkey. For instance, the antagonism with Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea worked in the said direction drawn by the Turkish ruling party. In discussing this competitive, zero-sum foreign policy, Göksel adds that the JDP utilised it to consolidate illiberal populism at home while at the same time battling major diplomatic crises with European governments and the US (Göksel, 2019, p. 27).

Populism's core strategy, the consolidation of political power based on the struggle between the 'pure people' and the national and international elites, was also the ideological backbone of the parties that came to power in Greece in the recent decades. As Stavrakakis and Katsambekis mention, "Greece is no stranger to populism. The country's recent history, following the democratic transition marking the end of a seven-year military dictatorship (1967-1974) has been marked by populist movements of all kinds, ranging from the popular-democratic left to the religious far-right" (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014, p. 124).

After the fall of the military regime in 1974, the country experienced a brief transitional period to liberal democracy (Lönnroth, 2017). This transition was interrupted in the early 1980s when populism prevailed on the country's political scene. A supposedly socialist party, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Πανελλήνιο Σοσιαλιστικό Κίνημα, Pasok), which was elected to government in 1981, put forward the demands of the "so-called non-privileged" against the elites (Pappas, 2014, p. 21). As Lönnroth mentions from the 1980s until the unprecedented financial crisis of the late 2010s, Greece developed as a populist democracy:

> *"On the 23rd of July 1974 the previous dictatorship run by the Greek military junta was replaced by political pluralism when Constantine Karamanlis, founder of ND, came to power. He soon began changing Greek society creating a liberal constitution, the formation of large political parties, economic stability and set the groundwork for entering the European Economic Community (EEC) which Greece eventually did in 1981. However, this effort was short-lived as Andreas Papandreou, founder of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok), 'a nominally socialist party that posed in Greece's political arena as the complete antithesis of democratic liberalism' came to power in 1981" (Lönnroth, 2017, p. 2).*

Besides a brief interruption in the early 1990s, Pasok remained in power until 2004. That year ND returned to power to govern the country until the outbreak of the unprecedented financial crisis, which erupted in the late 2000s. As international literature underlines, during this period, Greece went from being a frail liberal democracy to political extremism characterized by populism and from relative richness to very low standards of living. This development paved the way to challenging Greece's position in the EU by new political forces of extreme populism that benefited from the weakening of the larger systemic parties.

During the financial crisis, Greece's old political establishment parties tried to battle the extreme socio-economic crisis by securing foreign creditors' help and updating their populist narrative. In this context, the ruling parties, mainly Pasok and ND, developed into hybrid populist actors. Specifically, in their effort to defend the austerity measures implemented in Greece, the ruling parties "resurrected anti-communist rhetoric", promoted the nationalist discourse, and attempted to strengthen their leadership by transferring populist politicians from smaller parties (Chryssogelos, 2017b; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2019). This strategy's failure resulted in the emergence of the coalition government of Syriza and IH, which promised to curb the austerity measures (Lönnroth, 2017). The coalition of the left and the right-winged populist parties, which remained in power from 2015 until mid-2019, promoted an antagonistic discourse based on "the pattern us/the people against them/the establishment" (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014).

Although in a very different context, in the 2010s, Greece shared many populistic aspects found in modern Turkey's case. Despite having a more robust democracy than Turkey's, Greece too continued to carry several problematic elements such as the 'enhanced proportionality' electoral system, which rewards the first party with a bonus of 50 out of 300 parliamentary seats. At the same time, the well-grounded bipartisanship developed after 1981 was widely supported by the state-related benefits distributions system that nurtured the country's polarising reflexes and patronage politics (Chryssogelos, 2017b). Moreover, as Erdoğan's JDP, Alexis Tsipras' Syriza used an aggressive approach following the line of us/them dichotomy. Within this context, Tsipras presented himself as one of the ordinary people fighting the interior and exterior enemies of the 'pure people'. According to Markai and Apospori:

> *"Political advertisement can be very successful if it reaches out and moves people in a unique way and in the appropriate timing. According to the experts, Tsipras political advertisement was an exemplar in the field. As Tsipras himself noticed in the interview "what we tried to do through the advertisement was to create a climate that would fit well with the philosophy of our candidacy. We tried to 'shock' the public and made them curious about us, so we made them listen to what we had to tell them. That was an anti-conformist picture and that was the essence of the message we would like to convey. In a similar way, we would like our entire campaign to be anti-conformist, deeply radical and 'fresh'" (Markaki & Apospori. 2008, p. 7).*

In the same vein, the Greek governments of the 2010s recruited two strategies in diplomacy inspired by populism. On the one hand, they tried to strengthen and mobilize their electoral base by promoting antagonistic rhetoric towards Turkey. For instance, Greek diplomacy of the 2010s disregarded Turkey's concerns in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea. On the other hand, the Syriza-IH coalition enlisted the 'them/the establishment' dichotomy and criticised both the foreign powers pressuring Greece with economic austerity measures and the collaborators of these foreign powers within the country, such as the parties of the old political establishment. Using slogans such as 'They decided without us, we're moving on without them', the populist parties in the government aimed to address heterogeneous frustrated groups of people and their demands against the harsh austerity measures. Highlighting the popular opposition to a common 'other' (interior and foreign pro-austerity forces), Greece's ruling populist discourse divided the country into two opposing camps, "them (the 'establishment,' the 'elite') and us ('the people'), power and the underdog, the elite and the non-privileged, those 'up' and the others 'down'" (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014, p. 129).

The above rhetoric was predominant in Greek politics throughout this period until the electoral battles of mid-2019, when the widespread dissatisfaction with the populist coalition government's high taxes, unemployment rate and broken promises brought the centrist-hybrid populist ND back to power. The new government did not follow up on the populist, anti-establishment rhetoric directed against Greece's Western lenders. Instead, it projected the idea that Greece is the last bastion of the common Greek-European culture in the Eastern Mediterranean region, perpetuating thus the country's dogmatic attachment to the West. Within this conflict-oriented civilisational approach, as we will see in the follow-up of this study, Greece displayed a competitive attitude towards Turkey.

4. The Reign of Populism in the Greek-Turkish Relations

During the 2010s, populism left its mark on the bilateral ties of Greece and Turkey besides their internal political fields and foreign policy. The hybrid populist government parties in Athens, like their pure populist counterparts in Ankara, gradually cultivated a climate of confrontation in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. The two neighbours chose in their bilateral ties to follow the unilateral interpretations of the international law, a multidimensional zero-sum strategy and resource nationalism. In this framework, the Greek-Turkish relations were further polarised whilst the two countries fought for the leading role in the region. Under those circumstances and the ever-growing financial crisis, the populist parties of Syriza and IH came to power in Greece whilst the JDP in Turkey faced its first defeat at the first parliamentary elections of 2015 and the 2016 failed military coup.

The tension in the Greek-Turkish relations was also instrumentalised for the rally of the governing parties' electoral base. In Greece, the looming 'Turkish threat' narrative turned the public's attention away from the socio-political problems triggered by the unprecedented economic crisis. Similarly, the Erdoğan government rallied the conservative, nationalist base behind its nationalist, militarist zero-sum rhetoric and away from the multitude of problems boosted by the failed coup of 2016 ("Turkey's Increasingly Assertive Foreign Policy" 2020). In the 2010s, the Turkish President assumed the leading role in all the decision-making processes affecting the country's foreign policy, which was oriented towards securing Turkey's key position in the region. The Greek Prime Minister, too, took on a similar, although a less intrusive, role in shaping his country's diplomacy strategy. In this context, Athens and Ankara's 'collision course' went beyond affecting just their bilateral relations based on their distinct political agenda to also redefining their relations with Western and neighbouring countries.

Therefore, Greece's political leadership projected the modern Greek state as a bastion of European culture and the West's closest ally in Southeast Europe. It is important to note here that the official Greek historiography perceives Ancient Greece and the Byzantine Empire as the predecessors of the modern Greek state. This narrative of historical continuity puts Greece at the epicentre of Hellenism and Christianity and, by the extent, at the heart of the contemporary European identity. As former Greek President Prokopis Pavlopoulos states:

> *"Christian teaching and its values, which highlighted Byzantine art and culture, and contributed to the (Europe's) transition to the Renaissance, are integral elements of European culture ("Π. Παυλόπουλος: Η χριστιανική διδασκαλία και ο βυζαντινός πολιτισμός είναι αναπόσπαστα στοιχεία της Ευρώπης [P. Pavlopoulos: Christian teaching and Byzantine civilization are integral elements of Europe]" 2017)."*

According to Greece's President, "Turkey directly challenges Byzantine Culture" which is a fundamental pillar of European culture ("Παυλόπουλος: Η Τουρκία επιβουλεύεται ευθέως τον Βυζαντινό Πολιτισμό [Pavlopoulos: Turkey directly uses the Byzantine culture]" 2020). Turkey's President responded to his Greek counterpart's criticism within a similar civilisational context by claiming that his country shares the history of the Islamic world. As Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated:

> *"We must keep in mind that we are members of a nation that built a great civilisation. (This nation) will carry out a resurrection worthy of the history of the Islamic world, which has made Istanbul, Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad a centre of science and culture for centuries ("Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Medeniyetler tarihini İslam medeniyetini görmezden gelerek yazmak mümkün değil [President Erdogan: It is not possible to write the history of civilizations by ignoring the Islamic civilization]" 2019)."*

Therefore, based on its Turkish-Sunni Muslim character and culture, which is thought to date back to the Ottoman Empire and beyond, Turkey claims a leading role in its region whilst Greece stands in opposition with the West's help. As Erdoğan said:

> *"(Athens) targeted us once again. Now, how can we continue our talks? I know you put your trust in some places. But those whom you trust have already failed you. Turkey will not lean on anyone. It will stand up for itself ("Erdoğan to Mitsotakis: If You Want Dialogue, Stop Targeting Turkey" 2021)."*

The civilisational antagonism in the Greek-Turkish relations peaked throughout the Summer of 2020 on the Turkish government's decision to reconvert the Hagia Sophia museum in Istanbul into a mosque. Based on the assumption that the Greek state is the natural continuation of Byzantium and has the obligation to defend the Greek Orthodox culture of the empire, Athens reacted to Turkey's initiatives using a firm tone. The Greek President, Katerina Sakellaropoulou, in her reaction, stated that "Turkey's decision to turn (Hagia Sophia) into a mosque challenges our historical memory and damages irreparably (Turkey's) relations with Greece, the European Union and the international community ("Δήλωση της Προέδρου της Δημοκρατίας για την Αγία Σοφία [Declaration by the President of the Republic for Hagia Sophia]" 2020)". Responding to this criticism, the Turkish President pointed out that "Turkey can convert Hagia Sophia into a mosque" because "the Turkish nation's right over Hagia Sophia is no less (definite) than of those who build it ("İnsanlığın Ortak Mirası Olan Ayasofya, Yeni Statüsüyle Herkesi Kucaklamaya Çok Daha Samimi, Çok Daha Özgün Şekilde Devam Edecektir [Hagia Sophia, the Common Heritage of Humanity, Will Be Much More Intimate]" 2020)". A few months later, the Greek Archbishop, Ieronymos, made a controversial assertion claiming that "Islam is not a religion, but a political party and its believers are the people of war ("Αρχιεπίσκοπος Ιερώνυμος: «Φωτιά» στην Τουρκία τα όσα είπε για το Ισλάμ [Archbishop Jeronyme: 'Fire' for Turkey what he declared about Islam]" 2021)", which as was expected, provoked Ankara's strong reaction ("Atina Ve Tüm Yunanistan Başpiskoposu'nun Dinimize Yönelik İfadeleri Hκ. [About the Statement of the Archbishop of Athens and Whole Greece]" 2021).

Looking back to the second half of the 2010s, we observe that zero-sum tactics framed the civilisational context in the Greek-Turkish relations. The popular narrative of an open struggle between the Greek, Christian, European 'pure people' versus the Turkish, Sunni Muslim 'pure people' resulted in a gradual deterioration of Greek-Turkish relations. Several unresolved problems, such as the two countries' dispute over territorial waters and airspace, were perpetuated in this period ("Official Data Shows Turkey Violated Greek Territorial Waters 2,032 Times in 2019" 2019).

At the same time, the negotiations on a final solution to the Cyprus Problem didn't yield a positive result (Antoniades, 2020). Notably, Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot community disagreed with Greece and the Greek Cypriot side on guarantees and political equality issues. In addition, moving on to the early 2020s, the newly elected Turkish Cypriot leadership, having the support of Ankara, attempted to alter the agreed basis of the solution to the Cyprus problem by proposing for discussion the two-state solution ("KKTC'de Cumhurbaşkanı Adayı Ersin Tatar Vizyonunu Açıkladı [In the TRNC, the Presidential Candidate Announced His Vision of the Tatar]" 2020). The bi-communal and bilateral relations climate sunk into bitterness when the Turkish Cypriot community launched the plan to open the closed city of Famagusta under its administration ("Kapalı Maraş 46 yıl sonra açılıyor [Closed Maras opens after 46 years]" 2020).

In a similar context of friction in the Greek-Turkish relations, when eight Turkish military personnel sought asylum in Greece after the failed coup d'état on 15 July 2016, the Supreme Courts ruled against extradition demanded Turkey ("Greek Top Court Rejects Extradition of Turkish Coup Plotter Soldiers, Issues Arrest Warrant in Absentia - World News" 2017). In early 2018, Turkey arrested two Greek soldiers allegedly entering a Turkish military zone. These mishaps of accidentally violating the neighbour's borders were often between the Greek and Turkish armies. They were usually resolved based on the good intentions of the officers serving at the point. On that occasion, the two soldiers were detained in Turkey for several months (Press, 2018).

Mutual accusations and hostility observed in the relations between Turkey and its Western friends also affected Greek-Turkish relations. At the beginning of 2020, shortly after an air attack at a Turkish army base in Idlib in northern Syria, Turkey claimed the Western allies didn't support her on the Syrian front. Based on this, Turkey stopped preventing migrants and refugees from leaving for Europe via the Greek borders. Prior to this, Turkey suspended its bilateral migrant readmission deal with Greece ("Turkey Suspends 'Migrant Readmission' Deal with Greece - Turkey News" 2018). These decisions marked a dramatic turn in Greece's humanitarian crisis and added to the disputes on the two countries' land and sea borders. At the time, many people attempted to cross the Greek-Turkish border only to meet tear gas and warning shots fired from the border's Greek side ("Tensions Mount at Greek Border with Turkey amid Contested History of Migration in the Aegean" 2020). The flow of immigrants and

refugees affected Greece, which had to shelter many refugees within a short time.

The unilateral international law interpretations and resource nationalism were also instrumental in altering the Turkish-Greek relations towards the end of the 2010s. During this period, both Greece and Cyprus were seeking a way out of their financial collapse by raising the prospect of becoming Europe's energy gateway. Therefore, since the 2000s, Cyprus has been taking essential steps to exploit the island's waters' natural resources having Greece on her side. In this context, Cyprus, with the collaboration of international energy giants and neighbouring countries, signed agreements defining its own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and natural resources co-exploitation (Ellinas, 2020; Kostianoy & Carpenter, 2018). Greece took similar steps in the same direction during recent years ("Offshore Deepwater Exploration and Drilling in Greece" 2019).

These Greek and Cypriot enterprises gave Ankara the impression that Turkey's two traditional rivals were making coordinated moves to leave Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots out of the new Eastern Mediterranean energy equation. This impression was further amplified by the deterioration of the Greek-Turkish relations and the perpetuation of the Cyprus problem.   Ankara reacted by claiming the Eastern Mediterranean's marine areas and resources for herself and the Turkish Cypriot community. Ankara clarified that "it will continue to defend the rights and interests of the Turkish Cypriot people around the island as long as the Greek Cypriot side continues to not include Turkish Cypriots in the decision-making mechanisms" ("No: 199, 10 Temmuz 2019, Yavuz Sondaj Gemimizin Faaliyetleri Hk. [No: 199, 10 July 2019, About Our Yavuz Drilling Ship's Activities]," n.d., 199). Based on this, Turkey took unilateral initiatives, including signing agreements with the non-recognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and executing separate drillings and research operations in areas of the Eastern Mediterranean claimed by Greece and Cyprus (Andrei, 2019; "Timeline: Turkey's Gas Exploration off Cyprus Raises Tensions" 2019).

In addition, Ankara put forth the "Mavi Vatan (Blue Homeland)" doctrine, which ignores the Greek and Cypriot sides' claims (Dimou 2020) and interprets the international law in a way that suits Ankara's vital interests. According to Turkey's reading, the islands near the Turkish continental shelf lack jurisdiction on the said continental shelf. Within this framework, Turkey claims sizable areas of the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean (Ortolland, 2009; Stelgias, 2020). Greece, on her part, rejects Turkey's theories and puts forward the view that "The Convention on the Law of the Sea provides for the sovereign rights of the coastal State" and the "islands are entitled to a coastal zone, border zone, EEZ and a continental shelf". Moreover, to the disappointment of Ankara, Athens pointed out that "in the absence of a demarcation agreement with neighbouring states, the outer boundary of the Greek continental shelf is the midline between the Greek coasts and the coasts adjacent to or adjacent to them" ("Ελληνοτουρκική διαφορά ως προς την οριοθέτηση της υφαλοκρηπίδας - Ειδικότερα κείμενα [Greek-Turkish difference regarding to the demarcation of the continental shelf - Special texts]" 2018).

Based on the "Mavi Vatan" doctrine, in 2019, Ankara also signed an agreement with Libya, which shares a maritime border with Greece, besides taking part in Libya's Civil War (Wasilewski, 2020). During the same period, Turkey stirred up quarrels with several of Greece's and Cyprus' friends, such as France, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (Dalay, 2021). Turkey's confrontational rhetoric and one-sided interpretations of international law provoked Athens and Nicosia. They brought Greece and Turkey to the brink of an open military confrontation in 2020 ("Νίκος Παναγιωτόπουλος στο «ΘΕΜΑ»: Τρεις φορές φτάσαμε κοντά σε θερμό επεισόδιο [Nikos Panagiotopoulos in 'THEMA': We arrived three times on the edge of a hot episode]" 2021).

5. Conclusion: In Search of an Alternative Approach to Populism in the Greek-Turkish Relations

The main contention put forth by this study is that populism has a multidimensional influence on Greek-Turkish relations and contributes to bilateral relations deterioration. Within this context, our first argument is that the worsening of Greek-Turkish ties over the past decade is closely related to the prevalence of populism rhetoric in Turkey's and Greece's domestic political field and foreign policy. Therefore, the prevalence of populism resulted in the recruitment of the polarising civilisational discourse and authoritarian and clientelist politics. These strategies affected both Greek and Turkish foreign policies depending on the intensity with which the respective ruling parties have recruited the recipes of populism. As was expected, populism perpetuated the existing problems in the

Greek-Turkish relations and created a new field of controversy, which is the antagonism for the marine areas and energy fields. Our second argument is that to improve the Greek-Turkish relations, Athens and Ankara need to review several of their options and address the various aspects of their populist choices. Placing populism at the heart of troubled Greek-Turkish ties could help adequately identify the critical parameters of the recent deterioration of bilateral relations between the two neighbouring countries.

Since populism is at the eye of the storm that broke loose on the Greek-Turkish relations in the past years, addressing the various aspects of the phenomenon could change the overall climate. The withdraw of populism's basic premise, meaning the civilisational dichotomy between 'them and us', would presumably help strengthen the dialogue. Besides, focusing on the common characteristics and objectives that unite the two sides, rather than their differences, could be a first step in the desired direction. This effort would also help to put an end to the recruitment of polarisation strategies. For this to happen, the Greek and Turkish governments will have to conclude that the political and diplomatic profit from improving the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean's overall climate is more significant and valuable than the rallying of internal electoral bases behind nationalist recipes. Similarly, the two neighbouring countries may come to understand that securing a leading role at the regional level goes through the settlement of foreign policy and bilateral relations' chronic problems.

Reversing the prescriptions of populism would create an ideal scenario in which the zero-sum choices in the Greek-Turkish relations would be a thing of the past. The win-win strategy, which in previous decades was the shared dream of Greek and Turkish diplomats, requires, besides limiting populism within the internal field, the focusing of Athens and Ankara's attention on dialogue and cooperation for the settlement of the various regional issues. Above all, it presupposes respect for each side's concerns and sensitivities (e.g., concerning national security) and the end of unilateral interpretations of the law. Athens and Ankara could take the first step in this direction, starting from the energy field, by reaching common conclusions on marine zones and water energy deposits and joining forces to exploit sources.

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