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A diplomatic ray of hope amidst a disaster

The Greek-Turkish relationship has become increasingly estranged. The current rapprochement brought about by the earthquake could be a new beginning

The devastating earthquake in Turkey and northern Syria on 6 February, with over 40,000 dead and countless injured, caused a great deal of international horror and compassion. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced after the first week's rescue operations that there were 'offers of help from a hundred countries, 7846 rescuers from 77 countries on the ground'. Even though Turkey was grateful for every single gesture, one country in particular stood out: neighbouring Greece was one of the first to send help. And yet the rhetoric between the two countries had recently been so aggressive that some observers even thought a military confrontation was possible. 'We could come all of a sudden during the night,' Turkish President Recep Erdoğan said several times, referring to the nearby Greek Aegean islands. In December, he threatened that the new Tayfun missiles produced in Turkey could hit Athens if Greece did not 'keep quiet'. Greek politicians fumed that Turkey was behaving like North Korea and not like a NATO ally. The statements were accompanied by correspondingly shrill tones in both countries' media.

After the disaster in the far south-east of Turkey, all that has been forgotten, for the time being: Greek leaders expressed their sympathy and for the first time in months, Erdoğan took a call from Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, despite declaring months ago that he would never speak to him again. A week after the earthquake, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias visited the quake zone, side by side with his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. 'Greek efforts will not end now,' he said. 'Greece will do everything to support Turkey, whether bilaterally or as members of the EU.' Çavuşoğlu extended his gratitude for the 'superhuman efforts' - saying it had been visible that not only the rescuers, but all Greeks had taken part.

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And this is true: In numerous Greek cities, people queued at collection points to donate.

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On social media, Turkish and Greek flags lined up among the messages of solidarity on Twitter. The Greek newspapers, otherwise not exactly moderate in their tone, called for help, reported on the Greek rescue teams and mused about a new beginning in the tense Greek-Turkish relations. Turkey's *Hürriyet*, which is usually very vocal against Greek politicians, wrote on its front page in big letters: 'Efcharisto poli' - 'Thank you very much'.

History is also being made with another neighbour: Armenia sent aid and the Alican border crossing was opened for the first time in 35 years - back then for Turkish aid deliveries during an earthquake on the Armenian side, of all places. Bilateral relations are tense not only because of the Ottoman genocide of Armenians, which Turkey does not recognise, but also because of Turkish military support for Azerbaijan in the recent conflict.

Disasters as diplomatic opportunities

These days, many people are reminded of 1999: after a similarly bad earthquake in western Turkey, the rapprochement that followed went down in history as 'earthquake diplomacy'. This event also shaped conflict research, which has since asked under what conditions positive inter-state developments can follow from such natural disasters. Research has been conducted on the chances of dialogue between the United States and Iran following the earthquake in southwestern Iran that killed 25,000 people in 2003, or on the impact of the earthquake in Kashmir that killed more than 86,000 people in 2005 on Indo-Pakistani relations.

In no case, however, was such a 180-degree turn documented as after the earthquake in northwestern Turkey in August 1999, when over 18 000 people were killed. Greece immediately offered help, Greek rescue teams were among the first on the scene. The sympathy was enormous. A month later, the earth shook in Athens, much weaker, but a total of 143 people died - now Turkish helpers were ready. Since both countries are highly vulnerable to earthquakes, they have special forces at their disposal.

The mutual aid was so remarkable due to the fact that it was preceded by an unprecedented crisis: on 15 February 1999, a Turkish special squad had seized the fugitive PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan as he was leaving the compound of the Greek embassy in the Kenyan capital Nairobi. The fact

that Greece had apparently given shelter to the number one enemy of the state caused boundless indignation in Turkey. The allegations, always denied, seemed to be confirmed that Greece was supporting the PKK in attacks against the Turkish state.

As a result, three Greek ministers had to resign. But Turkish anger was so great that war did not seem out of the question, 25 years after the armed confrontation in Cyprus that had led to the partition of the island. It was precisely after this low point that the 'earthquake diplomacy' followed: there was not only an unprecedented wave of bilateral visits and expressions of friendship, but also concrete decisions: Greece, for example, gave up its fundamental opposition to Turkey's status as a candidate for EU membership, so that the process could begin.

A chance for a new beginning

In the first years of the Erdoğan era, the relationship continued to improve until 2015, when it became increasingly estranged. The issue of refugees caused tensions between Turkey and the EU. However, with the world's highest refugee population of almost four million, the country also faces significant challenges, which has often been forgotten amid justified accusations that Erdoğan is instrumentalising the refugee issue.

Above all, however, the tensions have to do with geopolitical claims: Within the framework of the 'Mavi Vatan' ('Blue Fatherland') strategy, Turkey is pursuing its own interests in the eastern Mediterranean. While Greece forged an alliance with Cyprus, Egypt and Israel in 2019 with the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, which should advance the exploitation and marketing of the existing gas reserves. Turkey, which does not recognise maritime borders with Greece and Cyprus, was left out.

The current rapprochement offers a realistic chance for a new beginning. Even if elections are due in both countries in spring and both heads of government could lose their posts. In Turkey, criticism of Erdoğan is growing, not least because of his crisis management. Mitsotakis is at the centre of a wiretapping scandal. But campaigning on the back of the neighbour is now suddenly no longer an option. Especially since the Turkish and Greek people have made it more than clear that they are not interested in hostility.

Yet 'earthquake diplomacy' only has a

Greek-Turkish history offers at least as much that unites as it divides and is to a large extent a shared history. 2023 commemorates the so-called 'population exchange', the

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expulsion of 1.2 million Greeks from Turkey and 400,000 Muslims from Greece 100 years ago, codified in the Treaty of Lausanne. This largely ended a centuries-old coexistence in the Ottoman Empire. For decades, the respective expellees longed for their old homeland. An appreciation of the common cultural heritage and the remaining minorities in both countries would be a good starting point to improving relations; for today, the re-Islamisation of the Byzantine Hagia Sophia in Istanbul is causing just as much criticism as the decay of former Ottoman mosques in Thessaloniki.

Yet 'earthquake diplomacy' only has a chance of success if it is followed by concrete steps: These should be supported by the international community. Germany in particular could play an important role here. Even though it recently sided with EU member Greece, Germany is traditionally also a close partner of Turkey. And solidarity with the victims, among whom were many relatives of German citizens with Turkish roots, is also strong in Germany. Now would be a good time for the German government to support conflict settlement in the Eastern Mediterranean. Involving Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum could be a key step in this direction.

During Dendias' visit, the Turkish Foreign Minister said that in 1999, as an ordinary citizen, he had written a letter to the editor of TIME Magazine. In it, he had argued that Greece and Turkey should not wait until the next earthquake to improve their relations. This intention must be renewed now so that out of this terrible tragedy something positive can grow.

René Wildangel
Berlin

Dr René Wildangel is a historian and author specialising in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. Among other roles, he has worked as an advisor at the Federal Foreign Office and in the **Bundestag**. From 2012 to 2015, he headed the Heinrich Böll Foundation's office in Ramallah. In 2022, he co-edited the book **Das Rebellische Spiel (The Rebellious Game)** with Jan Busse, which examines the World Cup in Qatar and football in the Arab world.