

CLIMATE CHANGE, ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT

# CAN CLIMATE CRISIS LEAD TO BRIDGE- BUILDING ACROSS THE AEGEAN?

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Climate change, a common global threat, offers unique opportunities for cooperation in the region of the eastern Mediterranean.



Working together in building energy communities helps to reduce carbon emissions and dependency on fossil fuels, while increasing people power and participation.



Dealing with common threats requires close cooperation, not increasing tension. Civil society can play a key role in proposing and shaping concrete approaches.



Energy, food and climate impacts have been identified as 'low hanging fruit' for close cooperation between people and local authorities in the region.



# Instead of a preface

Our thoughts during these difficult days, in mid-February 2023, are with the people who have died in the terrible earthquake in Syria and Turkey, as well as those who have lost all their belongings and are mourning the loss of loved ones and friends.

The following text was completed before the earthquake of 6 February 2023. In these days, real life shows once again that these two countries, regardless of political conflicts, are destined to live together, work together and cooperate. Right now, this is in response to the devastating and unpredictable impacts of the earthquake. But what we are suggesting is cooperation to reduce the impacts of climate change for the people of both nations, letting the two countries become pioneers of action against climate change. What we are suggesting is ongoing cooperation not limited to disaster relief.

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# CAN CLIMATE CRISIS LEAD TO BRIDGE-BUILDING ACROSS THE AEGEAN?

## Introduction

Once again, policymakers from Turkey and Greece are engaging in mutual accusations, exchanging hostile rhetoric and increasing tensions in the Aegean. Within this context, talking about energy issues in the Eastern Mediterranean seems like walking through a minefield. However, growing environmental risks amidst the war in Ukraine and its energy-related repercussions and regional tensions compelled the Athens office of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) to organise a workshop in Samos in May 2022 at which activists, academics, business people, and artists from Greece and Turkey sat together and tried to identify common environmental challenges and possible solutions in the Aegean. While the climate crisis emerged as the main issue, energy, art, food and education were among the other topics that made the list of possible synergies that could bring the two sides together in the fight against climate change. The crucial question is: Can climate crisis lead to building bridges across the Aegean, despite the political obstacles?

## Background

Relations between Turkey and Greece have not always been easy. Constant frictions and tensions have been developing over sovereignty rights, air space, territorial waters and the continental shelf. The unresolved issue of Cyprus adds to the already complex situation. Recent discoveries of hydrocarbon sources in the Eastern Mediterranean have triggered a new round of tensions and a race in the region to establish exclusive economic zones (EEZs), particularly with the formation of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum.<sup>1</sup> Taking action to protect national sovereignty' seems to be pursuing a potentially dangerous course, involving other countries, too. As for Greece and Turkey, both sides have been increasingly accusing each other of airspace violations, pushing back refugee boats, illegal drilling activities, escalatory military action and rhetoric.

<sup>1</sup> This comprises the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and Palestine. Turkey, Syria and Lebanon are thus excluded.

## Earthquake diplomacy and rapprochement in the 2000s

Despite this gloomy picture, it is important to remember the periods in which the two countries could conduct successful diplomacy among policymakers and cooperation between civil societies. Especially during the late 1990s, diplomatic attempts between Turkey and Greece accelerated under the aegis of Turkey's EU accession process. Marked by mutual rescue and relief missions after tragic earthquakes in İzmit-Gölcük on 17 August 1999 and Athens on 7 September 1999, this era is often categorised as 'rapprochement' and the disaster diplomacy has come to be known as 'earthquake diplomacy'. Shortly afterwards, in January 2000, George Papandreou paid an official visit to Turkey, the first by a Greek foreign minister in 38 years. A Memorandum of Understanding between the Republic of Turkey and the Hellenic Republic concerning Cooperation on Environmental Protection was signed and a Joint Hellenic-Turkish Standby Disaster Response Unit (JHET-SDRU) was to be established in this period.<sup>2</sup> The JHET-SDRU was signed in 2001 and ratified by the Turkish parliament in 2004 and by the Greek parliament in 2006. The aim was to organise joint exercises and cooperation on other emergencies.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Greece and Turkey offered each other immediate assistance in the wake of earthquakes and wildfires.

Cooperation between civil societies also increased during this period. The search-and-rescue teams of Greece's EMAK (Special Units for Disaster Relief, Ειδικές Μονάδες Αντιμετώπισης Καταστροφών in Greek) and Turkey's AKUT (Search-and-Rescue Team, Arama Kurtarma Timi in Turkish) were involved in cooperative efforts. The EU launched the Civil Society Development Programme in 2002 to strengthen NGOs in Turkey. Its components included local civic initiatives and the Turkish-Greek Civic Dialogue. Although organisations in Greece

<sup>2</sup> In the Annex of the Memorandum the following are identified as potential areas for cooperation: energy production, desertification, combating marine pollution, adopting environmentally-friendly solid waste management systems, developing eco-tourism, environmental impact assessment, encouraging NGO cooperation, combating pollution, and cooperation on earthquakes and forest fires. <http://www.turkishgreek.org/index.php/kuetuephane/item/33-memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-republic-of-turkey-and-the-hellenic-republic-concerning-cooperation-on-environmental-protection>

<sup>3</sup> Dizdaroğlu, C. (2021): Greek-Turkish Relations at the Crossroads: Cooperation or Rivalry? Istanbul Political Research Institute Policy Note.

and Turkey have benefited from EU funds since the 1990s, this was the first programme specifically designed for this purpose. It had a budget of 8 million euros for 2002 and 2005.<sup>4</sup> The macro grants under this programme were provided to organisations already active in this area, while the Ankara branch of AEGEE coordinated the project. The Interreg III Programme and pre-accession funding to Turkey continued in this direction. Between 2004 and 2006, 35 million euros were provided for cross-border projects between Greece and Turkey.<sup>5</sup> With this support, environmental projects such as protecting the Mediterranean monk seal led to exchanges of knowledge and experience between the Underwater Research Society–Mediterranean Seal Research Group (SAD-AFAG) in Turkey and the Hellenic Society for the Study and Protection of the Monk Seal (MOM).<sup>6</sup> The Women’s Initiative for Peace (WINPEACE) brought women together from Aegean villages to develop agro-tourism.<sup>7</sup> A workshop on the sociological effects of natural disasters was organised and at the closing event, AEGEE published a ‘Declaration of Youth’, which also included their suggestions on environmental protection.<sup>8</sup>

The rapprochement process lost momentum after its initial years and failed to yield solutions to bilateral problems. However, despite increasing tensions, high-level visits and civil society cooperation continue between Turkey and Greece, which could be the basis of future cooperation on climate change.

## Cooperation on climate change

As energy prices skyrocket, energy poverty is spreading widely, adding to social polarisation and divisions at the national and international levels. Adding tension to an already tense relationship is not a good strategy. So, let’s start with the basics:

1. access to clean energy is a basic human right;
2. at times of climate crisis, we need immediately to curb dependency on any type of fossil fuels (such as lignite, oil or gas);
3. energy poverty must be fought to alleviate marginalisation, improve inclusion and reduce the social gap;
4. neighbours need to cooperate to make the above happen;
5. citizens and local authorities should play a key role over against central governments.

<sup>4</sup> Rumelili, B. (2007): Transforming Conflicts on EU Borders: The Case of Greek-Turkish Relations, in: *Journal of Common Market Studies* 45(1): 105–126.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> AEGEE Europe (ND): *Turkish-Greek Civil Dialogue Project 2002–2005*.

<sup>7</sup> Oral, Z. (2010): *WINPEACE: A Miraculous Experience*. FES Turkey Office.

<sup>8</sup> The suggestions included ‘Cooperation between the municipalities of the cities of the Turkish coastline and the Greek islands for wastewater treatment; stricter legislation on environmental protection; NGOs should cooperate in common action (for example, campaign to ban nuclear plants and nuclear waste treatment units); water supply to the other side in case of shortages of water during summertime’. See AEGEE Europe: *Turkish-Greek Civil Dialogue Project 2002–2005*.

## Climate crisis hitting the Eastern Mediterranean

It seems that the window of opportunity during which we will be able to limit the increase in average temperature to 1.5 °C is passing out of reach. But research findings indicate that the average temperature increase in the region is already higher than this, above the global average. Recorded climate crisis impacts in the region (including desertification and rising sea temperature) are already higher than the global average. The rise in sea temperature is already higher than the global average and invasive species seem to be increasing and even dominating parts of the region. Agricultural production and tourism, two of the main sources of income in the region, are expected to be affected by the unfolding new climate reality. The accelerating climate crisis is expected to increase displaced populations<sup>9</sup> by hundreds of millions of people by the end of the century, and the Eastern Mediterranean is expected to receive a disproportionately large percentage of them. All the above are threatening the regional economy’s financial stability and sustainability and thus social cohesion and human lives.

## Clean energy NOW

According to the experience of the past 70 years, intensive use of fossil fuels means that we have dramatically increased greenhouse gas emissions. As we get closer to the +1.5 °C limit, beyond which we will be entering uncharted waters for humanity, there is little time left to change course and reduce expected impacts. As greenhouse gasses (especially CO<sub>2</sub>) have a long life, even if we curb further emissions immediately, the climate crisis will continue as a result of existing emissions in the atmosphere. In simple terms, as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has clearly and repeatedly stated, we need to act fast to achieve zero emissions as close as possible to 2040.<sup>10</sup> In order to achieve this we need to reinvent many sectors of our life and global economy, such as energy production, agriculture and transport. In this arena, energy seems to be the low hanging fruit as technology provides a plethora of options. Science has elaborated many different scenarios showing how decentralised clean energy can provide necessary solutions addressing both climate and energy security, while clean energy prices are even lower than those of fossil fuels.<sup>11</sup> This was already the case even before the war in Ukraine. However, many tensions result from access to new fossil fuels around building – or co-building – and owning new oil and gas pipelines that may guarantee an even deeper and longer regional dependency on fossil fuels, there-

<sup>9</sup> OHCHR (2022): ‘Intolerable Tide’ of People Displaced by Climate Change: UN Experts; <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/intolerable-tide-people-displaced-climate-change-un-expert>

<sup>10</sup> IPCC (2018): Summary for Policymakers, in: *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C above Pre-industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty*; <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/spm/>

<sup>11</sup> IEA (2022): World Energy Outlook 2022: Outlook for Electricity; <https://www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-outlook-2022/outlook-for-electricity>

by simply adding to the climate crisis. This poses a threat but also provides a unique opportunity to bring countries and people closer together to combat the common threat.

## Clean and cheap energy for all

An additional challenge in addressing the climate crisis is how to reduce injustice and close the equity gap while promoting solutions. Emissions reduction in such a short time frame entails more than technical fixes: it needs to incorporate public participation and wider ownership as it involves major changes in people's everyday lives that cannot be imposed from the top down. Active public participation must be based on a solid understanding of the magnitude and depth of the necessary changes, avoiding alternation back and forth between announcements of inconsistent measures and their subsequent withdrawal.<sup>12</sup> Simply replacing dirty energy oligarchs with green energy oligarchs, for example, or current agrochemical agriculture with something equally centralised but with fewer emissions, not to mention promoting large-scale reforestation to counteract large-scale deforestation are not adequate solutions to the magnitude of the challenges we face.

## What do we have to do?

- Address energy poverty as an escalating phenomenon and threat to social cohesion, exacerbated by rising energy prices (especially heating).
- Empower citizens by promoting solutions that bring them to the fore, allowing them not just the right to choose (as consumers) but also the right to become producers themselves.
- Promote clean energy not only with mega projects (with limited or unclear value added for society), whether solar, wind or something else, but also small-to medium-sized projects aimed at self-consumption, such as solar roofs and energy communities as a direct measure to reduce dependency on fossil fuels.

## Proposals for cooperation to fight the common threat

Science is the absolute compass and light source as regards what needs to be done to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. But there is no way to make things happen without the active participation and commitment of the wider public. This cannot be a top-down process. The climate crisis and related impacts knit together the futures of all people in the region and thus we must create a space for testing and implementing common solutions. People need to be empowered and actively pursue solutions instead of waiting passively. Here we discuss some ideas for further collaboration:

- **Energy communities:** The first step would be to identify a group of stakeholders from Greece and Turkey willing to work together on this. The group should consist of local authority and civil society representatives, academics and so on. A workshop could support the exchange of best practices, challenges and improvements needed in the legal framework, and empower and support networking. This could result in an energy community (ideally for self-production) that could provide the basis of wider replication.
- **Sustainable cities with civic participation:** First, a group of stakeholders from Greece and Turkey should be identified who are willing to work together on this topic. The group should consist mainly of local authority representatives who have already undertaken such initiatives in their cities and have lessons (both successes and failures) to share. Quality criteria will showcase which of the initiatives made a real difference (and are not simply greenwashing or communication exercises). Relevant key performance indicators will also showcase concrete improvements. The idea is to organise a workshop at which the above will be shared and ideally a follow-up mechanism to see whether this has triggered further action in the same direction.
- **Regenerative agriculture:** In both countries, agriculture is an important part of the economy, society and culture. This sector is strongly impacted by desertification and other phenomena strengthened or induced by climate change. The Eastern Mediterranean is a global hot spot of climate change impacts. Bringing together scientists, farmers and chefs at a roundtable on how regenerative agriculture and sustainable consumption could play a role in reducing food insecurity has been identified as a key opportunity for meaningful cooperation. It is possible to link this to tourism, education and professional training in many sectors. The idea is to bring people together to exchange best practices and lessons, as well as ways of overcoming challenges, and to empower networking.

<sup>12</sup> This happened in the case of the *Gilets Jaunes* in France: In principle, the relevant additional taxes on diesel announced by President Macron were in the right direction from an environmental perspective, but they did not form part of a consistent strategy or entail any serious consultation process. Thus, the reaction of those most affected was expected and to an extent reasonable given the wider reality of the economy. As a result, fragmented measures (in the right direction) were withdrawn after the adverse public reaction (to environmental protection measures). Henceforth there should be consistency and inclusion.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## CAN CLIMATE CRISIS LEAD TO BRIDGE-BUILDING ACROSS THE AEGEAN?

While historical tensions in the region have been exacerbated by the current energy crisis and competition for access to oil and gas reserves, there is both a need and an opportunity to build bridges and create synergies around a major common threat, as the region is recognised as one of the global hot spots of climate change impacts.

At a workshop in May 2022, FES Athens brought together representatives of civic society from Greece and Turkey to test the water and facilitate the elaboration ideas on cooperation around combating climate change together. The results are promising as regards concrete ideas for further cooperation.