



DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

PARTNERS, NOT FRIENDS

GREEK PUBLIC OPINION(S) ON GERMANY

Dr Ronald Meinardus

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Germany's image among the Greek public is negative. This has become entrenched over the years.



Regardless of age and political party preferences, a large majority of Greeks cite Berlin's stance in the euro crisis as the single most important factor in their negative assessment of Germany.



For the present relationship to become a genuine friendship, reconciliation must be put on a broader basis and civil societies in both countries need to play a key role in this process.

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FOREWORD

Let me start with a recent political event that is important for relations between Germany and Greece, namely the first visit by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to Athens, on 27 October 2022. Unsuspecting observers might have thought that the two politicians' speechwriters had coordinated their texts in advance. When Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Chancellor Olaf Scholz appeared before the press, both had a largely identical message, speaking of a »new Greece«, renewed Greek–German relations, and new challenges that must be solved together in a spirit of European cooperation and solidarity.

The positive communication and the celebration of German–Greek understanding were striking. The show of harmony should also be evaluated against the background of the distortions of the past. The key word for both leaders at the Athens summit was »new«, demonstrating a desire to open up a new chapter in their relations and leave the past aside – as far as that is possible.

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GERMANY'S POOR IMAGE

Germany's image among the Greek public is anything but positive. In fact, the opposite is true. The poor survey ratings are not merely a snapshot, but go back a long way. And Germany's poor image among a majority of Greeks has only become more entrenched over the years.

Between 2011 and 2019, two-thirds of Greek survey respondents consistently expressed a negative image of Germany. Its negative scores averaged 66 per cent, skyrocketing to 78 per cent in the middle of the decade, at the height of the euro crisis.

At that time, when the issue of Greece remaining in the euro zone was being fought out not always in a diplomatic manner, with Berlin playing a leading role, four out of five people in Greece had a negative view of Germany.

A further low point was documented by a survey carried out by the Antenna TV station in October 2021, according to which only 4 per cent of respondents consider Germany a »friendly« country. This is even more shocking because Russia, Saudi Arabia and China are ranked clearly ahead of Germany in the poll.

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QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Over the years, many opinion surveys on Germany's image in Greece have been published. They all present a quantitative account of public opinion. With some variations, the surveys provide empirical evidence of the negative image already mentioned.

The survey presented here breaks new ground. To our knowledge, it is the first time the question of why a majority of people in Greece do not have a good opinion of Germany is explored systematically. This qualitative approach provides an additional perspective. The availability of qualitative data may help to improve the quality of related discussions and – and this is an important argument for a publication by a political foundation – provide a basis for solution-oriented policies aimed at overcoming negative perceptions.

Before we share the main findings of the survey entitled »Perceptions of Germany in Greece«, carried out by Kapa Research on the basis of interviews with 2,121 representative Greek respondents in the period 7–12 October 2022, we should first make some general remarks.

Regarding Germany's image in Greece, there is a notable discrepancy between »official« relations, as depicted in statements made by the two governments and the corresponding assessments of »people in the street«. In this respect, we may speak of »dual« images of Germany, official and public. In this study, only the results of opinion research are taken into account.

A second point is of particular interest to historians. Negative perceptions of Germany among Greeks are not persistent; there have been times when Greeks have had more positive views. »The ›anti-Germanism‹ [*antigermanismos*] of the 2010s replaced one-to-one the anti-Americanism that was the dominant phenomenon of the period after the fall of the dictatorship (1974)«, according to Giorgos Pappas, a correspondent of the daily *TA NEA*, who has studied Greek–German relations over recent decades like few others.

In recent years, the United States has gone from being a scapegoat to a popular superpower and cherished friend and ally for many Greeks. This shift of attitude raises the prospect that the negative assessments of Germany in Greece may not be permanent.

A comprehensive assessment would benefit from relevant surveys also of German perceptions of Greece. Anecdotal evidence suggests that tempers have flared on both sides, with press reports inflaming public sentiments, all the more so in the wake of the euro crisis, which – and this should be taken into account – was also highly controversial in Germany's domestic politics. In short, negative stereotypes and prejudices about Greece and the Greeks have also been rather common among the German public.

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NEARLY ONE IN THREE GREEKS HAS A »VERY NEGATIVE« OPINION

The study starts off with the finding that 57 per cent of respondents have a negative opinion of Germany. The result is not improved by the fact that almost one in three (29 per cent) has a »very negative« view. In response to the question »What is your opinion of Germany?«, only a minority of 16 per cent of people answered »positively« or »very positively«. The highest proportion of those with a »very negative« opinion is in the 55–64 age group, 42 per cent of whom have a »very negative« image of Germany.

It is noteworthy that age and level of education, in accordance with which the results are broken down throughout, only show relatively minor fluctuations.

The differences of opinion are much clearer – and in some cases considerable – when it comes to political association and proximity to political parties. In line with a continuous right–left scheme, Germany’s unpopularity is particularly high among supporters of the Communist Party (KKE), at 70 per cent, while among supporters of the left-wing SYRIZA party the figure is 64 per cent. Germany scores significantly better among supporters of the conservative ruling party *Nea Dimokratia* (52 per cent) and the social democratic KINAL (46 per cent). The survey reveals an extreme value for supporters of the far-right Greek Solution, however, among whom a whopping 88 per cent have a negative opinion of Germany.

To determine the Greek population’s »perceptions of Germany«, the pollsters asked participants for their opinions on eight topics, each of which relates to relations between the two countries. More than two-thirds of respondents see Germany as »a source of tourism for Greece«, followed by »the home of many Greek immigrants«. A similar number of Greeks perceive Germany as a »nation of science and technology«, as well as »an important economic player and investor«. Comparatively low, at 32 per cent, is the proportion of those who identify the country, which likes to present itself as a »nation of poets and thinkers«, as »a nation of culture and values«. It is notable that 42 per cent of respondents with a university degree do not see Germany as a »cultural nation«. This finding is striking in that German universities have exerted a strong attraction on academics from Greece since time immemorial, and continue to do so today.

Only one in five respondents (22 per cent) sees Germany as a »strategic partner in international relations«; the opinion that Germany is a source of stability in the world is similarly weak (21 per cent).

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LOW ESTEEM FOR GERMANY AS A STRATEGIC PARTNER

The low regard for Germany as a strategic partner is a key finding of the study. It is hardly surprising that left-wing political forces tend to take a more anti-German stance in this regard. This pattern of opinion is also evident in other parts of the study. A notable finding is that also half (50 per cent) the followers of the conservative *Nea Dimokratia* believe that Germany is not a strategic partner for Greece. This is remarkable given that the ND has made Athens' affiliation with the West its credo since its founding in 1974.

What, then, is the reason for Germany's poor image in Greece?

The answer to this important question is clear and can be summed up in the oft-cited phrase »It's the economy, stupid!«

Three topics play a dominant role in political debate and media opinion-making in this context:

- (i) Germany's stance in the euro crisis;
- (ii) Germany's role in the Second World War and the related issue of reparations;
- (iii) Berlin's attitude in the Greek–Turkish dispute.

Thus far, there has been no clarity about the weighting of the three issues due to a lack of surveys. The present study has now closed this gap.

A majority of Greeks believe that Berlin's conduct in the euro crisis is primarily responsible for their negative image of Germany. Similar importance is attached to the unresolved past of Germany's occupation in the Second World War and the issue of reparations. Some 77 per cent believe that Germany's position in Greek-Turkish conflicts are responsible for the negative perception.

Regardless of age and political party preferences, respondents cite Berlin's stance in the euro crisis as the single most important factor in their negative assessment. The number is highest among supporters of left-wing parties (KKE: 94 per cent, SYRIZA: 90 per cent). Also, 79 per cent of ND supporters believe that German policy in the euro crisis was decisive for the country's unpopularity.

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ANGELA MERKEL STILL UNPOPULAR

In line with these figures, which indicate that many Greeks have yet to come to terms with the, in some cases, traumatic experience of the financial crisis, the ratings for long-serving German Chancellor Angela Merkel are poor. Some 45 per cent of respondents agree with the statement that Ms Merkel brought »misery to many Greek households«. Her open channels of communication with Turkish President Erdogan, which provided the basis for many a Berlin mediation between estranged neighbours, are not appreciated by Greeks, 26 per cent of whom accuse Ms Merkel of one-sided partiality for Turkey.

The fact that Greece's political left does not have a positive opinion of the former chancellor fits into the general picture. On the other hand, the finding that only one in five ND supporters recognises the long-time leader of its »sister party« CDU as a »great European leader« attests to the far-reaching alienation that transcends party lines.

A look at the data covering the here and now points to a better future in terms of Greeks' image of Germany. While a majority of respondents (54 per cent) believe that nothing has changed with the change of power in Berlin, a third (32 per cent) recognise a positive trend. This proportion is particularly high among supporters of the governing ND party. For Greek conservatives' image of Germany, it does not seem to be decisive whether a member of the centre-right CDU or a Social Democrat is in power in Berlin.

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A LOOK AHEAD: FROM PARTNERS TO FRIENDS?

Finally, a look ahead and back to the starting point of this report. The visit of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to Athens signals a new, better climate in bilateral relations. It can be assumed that the public displays of harmony, which have been carried into the public sphere by a large part of the media, will not remain without influence on the climate of opinion over the long or short term. The first signs of this are already measurable in opinion polls.

Nevertheless, German–Greek relations require more than conciliatory tones from political leaders. In order for the current partnership, which, as we have seen, also has its doubters, to become a genuine friendship, reconciliation must be put on a broader basis. There are commendable beginnings here, too. Above all, civil society in both countries plays a key role. In this area, German-Greek relations are still in their infancy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The survey presented here breaks new ground. To our knowledge, it is the first time the question of why a majority of people in Greece do not have a good opinion of Germany has been explored systematically. The availability of this qualitative data provides a basis for solution-oriented policies aimed at overcoming the negative perceptions.

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German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's recent visit to Athens signals a new, better climate in bilateral relations. The German-Greek relationship requires more than conciliatory tones from political leaders. In order for the current partnership to become a genuine friendship, reconciliation must be placed on a broader basis. Above all, civil societies in both countries play a key role in this process. In this area, German-Greek relations are still in their infancy.