

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ORDER

EVOLVING PERCEPTIONS: THE GRADUAL TRANSFORMATION OF GERMANY'S IMAGE IN GREECE

Ronald Meinardus
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While German politicians and diplomats often face difficulties regarding political issues and stereotypes, products with the 'Made in Germany' label enjoy great popularity. Almost nine out of ten Greeks have a positive opinion of products manufactured in Germany.

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Preface

This report examines Germany's image in Greece as reflected in opinion polls. Public opinion surveys are snapshots, which makes it essential to repeat them at intervals to capture the dynamics of political and social processes.

The following observations are based on comprehensive surveys conducted by the opinion research institute KAPPA Research in October 2022 and July 2024.¹ The aim was to determine the collective attitudes of the Greek population on various aspects related to their image of Germany. Assessments of economic relations between the two countries supplement the current survey as economic relations are traditionally a cornerstone of interstate relations.

Perceptions of Germany among the Greek population have improved significantly over the past two years. Several explanations for this development are given towards the end of this report following a presentation of the most important data.

¹ An in-depth analysis of the 2022 opinion survey is available at: Ronald Meinardus: 'Partners, not Friends. Greek Public Opinion(s) on Germany', FES Policy Brief, November 2022.

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TIME FOR A 'NEW NARRATIVE'?

During Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis' official visit to Berlin on 14 November 2023, both sides spoke of a 'new chapter' for the Greek economy and bilateral relations. At the joint press conference with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the Greek Prime Minister stated that it was time to change the 'narrative of German-Greek relations'.

On the Greek side, opinion research suggests that the widespread 'narrative' about Germany and German-Greek relations has improved significantly over the past two years. Nevertheless, negative perceptions continue to beset the image of Germany among many Greeks.

Andreas Kindl, the German ambassador in Athens, has good reason to be pleased. A few weeks after taking up his post, Berlin's top diplomat was asked about Germany's lack of popularity in Greece at an international conference. 'We have a popularity of 14 per cent', the ambassador conceded. 'I don't think it is enough. We want to bring it up to 17 per cent.'

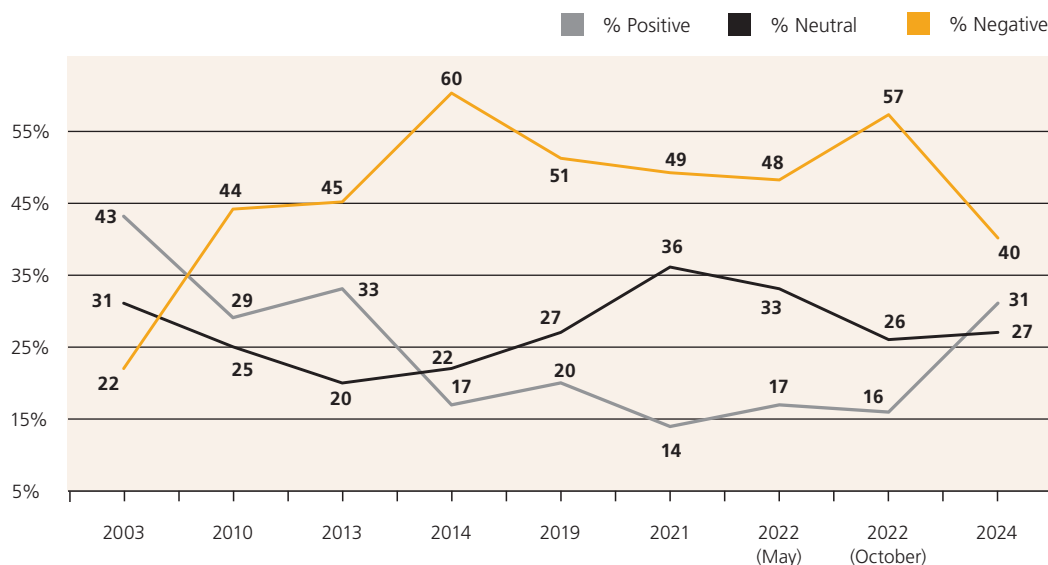
Kindl said this at the Athens Security Forum in late January 2023. His reference to the 14 per cent that needed improvement was based on survey results from 2021. This demographic low point for Germany's image in Greece is now a thing of the past.

NUMBER OF POSITIVE MENTIONS DOUBLES

According to the latest survey, from June 2024, 31 per cent of respondents have a positive opinion of Germany. Compared with the October 2022 survey (when the figure was 16 per cent), this represents almost a doubling of positive responses. At the same time, the proportion of people with negative attitudes towards Germany in Greece has fallen from 57 per cent to 40 per cent.

From a historical perspective, Germany's 'popularity' in Greece in summer 2024 is at the same level as in 2010, the beginning of the financial crisis, when 29 per cent of the population had a positive image of Germany (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1
Opinion about Germany. Time-series data



Source: Kapa Research archives

One striking aspect of the current data is the correlation between the respondents’ level of education and their sympathy for Germany: the higher a person’s school-leaving qualification, the higher their approval rating for Germany. Accordingly, only 16 per cent of elementary school graduates have a good opinion of Germany, while among people with a university degree the figure is almost three times as high, at 50 per cent.

The data are also revealing when it comes to party political affiliation. Statistically, by far the largest number of Germany supporters can be found among people who voted for Nea Dimokratia (ND) in the European Parliament elections on 9 June 2024, at 45 per cent. Meanwhile, 36 per cent of PASOK voters have a positive opinion of Germany, while the figure for SYRIZA is 25 per cent.

It is also worth noting that when asked the same question in 2022, only 19 per cent of ND supporters expressed sympathy for Germany. This proportion has now more than doubled and is thus in line with the trend that runs through the entire study.

WHAT DO GREEKS LIKE ABOUT GERMANY – AND WHAT NOT?

Tourism is of central importance to the Greek economy. In hardly any other economic sector do interpersonal relationships, usually with members of other nations, play such an important role. Tourism is an integral part of German–Greek relations: traditionally, holidaymakers from Germany are at the top of the tourist nationality statistics. In 2022, 4.35 million German vacationers visited the country. Contrary to a

widespread prejudice, tourists from Germany are – statistically speaking – more inclined to spend than other nationalities.

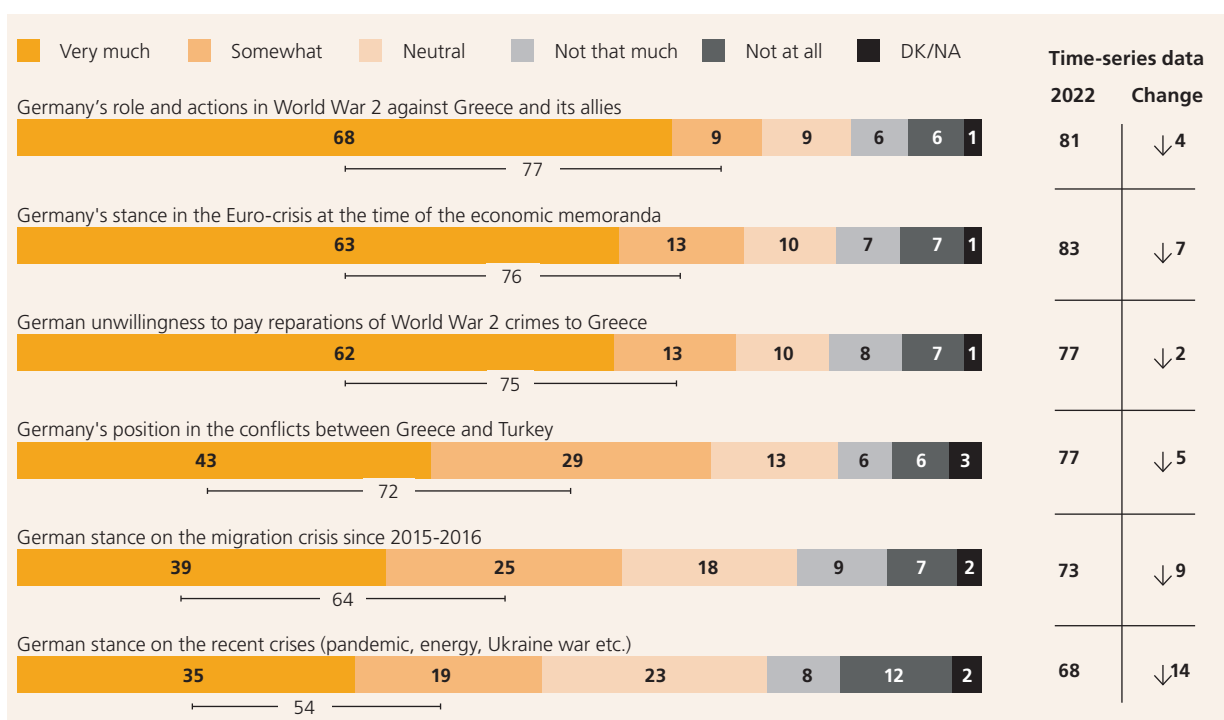
Economic realities shape people’s attitudes: 81 per cent of Greeks consider Germany to be ‘a source of tourism for Greece’. The importance of tourism in forming opinions about Germany has increased in recent years.

In second place, Greeks value Germany as the ‘home of many Greek immigrants’. In third place comes ‘a leading power in the European Union’, followed by ‘an important economic player and investor’.

Political issues play a subordinate role in the list of factors shaping Germany’s image in Greece. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that attitudes towards Germany have also improved on political issues. While only 21 per cent of respondents in the 2022 survey thought that Germany was ‘a source of stability in world politics’, this figure has risen to 35 per cent. And while two years ago only 22 per cent considered Germany to be a ‘strategic partner of the Greeks in international relations’, this figure has now gone up to 33 per cent.

When it comes to attitudes towards Germany’s geostrategic role, the above-average increase among voters of the governing party is particularly striking. While in 2022 only just under one in three ND supporters thought that Germany was a stability factor and a strategic partner of Greece in international relations, almost one in two now share this opinion. Among SYRIZA and PASOK supporters, assessments on this issue have hardly changed: today, as was the case two years ago, some 20 per cent of SYRIZA voters and 40 per

Figure 2
Factors shaping the negative perception of Germany. How much has your view of Germany been affected negatively by each of the following?



Source: Kapa Research archives

cent of social democratic party supporters believe that Germany is a strategic partner for Greece.

Irrespective of the significant improvement in Germany's image in some areas, many Greeks continue to maintain a negative (16 per cent) or even very negative (24 per cent) opinion of Germany.

As **Figure 2** shows, a majority of respondents consider Germany's role and actions in the Second World War to be the decisive factor for their negative attitude. Related to this is Berlin's unwillingness to offer reparations for war crimes committed during the occupation, something that three out of four Greeks surveyed see as having a negative impact on their attitudes towards Germany.

High up on the 'negative list' is the German government's attitude during the financial crisis, which resulted in massive social upheaval in Greece and, according to a widespread perception, is largely attributable to austerity policies imposed by Berlin (and Brussels).

A third topic that affects German–Greek relations and hurts Germany's image in Greece is the popular assumption that Berlin sides with Ankara on Greek–Turkish issues.

It is noteworthy that changes have occurred over the past two years in all areas with a negative impact on collective perceptions. For example, in October 2022, 83 per cent of respondents stated that their image of Germany was negatively influenced by Berlin's stance on the financial crisis. Two years later, this figure had fallen to 76 per cent.

Overall, the findings suggest that today fewer Greeks have a negative opinion of Germany on the issues in question. Al-

though negative attitudes persist, they are less pronounced than they were two years ago.

LITTLE ESTEEM FOR BERLIN AS AN ALLY

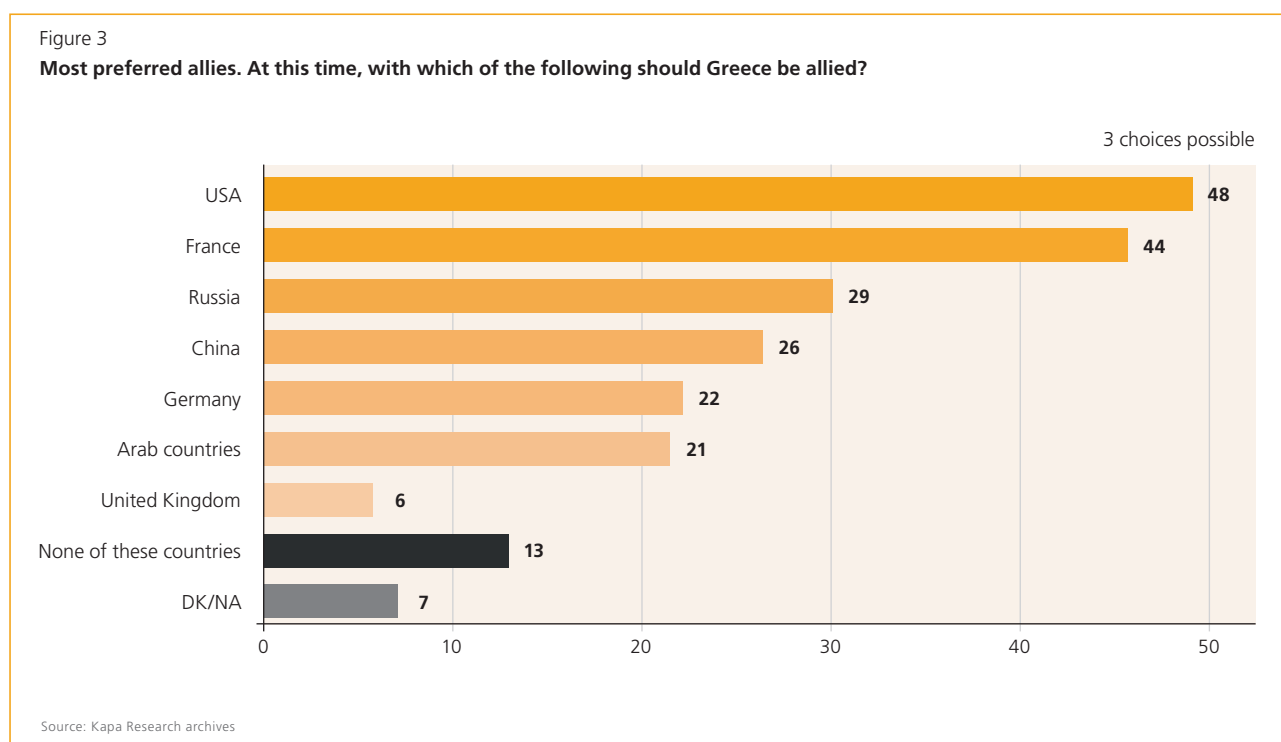
Foreign policy often plays an important role in domestic affairs. It is obvious that foreign policy issues are also important in the collective assessment of countries. As a rule, partner countries whose governments are perceived to promote the national interests of the home country enjoy greater popularity than those whose governments do not appear to do so.

Alliances have traditionally played a key role in Greek foreign policy. This is the case today, and it was no different in earlier phases of history.

In the ranking of 'most preferred allies' (**Figure 3**), the United States has ranked first in Greece's favour for several years, closely followed by France. The third and fourth most preferred allies are Russia and China. NATO ally and EU partner Germany only takes fifth place in this table. Surveys over the past five years show that this ranking has not changed.

An explanation is easily found for the low esteem in which Germany is held as an ally. For the majority of Greeks, Turkey is the main security problem. Forging alliances against the 'Turkish threat' has been a priority of Athens' diplomacy for many years. A large majority of the Greek population is convinced that Germany stands on Ankara's side in the Greek–Turkish dispute. This assessment is supported not least by the historically good relations between Germany and Turkey.

The current survey confirms the observation that Germany has a reputation in Greece for being pro-Turkish. Germany



performs particularly poorly in direct comparison with the United States and France when it comes to policy on Turkey. When asked whether Washington or Berlin is more on the side of the Greeks when it comes to Greek–Turkish issues, 59 per cent favour the Americans. In the case of France, the picture is even clearer: 82 per cent of Greeks believe that France is a better ally than Germany when it comes to the problems with Turkey.

Given these figures, policy on Turkey could be described as the Achilles’ heel of German public diplomacy in Greece. Nevertheless, changes have also taken place in this area over the past two years. In 2022, three out of four Greeks (75 per cent) thought that Germany was more on the side of Turkey, but this figure has now fallen to 64 per cent, a fall of 11 points.

GOVERNMENT TRANSITION IN BERLIN AND THE CHANGE IN SENTIMENT

As stated at the beginning, opinion polls are only ever a reflection of public opinion at a given point in time. By repeating them over time, we can identify changes that are usually the result of complex political and socio-economic processes, and which influence people’s thinking.

The change of government in Berlin from Angela Merkel’s term as chancellor to that of Olaf Scholz in December 2021 marks an important turning point for Greek perceptions of Germany. Since then, the pollsters have noted a significant improvement in Greek sentiment towards Germany.

While 32 per cent of respondents in the October 2022 survey stated that German–Greek relations had improved since the change of government in Berlin, this figure was 41 per cent in the June 2024 survey. The highest proportion of those who state that relations have changed for the better since then is 73 per cent, among PASOK supporters. This result suggests that Greece’s Social Democrats have a better opinion of Germany under Social Democratic Chancellor Scholz than under his Christian Democratic predecessor Angela Merkel.

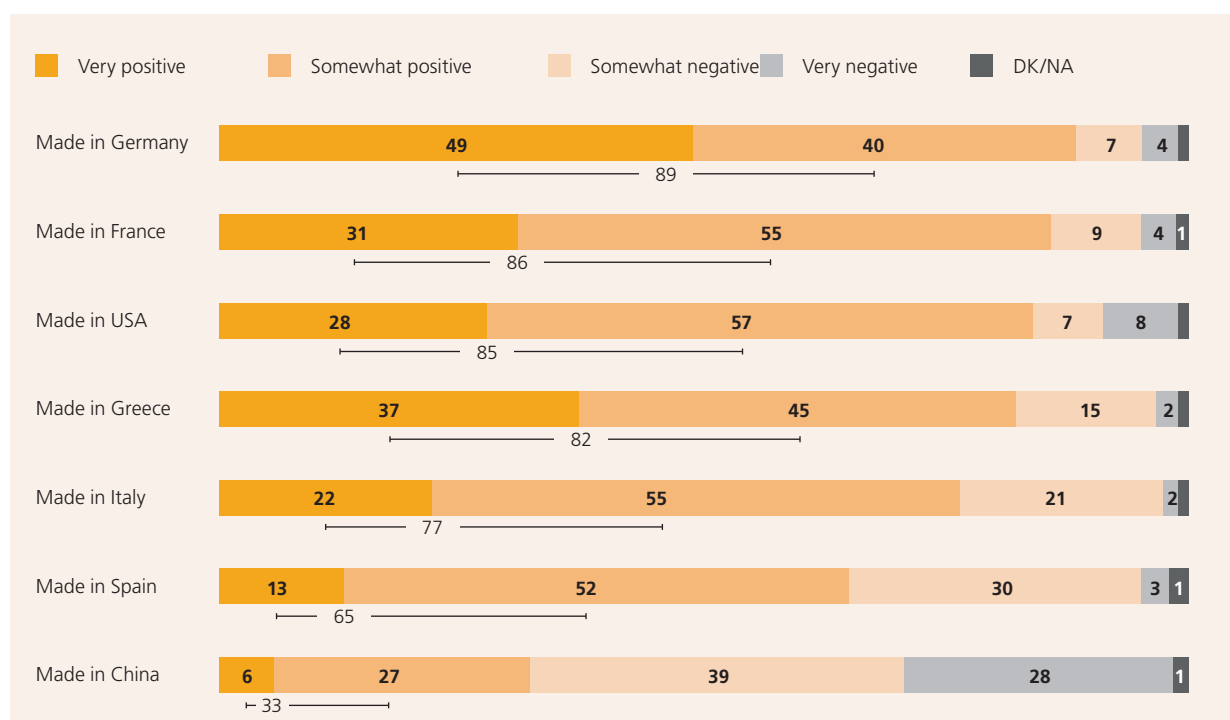
TOP IN INVESTMENT, TRADE AND TOURISM

Germany is traditionally one of Greece’s most important trade and investment partners. According to the German–Greek Chamber of Commerce, Germany ranked first for Greek imports between 2015 and 2021 and is the second most important sales market for Greek exporters. With 6.8 billion euros and a share of just under 20 per cent, Germany led the direct investment ranking in Greece in 2021.

The German side points out that most businesses remained loyal to Greece during the tough years of the financial crisis. Andreas Kindl, the German ambassador in Athens, said they ‘significantly contributed to Greece’s emergence from a deep crisis into an almost unprecedented growth phase’.

Nevertheless, in the collective perception of the Greek population, general intergovernmental relations, fraught with various political problems, fare better than bilateral economic relations: 46 per cent of respondents stated that relations

Figure 4
Popularity of ‘Made in ...’ labels. What is your opinion of each of the following labels?



Source: Kapa Research archives

between the two countries are good or very good overall, while this figure is slightly lower, at 41 per cent, with regard to quality of economic relations.

The familiar demoscopic pattern applies to economic relations as well: two out of three supporters of Nea Dimokratia are positive about the development of German–Greek economic relations. Scepticism dominates at the political margins: only 27 per cent of Communist Party of Greece (KKE) voters believe that economic relations have improved over the past ten years, and among supporters of the far-right Greek Solution this figure is as low as 15 per cent.

By and large, the Greek population has a positive attitude towards foreign direct investment. Almost two out of three respondents favour the inflow of capital from abroad, with only a minority of 12 per cent rejecting foreign investment.

This positive sentiment also benefits German investors in Greece. Fifty-six per cent of respondents have a positive attitude toward German investments, which are most popular among ND and PASOK voters, where around three out of four respondents have a positive view.

While German politicians and diplomats often face difficulties in Greece regarding political issues and stereotypes, products with the 'Made in Germany' label enjoy great popularity. (Figure 4). Almost nine out of ten Greeks have a positive opinion of products manufactured in Germany. France, the United States, Italy, Spain, and China follow behind Germany in this important table for trade flows.

Greek consumers' enthusiasm for products from Germany does not extend to all market segments, however. While German home appliances, cars, manufactured products, pharmaceuticals and chemicals are the most popular among Greek consumers, Greeks prefer Italian clothing and food products; American software, movies and military equipment; and Chinese smartphones.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF GERMAN–GREEK RELATIONS AND A POSITIVE DEMOSCOPIC TREND

Public opinion is subject to change. We live in a time of profound political, social, economic, and socio-cultural upheaval, each affecting public opinion to varying degrees.

The image of Germany in Greece is no exception. Greek perceptions and attitudes towards Germany are changing. This report has shown recognisable improvements over the past two years, allowing us to speak of a brightening of Germany's image in Greece.

There remains room for improvement, however. In 2005, surveys by KAPPA Research showed Germany at the top of the Greek popularity table with an approval rating of 78 per cent, closely followed by France and far ahead of the United States with 28 per cent. With today's figures, we can retrospectively speak of a tectonic shift in collective attitudes.

A key value of the opinion polls on which this report is based lies in the fact that they provide data for a qualitative analysis in addition to a quantitative representation of the mood in Greece. We not only learn how many Greeks have a certain opinion on Germany – and how they can be categorised sociologically. At the same time – and this is where the project's politically significant added value lies – we find out why people think one way or another about Germany.

Despite the noticeable improvement in the general climate of opinion, dark spots tarnish the overall impression. Negative perceptions persist, albeit weaker, in three areas: Germany's stance during the financial crisis; the history of occupation during the Second World War (and the handling of the most painful phase in bilateral relations); and, finally, Berlin's stance in Greek–Turkish conflicts.

Developments in these areas over the past two years have impacted people's attitudes. The most sustainable changes have occurred in economic policy, where the 'vicious circle of memoranda, recession, and negative publicity' has been broken, as noted in the centenary publication of the Greek–German Chamber of Industry and Commerce in Athens.

Overcoming the financial crisis is the single most important factor in improving German–Greek relations and brightening Germany's image in Greece. The times when representatives from Athens travelled to Brussels and Berlin as petitioners, and Greece was widely pilloried in public, belong to the past. The Greek government has returned to the diplomatic stage with its head held high. Where ridicule and malice once dominated, there is now talk of successful adaptation and approval.

'My country is writing a new chapter in its history. From the "black sheep" of the times of crisis, Greece is developing into a rapidly growing economy, even one of the fastest growing economies', said Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis at the joint press conference with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on 14 November 2023. 'In this new chapter, our bilateral relations [with Germany] are also writing a new chapter in our history.'

The governments in Athens and Berlin are focusing on the future. Both sides desire to put aside the burdens of the past and not allow old baggage to hinder the development of relations.

'The bilateral relationship between Greece and Germany is good. We share the same paths. We are pursuing the same goals for a better future', the German Chancellor assured his guest from Athens.

The 'metamorphosis' of German–Greek relations is also facilitated by the cautious adjustment of German policy in the Greek–Turkish dispute.² The Berlin coalition government countered the Turkish president's forward strategy – seen as

² A detailed account of Germany's role in Greek–Turkish relations may be found at: Ronald Meinardus: 'Bridging divides: Berlin's diplomatic role in Greek–Turkish relations', FES Policy Brief Athens, January 2024.

provocative not only in Athens – with targeted political and diplomatic interventions. German diplomats worked behind the scenes to resume the dialogue between Athens and Ankara at the height of Greek–Turkish tensions in 2022, ultimately leading to a good outcome. As a result, since spring 2023 we have witnessed a rare phase of bilateral détente between the Aegean neighbours, who have publicly vowed to seek an amicable solution to their conflict.

Even though Berlin's successful efforts to mediate have not received particular attention from the Greek public, the ongoing trans-Aegean détente has at least had an indirectly positive effect on Germany's image in Greece. The lack of escalating crises between Athens and Ankara has reduced the opportunities to accuse Berlin of siding with Turkey. An analysis of newspaper content over the past two years, although not the subject of this study, would in all probability reveal a significant decline in negative references to Germany. The issue of Turkey traditionally plays an important role in this.

In recent years, there has been no movement on the issue of Greek reparations claims. Both sides have officially recorded their known, incompatible positions. However, both sides seem to have tacitly agreed not to let this issue jeopardise future relations. The issue plays virtually no political role in the Greek public sphere, apart from occasional publications and information events on important memorial days.

To summarise, Germany's image in Greece is shaped by a complex mixture of historical, political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural factors. Fluctuations and changes result from the dynamics of these factors and how they are perceived and processed by the respective political classes, the media, and, ultimately, the population.

'We want to do everything, I will do everything, to improve the image of Germany and the Germans [in Greece]', said the German ambassador to Greece in an interview with Deutsche Welle in early 2024.

It is a long and rocky road before Germany's popularity ratings in Greece reach their former highs. But the current trend is pointing in the right direction.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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