

1. THE GRADUAL TRANSFORMATION OF GERMANY'S IMAGE IN GREECE

Μέσο: INTERNATIONAL NEW YORK TIMES_KATHIMERINI

Ημ. Έκδοσης: . . .07/09/2024 Ημ. Αποδελτίωσης: . . .07/09/2024

Σελίδα: 3

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



The gradual transformation of Germany's image in Greece

COMMENTARY | BY RONALD MEINARDUS*

Public opinion is subject to change. We live in a time of profound political, social, economic and sociocultural upheaval, each affecting how people think and feel to varying degrees. The image of Germany in Greece is no exception. Greek perceptions and attitudes towards Germany are changing. According to a survey conducted by Kapa Research in June 2024 on behalf of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES), to be presented to the public at the Thessaloniki International Fair, 31 percent of Greek respondents have a positive opinion of Germany. This represents almost a doubling of positive responses compared to a survey conducted in 2022. At that time, only 16 percent had a good opinion of Germany. The data reveal recognizable improvements over the past two years, allowing us to speak of a brightening of Germany's image in Greece.

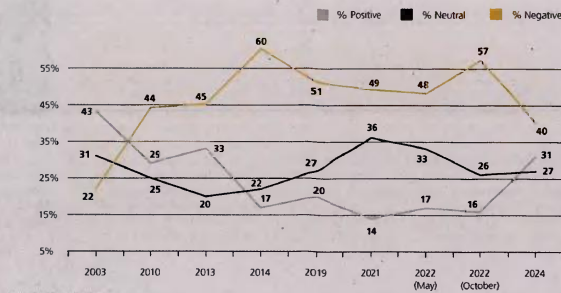
There remains room for improvement, however. Back in 2005, surveys showed Germany at the top of the Greek popularity table with an approval rating of 78 percent, closely followed by France and far ahead of the United States with 28 percent. We can retrospectively speak of a tectonic shift in collective attitudes.

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 Nazi 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 cycle 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 Ath-

Figure 1
Opinion about Germany. Time-series data



Source: Kapa Research, Innews

A poll conducted by Kapa Research for the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) shows how Germany's popularity in Greece has seesawed in the last two decades, with the lowest percentage reached in 2021, at 14%.

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ens traveled 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.

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 "metamorphosis" of German-Greek relations is also facilitated

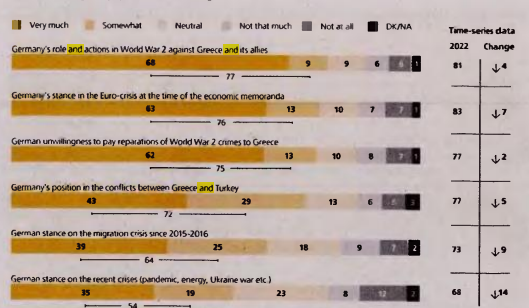


Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (r) and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz talk during their visit to the archaeological site of the Acropolis in Athens, Greece, on October 27, 2022.

by the cautious adjustment of German policy in the Greek-Turkish dispute. The Berlin coalition government countered the Turkish president's forward strategy – seen as 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

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, Innews

The poll shows negative perceptions persist in three areas: Germany's stance during the financial crisis; the history of Nazi occupation during the Second World War; and Berlin's stance in Greek-Turkish conflicts.

2023 we have witnessed a rare phase of bilateral detente between the Aegean neighbors, 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 detente 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 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 jeopardize future relations. Apart from occasional publications and information

events on important memorial days, the issue plays virtually no political role in the Greek public sphere.

Germany's image in Greece is shaped by a complex mixture of historical, political, socioeconomic and sociocultural 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 German Ambassador to Greece Andreas Kindl 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.

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