



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE ON
THE CIVIL DIMENSION OF
SECURITY (CDS)
Sub-Committee on
Democratic Governance (CDS DG)

POLITICAL COMMITTEE (PC)
Sub-Committee on
Transatlantic Relations (PCTR)

MISSION REPORT*

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* This Mission Report is presented for information only and does not represent the official view of the Assembly. This report was prepared by Andrius Avizius, Director of the Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security and Steffen Sachs, Director of the Political Committee.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Security in the Eastern Mediterranean, migration and border security, as well as Greek foreign and security priorities took centre stage during the exchanges of a visit of a delegation of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA) to Athens, Greece from 4 to 6 March 2019. The delegation comprised 38 parliamentarians from 13 NATO member states and two members from the Republic of North Macedonia. The group, representing members of the Sub-Committee on Transatlantic Relations (PCTR) and the Sub-Committee of Democratic Governance (CDSDG) was led by their respective chairpersons, Karl A. Lamers, Germany, and Vitalino Canas, Portugal. NATO PA President Madeleine Moon (United Kingdom) and officers of the Assembly's Middle East and Mediterranean Special Group (GSM) were also part of the delegation.

II. GREEK FOREIGN AND SECURITY PRIORITIES AND NATO

2. Greece remains a staunch supporter of and contributor to the Alliance. Strong defence and deterrence capabilities form the first pillar of the country's foreign and security policy, which is reflected by the fact that Athens meets the 2% defence pledge. Moreover, Greece participates in many NATO missions, including in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Iraq. Athens is also in favour of developing a stronger Allied defence and deterrence posture on NATO's eastern and south-eastern flanks where stability remains volatile. This is important as the changing international security environment has created a sense of uncertainty and anxiety in the region. Therefore, NATO and the European Union should pay more attention to ongoing security challenges on their south-eastern flank. Russia's ambition in the region, particularly its aggressive policy towards Ukraine and its military engagement in Syria, are also cause for concern, as several official and independent speakers noted. Greek officials welcomed NATO's presence in the region and its support to regional member states. More generally, host country interlocutors emphasised the need for good cooperation among Allies, among others to fight terrorist groups and prevent terrorist attacks. They also stressed the need to strengthen democratic values as an important part of the defence of member states. Greece is also making important contributions to EU's missions, including Frontex. Moreover, Greece is lead nation in five projects of the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

3. At the same time host country interlocutors emphasised the second pillar of the country's foreign and security policy – dialogue. Greece sees itself as a force aiming at promoting peace and stability in the “triangle of instability” between Ukraine, Syria, and Libya. This second pillar reflects both the country's historic links with its immediate neighbours as well as the recognition that Greece is located in a region of instability. This regional instability is primarily driven by the conflicts in Syria and compounded by the nexus of new security challenges, which includes terrorism, illegal trafficking, cyber security, and the continuing refugee/migration crisis. Several interlocutors also noted that Greece has been an “honest broker” in the past. One commentator summarised that Athens' approach is multilateral and multi-layered, emphasising at the same time that it remains committed to its values and international law. Athens wants to build bridges of dialogue with all countries in the broader region, including with Russia. This is also supported by a majority of the Greek population and according to a 2017 opinion poll by the Pew Research Center, 64% of Greeks view Russia favourably. Because of Greece's longstanding cultural and historical links with Russia, Athens could help to improve NATO's relationship with Russia, several host country interlocutors argued. However, any dialogue with Russia should be based on NATO's values. Athens, which strongly supports the principle of territorial integrity, is also concerned about the treatment of Greek populations in frozen

conflict zones. Greece has always supported NATO's approach to Russia, even in difficult circumstances. In this context, one speaker informed the delegation that implementation of the sanction regimes put in place as a response to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea led to a decrease of Greece's agricultural exports to Russia by about 80%. Greece also responded to Moscow's attempts to undermine the name agreement with Skopje through various forms of interference in Greece's domestic affairs by expelling two Russian diplomats.

III. THE WESTERN BALKANS AND EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

4. Greek interlocutors called upon the Alliance and the EU to pay more attention to developments in the Western Balkans which face a host of challenges, including ineffective institutions and weak rule of law, corruption, trafficking, radicalisation, and ongoing issues related to national minorities. "The Balkans is not the dark side of the moon", Christos Karagiannidis, Head of the Greek delegation to the NATO PA, stressed. Greek officials commented that the accession of North Macedonia to the Alliance will consolidate a sense of stability in the region. Greece and North Macedonia are already linked on many levels, including economic ones, the delegation was informed. Host country interlocutors stressed that Athens is willing to further expand and deepen the existing cooperation with Skopje. In the military and security area, the interoperability of the armed forces of North Macedonia with NATO Allies was mentioned, where Skopje needs to make further progress. Greece stands ready to support the Republic of North Macedonia on all issues, including on air policing, as it is already doing for other Balkan countries.

5. The visit to Greece took place shortly after the landmark Prespa agreement was ratified by the parliaments in Athens and Skopje, thus ending the long diplomatic standoff between the two countries on the name issue. Delegates, including NATO PA President Madeleine Moon and the participating representatives from North Macedonia, thanked host country representatives for their courage in making that difficult decision. The Prespa agreement does not have much support among the Greek population and, according to recent polls, a majority of Greeks is against it. This issue is also used by right-wing groups and several Greek parliamentarians even face threats from nationalists. Regardless, this diplomatic breakthrough has paved the way for the Republic of North Macedonia to join the Alliance once all parliaments of NATO member countries will have ratified the accession protocol. Moreover, the agreement has the potential to generate positive momentum to tackle and eventually solve other disputes in the region, participants agreed.

6. More generally, Greece is an important player in the Western Balkans and is therefore very much interested in overcoming the challenges facing the countries of the region which are often linked to ethnic and territorial disputes, it was argued. Prespa provides an opportunity to move forward and overcome existing disputes and conflicts in the region, although most speakers acknowledged that remaining issues, particularly in relations between Belgrade and Pristina, are particularly complex. The issue of identity is of particular importance in the Balkans – it requires recognition and respect for different identities, one speaker emphasised. Therefore, making progress towards more stability and security in the region requires compromise, he added. Host country speakers also noted that Turkey has historically played an important role for the stability of the region and continues to do so.

7. Bilateral relations with Turkey remain complicated, among other reasons because territorial disputes over islands in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Cyprus issue need to be solved, delegates heard. Expectations that the discovery of gas off the coast of Cyprus will promote the resolution of the dispute have thus far not materialised. Nonetheless, one speaker

expressed the hope that the establishment of a joint fund to exploit the gas field could help both Cyprus communities to benefit from the discovery. Though several Greek interlocutors cited Turkish violations of Greece's maritime and airspace in the Aegean both Greece and Turkey are willing to improve their relationship, as evidenced by the Greek Prime Minister's recent visit to Turkey. As Christos Karagiannidis, Head of the Greek delegation to the NATO PA, summed up: "We have a lot in common, we should focus on what unites us, not what divides us." In practical terms, the Greek and Turkish defence ministers have established a technical group that meets regularly to solve problems and avoid a possible escalation. Moreover, the bilateral cooperation on migration is already working well, delegates learned. Both Greece and Turkey have signed and implemented the Marrakech Global Compact on Migration, which has resulted in a reduction of the number of migrants perishing during the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea.

8. During the visit, Greek and Turkish parliamentarians discussed the idea of an exchange of bilateral parliamentary visits.

9. Athens strives to develop a wide array of regional partnership frameworks to prevent further destabilisation in the Eastern Mediterranean. These frameworks include tripartite forms of cooperation involving, in different configurations, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt and Jordan.

IV. THE MIGRATION CHALLENGE

10. Migration is one of the greatest external challenges Greece is currently facing. Since 2015, some 1.5 million people entered Greece's territory fleeing violence and poverty, the delegation learned. Although the numbers have dropped significantly since 2016, the problem remains acute for Greece. Under the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement, Greece must process all asylum requests filed on its territory. As a result, Greece has become the third country after France and Germany in terms of number of asylum requests received (the figure for 2018 was 69,000). The number of migrants returned to Turkey has been lower than anticipated, which is primarily due to Greek legal provisions on asylum and lengthy procedures. Today, the majority of the arrivals in Greece are from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan; approximately 90% of Syrians, Iraqis, and Palestinians as well as some 70% of the Afghans are granted refugee status, delegates were informed.

11. Greece strives to provide decent conditions for all migrants arriving on its territory, and it has received financial assistance from the EU – some EUR 1.6 billion – and both financial and operational support from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, resources remain insufficient. Many migrants continue to be hosted in overcrowded facilities in the Greek islands of Lesbos, Samos and others. Greece, which is still suffering from the economic and financial crisis, has no additional capacity to tackle a higher number of refugees/migrants. In this context one commentator noted that as a result of years of austerity, the Greek GDP has shrunk by 26%, which is unique among EU member states.

12. That tackling the migration challenge requires both responsibility and solidarity among NATO and EU member states, was a key message that the delegation heard repeatedly. It is neither fair nor sustainable that Greece and other recipient countries bear most of the burden, even though the majority of refugees want to go to other countries. Migration is a European problem, host country speakers underlined. A more integrated and comprehensive EU migration policy could go a long way to deal with the continuing migration flows more effectively. Such a policy should direct assistance to the countries of origin and improve border management at the same time. Therefore, they proposed a revision of the Dublin mechanism, which places disproportionate burden on the frontier states. Population movements will

continue, even after the end of the war in Syria, one commentator observed, adding that factors like underdevelopment and climate change will drive people to migrate to Europe.

13. While currently a majority of crossings from Turkey are by land (this segment of the border is not covered by the EU-Turkey agreement), Greece faces a sustained flow of arrivals across the eastern Aegean, where migrants can cross from Turkey into the Greek islands in a matter of minutes. Given the country's extensive coast line of approximately 18,400km, the Coast Guard, which works closely with the Greek police and armed forces as well as with Frontex and NATO vessels in the region, plays an important role for border security. To cope with the continuing flow of migrants, the Coast Guard has intensified the patrols in the eastern Aegean. As migrants adapt to changing circumstances, their routes continue to change - which requires constant monitoring and real-time information exchange. Operationally, Coast Guard missions are rather demanding, as traffickers are often armed and act aggressively. The organised criminal networks which are behind the human trafficking operate internationally. The traffickers apprehended by the authorities are usually not very qualified. They are considered by the network's leaders as expendable and can be easily replaced by others. Traffickers also increasingly use sailing boats, which attract less attention. Generally, the Coast Guard faces the daunting challenge of monitoring an area where maritime traffic is very dense and the distances between islands are short. Greek interlocutors stressed the need for additional funds and greater operational means to deal with the challenge.

14. The importance of securing the external borders of Europe and the great strides that EU member countries have made since the establishment of Frontex, were also discussed. Frontex, which comprises the 28 EU member states and four countries associated with the Schengen agreement, coordinates maritime operations in the Mediterranean as well as external land borders in Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, and Slovakia. It is also present at many international airports across Europe. Its main tasks are risk analysis, joint operations, rapid response, research, training, and information sharing among participating countries. Through its activities, Frontex provides frontline member states with crucial assistance in tackling the migration flow. In addition to operating in EU member states, Frontex will soon coordinate operations in and with third countries. To respect the fundamental rights and dignity of migrants, Frontex has established a monitoring mechanism and cooperates with governmental and nongovernmental institutions. Accordingly, all Frontex officers are obliged to immediately report any violation they notice. Emphasis is also put on training Frontex staff and border guards of participating countries. This approach has resulted in a considerable improvement of the behaviour of border guards.

15. The visit included briefings by and exchanges with leading Greek government officials, parliamentarians, officers of the coast guard, academics, and representatives of international organisations. As part of its programme, the NATO PA delegation also visited the temporary accommodation centres for asylum seekers of Elaionas and Schisto, as well as the offshore Hellenic Coast Guard's patrol vessel "Gavdos".

OVERVIEW OF INTERLOCUTORS

Hellenic Parliament

- Nikolaos Voutsis, Speaker of the Hellenic Parliament
- Anastasios Kourakis, First Vice-President of the Hellenic Parliament
- Costas Douzinas, Chair of the Standing Committee for National Defence and Foreign Affairs
- Nikolaos Toskas, member of the Standing Committee for National Defence and Foreign Affairs

Greek Government

- Evangelos Apostolakis, Minister for National Defence
- Dimitrios Vitsas, Minister for Migration Policy
- Ekaterini Papakosta-Sidiropoulou, Deputy Minister for Citizen Protection

Independent experts (Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP))

- Dr Thanos Dokos, Director General
- Dr Panagiota Manoli, Assistant Professor of the University of the Aegean, Head of the Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies Programme, ELIAMEP
- Angelos Athanasopoulos, Diplomatic Editor, (*To Vima*)

Other representatives

- Georgios Christianos, Commander, Head of the Integrated Maritime Surveillance Bureau, Hellenic Coast Guard
 - Grigorios Apostolou, Head of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) Liaison Office in Piraeus
 - Philippe Leclerc, Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Greece
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