

The coincidence in the holding of elections in both countries may open an opportunity to improve the relationship between Athens and Ankara, marked by historical mistrust.

Dario Menor/Special envoy to Athens

Stability in the Aegean is at stake in the ballot boxes placed these days on both shores of the sea. The Greek general elections this Sunday are held seven days after the first round of the Turkish presidential elections, which will have their second round on May 28. The coincidence of the elections in both countries opens a window of opportunity to establish a new stage in the difficult bilateral relationship, weighed down by territorial, energy and migratory disputes. Although the rapid shipment of Greek humanitarian aid to Turkey after the earthquake last February helped to reduce tensions, in Athens the threat left a few months ago by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the favorite to win the second round and remain in power, is remembered with concern. power in Ankara against the other candidate, the opponent Kemal Kilicdaroglu.

"Greece, look at history. If you go too far, you will pay a heavy price. The occupation of the Aegean islands does not oblige us to do anything. When the time comes, we'll do whatever it takes. We can come by surprise one night." Those words of the Turkish leader, pronounced last September at a military event held in the city of Samsun, give the Greeks plenty of reasons to be suspicious of the expansionism of the Ankara authorities. In his 20 years in power, Erdogan has spurred nostalgia for the days of the Ottoman Empire and the aspiration to make Turkey the hegemonic power in the region, at the expense of threatening the interests of an increasingly uncomfortable Greece with its powerful neighbor.

The Hellenic Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, leader of the center-right New Democracy party and favorite to win this Sunday's elections, has expressed his willingness to extend "a helping hand" to the winner of the Turkish elections in case of achieving he reelection. "I hope that the next government will reconsider its position towards the West. Not only towards Greece, but towards Europe, NATO and the United States," Mitsotakis said in an interview with AP, in which he stressed that Athens is also committed to exercising a deterrent policy by "continuing to strengthen our defense capabilities." The growing Turkish threat has led Greece to devote an increasing percentage of its GDP to military spending in recent years, reaching 3.54% in 2022, the highest among all NATO members. Turkey, which is also part of the Atlantic Alliance, stayed at 1.37%.

"I would like to dedicate no more than 2% to defense (NATO's suggested minimum level), but unfortunately we live in a precarious area, next to a country much bigger than us and behaving aggressively," Mitsotakis said. "If the Turkish government threatens to invade our islands at night, every other day, it is obvious that this does not favor the creation of a climate of trust." From the other side of the Aegean, Erdogan responded that he seems willing to make a clean slate, acknowledging that the tensions of recent years "have significantly damaged the two countries and should not continue." In an interview with the Hellenic newspaper 'Kathimerini', the Turkish leader was confident that the elections in both nations "mark the beginning of a new era".

Despite the apparent willingness to park the differences of Mitsotakis and Erdogan, favorites for re-election in their respective countries, Panayotis Tsakonas, professor of International Relations and Security at the University of Athens and researcher at the Hellenic Foundation of European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), did not trust their words. "There has been a clear improvement after the earthquake, but much more is needed to achieve secure relations between Greece and Turkey. Erdogan has good reason to continue treating the Western bloc, which includes Greece, with his "transactional logic". He tries and pushes for concessions," explains Tsakonas. The Turkish leader has shown in the past that his pulse does not tremble when it comes to using migrants and refugees as a "political weapon" to destabilize Greece and the rest of the EU, in addition to disputing sovereignty with Athens of a gas field in the Eastern Mediterranean.

"For Greece it is vital that relations with Turkey go through the European Union. It is his best asset to impose conditions on Ankara. In addition, we must develop a dissuasive military policy but at the lowest possible level, to avoid an escalation", considers the expert from the University of Athens. In his opinion, the strong economic crisis that Turkey is suffering could prompt Erdogan to knock on the doors of Brussels to achieve a "special relationship" with the Twenty-seven, which would offer Greece an opportunity to set conditions at a European level that allow itself to improve bilateral relations with Ankara.

The reunification of Cyprus also depends on the elections.

There is a country where the elections in Greece and Turkey are followed as if they were their own. This is Cyprus, the largest island in the Eastern Mediterranean whose territory is divided into two nations: one on the south of Hellenic culture and a member of the European Union and another on the north, recognized only by Turkey. The fracture is the result of the invasion carried out in 1974 by Ankara troops to protect the interests of the Turkish Cypriot community after a coup supported by Athens. Given the coincidence in the holding of the Greek and Turkish elections, the Cypriot president, Nikos Christodoulides, expressed hope that the new governments in both countries would promote reunification talks. The EU would have a prominent role in these negotiations. "It is the only one that has the 'carrots', the incentives," said Christodoulides in an interview with 'Politico', inviting them to take advantage of Ankara's need to reach economic agreements with Brussels.

Panayotis Tsakonas, professor of International Relations and Security Studies at the University of Athens and Head of the Security Program at the Hellenic Foundation for Foreign and European Policy (Eliamep), is skeptical of the possibility of a new scenario opening up that would allow for the reunification of Cyprus. "There was a great opportunity in the Crans Montana talks in 2017, but it was missed because there was no real desire from the Greek Cypriots to solve the problem. It seems the Greek Cypriots are somehow satisfied by being part of the EU while the reunification prospects being rather dim in the Turkish Cypriot part, which is fully controlled by the "Ergogan regime" and where there has been a demographic change since Turkey's invasion with many people arriving from Turkey".