

1. HOW GERMANS SEE GREECE : SUN , SEA AND SELECTIVE MEMORY

Μέσο: INTERNATIONAL NEW YORK TIMES_KATHIMERINI

Ημ. Έκδοσης: . . .08/07/2025 Ημ. Αποδελτίωσης: . . .08/07/2025

Σελίδα: 3

Innews AE - Αποδελτίωση Τύπου - <http://www.innews.gr>



How Germans see Greece: Sun, sea and selective memory

Poll shows vacations and food at the top of associations list, while political references such as 'bankruptcy' are near the bottom

BY RONALD MEINARDUS*

There exists a striking asymmetry in the study of public opinion concerning German-Greek relations. While we have fairly precise data on how Greeks have viewed Germany over the past 20 years, until very recently, virtually nothing was known about how Germans perceive Greece and the Greek people – apart from anecdotal accounts in segments of the German media, which, particularly at the height of the financial crisis, often relied on predominantly negative or even racist stereotypes. This gap has now been closed with a nationwide poll of public opinion in Germany in March of this year.

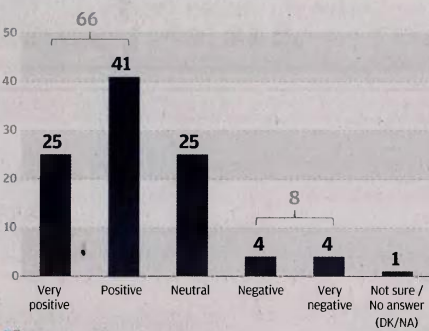
The associations most Germans have with Greece closely mirror the imagery conveyed in glossy travel brochures. When Germans think of Greece, they primarily envision an attractive holiday destination: the sea, sunshine and favorable weather are the terms most frequently mentioned when respondents in Germany are asked what spontaneously comes to mind when they think of Greece.

This characterization applies to nearly half of the respondents in the survey. Ranking second among top associations is Greek cuisine: dishes such as souvlaki, tzatziki and feta cheese enjoy widespread recognition and popularity in Germany. Greece is also associated with "hospitality" and "vacation." Significantly further down the list – though still present – are associations with "history, culture, mythology," as well as with the country's globally renowned historical landmarks and archaeological monuments. Political references such as "crisis, poverty, bankruptcy" appear only near the bottom of the list – a central finding of this analysis – indicating that such terms rarely intersect with the experiential world of German tourists in Greece.

Within this framework, negative associations play at most a marginal role. The shadows of the past, including darker chapters involving German

OPINION ABOUT GREECE

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ny – such as the occupation during World War II or the financial crisis of the 2010s – do not significantly shape the image of Greece among the majority of respondents. This general goodwill is mirrored in assessments of the state of German-Greek relations: 60% of respondents believe the bilateral relationship is either "good" or "very

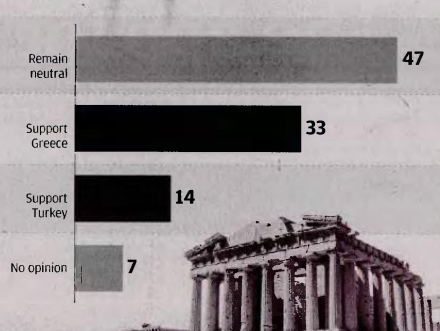
good," while only 7% consider it to be poor.

The decisive factor shaping public perception is direct personal experience through travel to Greece. An overwhelming 88% consider an actual visit to the country essential for forming an informed opinion. Nearly half (46%) of those interviewed in this representative survey have personally traveled to Greece. Among this group, the vast majority returned with either a "very positive" (51%) or "positive" (38%) impression.

The occupation of Greece by Nazi Germany continues to cast a long shadow over bilateral relations. What significance does this historical episode hold in shaping contemporary German perceptions of Greece? For nearly one third of respondents, the Nazi occupation plays a "very important" (13%) or "important" (14%) role.

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Another third report having no opinion on the matter, while 31% state that the occupation is of little or no relevance to their current view of Greece. Closely related to this issue is the question of how German political leaders should handle the country's historical responsibility toward Greece – a debate that includes discussions on reparations. Four in 10 respondents consider it "important" (24%) or "very important" (16%) that Germany acknowledge and assume historical responsibility vis-a-vis Greece.

More recent in historical memory is the Greek financial crisis and the corresponding German policy response – widely criticized within Greece and closely associated with then-finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble. A narrow majority of Germans (44%) hold a "very positive" (15%) or "positive" (29%) view of Germany's role during

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the crisis. Only 17% express a negative opinion of Berlin's crisis-era policy, while nearly one third (29%) adopt a neutral stance.

Greece's accession to the European Community in 1981 also shaped the German-Greek relationship. Two-thirds of Germans consider Greece to be either "very important" (26%) or

"important" (38%) for the European Union. Similarly positive responses were recorded regarding Greece's role as a strategic partner within NATO: Nearly two thirds of Germans view Greece as a "very important" (27%) or "important" (35%) ally in the Alliance.

Finally, the survey inquired into German attitudes toward Greece's disputes with Turkey. A narrow majority (47%) believe that Berlin should remain neutral and refrain from intervening in the conflict between the two Aegean neighbors. One in three respondents favor German alignment with Greece, while 14% support siding with Turkey.

Among the noteworthy findings of our study is the fact that, 10 years after the peak of the financial crisis only one in 10 Germans now associate Greece with terms such as "crisis," "poverty" or "bankruptcy." Younger Germans, in particular, are even less likely than older cohorts to connect the country with this dark episode when thinking about Greece today. What happened in the past between Germany and Greece occupies, at most, a marginal position in the minds of most Germans – and is of little interest to the broader public. This may be seen as a readiness to forget or suppress the past – an attitude that appears to significantly shape German views of Greece. On the Greek side, this readiness to move on from historical experience is less pronounced. Our studies on the image of Germany in Greece confirm that many people in Greece have not yet fully processed the at times traumatic experiences associated with Germany.

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