

Greek cafe in heart of Turkey signals a thaw in relations

When three Greeks opened the Island of Mastic in Izmir, the once famously cosmopolitan town that many of their relatives had hailed from, none of them could ever have imagined its runaway success.

Within days of the cafe-cum-bar's inauguration on the Turkish city's elegant seafront, its pastries, jams, Greek-style coffees and mastic products were going down a treat.

"It's great here, it's so great that the Greeks are back again," enthused Dilek, a Turkish student. "We're neighbours, we both live around the same sea, the Aegean, we've got a lot in common."

The Island of Mastic might have gone unnoticed had it not also made history: it is the first Greek-owned enterprise to open in Izmir since the sacking of Smyrna by the Turkish armies after the Greek campaign to occupy Asia Minor in 1922.

For the Greeks, who still refer to the event as the "catastrophe", no other place is as redolent of loss or defeat as the city they once predominated and still call Smyrni. For the generations of Greeks and Turks raised on school-book stories of hatred and chicanery, no other place provokes such passion and rancour.



Greece's prime minister George Papandreou, left, with Turkey's leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan earlier this month. Photograph: Murad Sezer/Reuters

Until recently it would seem. The tragedy, not least the fire that raged through the city on the night of 13 September 1922, and the awful massacre that ensued, have become a distant memory as Greeks and Turks attempt to forge better ties.

"In our hearts, we just want to get on," said Nektarios Memekas, who divides his time between Chios, the nearby Greek isle, and Izmir, where he opened the cafe two years ago. "As neighbours we are like two branches from the same tree. Our relationship on the ground has nothing to do with politics or what you see or hear on television. It couldn't be more different."

The Island of Mastic appears to have set a trend. Last week the first forum

was held in the town between the local chamber of commerce and entrepreneurs from Greece's Aegean islands. The inauguration of the first air link between Athens and Izmir this month has facilitated exchange.

"I grew up speaking Greek because that was the language I heard at home," said Hasan, a 46-year-old hotel employee. "My parents were Muslim but until the exchange [of populations between Greece and Turkey in 1923] they lived in Crete."

"For people like me it is wonderful that all these Greeks are coming here," he added. "It's a pity that Turkey doesn't have its Greek community any more, that there are only 2,000 or 3,000 of them left."

Greece's newly elected prime minister, George Papandreou, appears determined to tap into the desire for improved bilateral relations. In the two weeks since his socialist government assumed power there has been a discernible shift in mood between the two countries, whose ties in recent years had again fallen victim to paranoia and hostility.

A surprise visit to Turkey – where the Greek leader is still remembered fondly for his reconciliation policies back in the 1990s – was received with near euphoria after he laid an olive branch at the grave of the late foreign minister, Ismail Cem, who helped oversee rapprochement.

In an equally unexpected move, the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, "dropped everything" to meet Papandreou, who was visiting unofficially in his capacity as foreign minister.

Making his first official trip to the war-divided island of Cyprus yesterday, Papandreou set the tone for the conciliatory policies he intends to pursue. Turkey "had every right" to join the EU, he said, as long as it "fulfilled certain criteria", including good neighbourly relations.

In Izmir, at least, good neighbourly relations is what it is all about. "Thank God for Papandreou," said Dilek. "Turks like him. Maybe, at long last, we can just get down to the business of liking one another."

Article from the Guardian

President Papoulias accepts nomination for re-election

President of the Republic Karolos Papoulias announced on Monday that he has accepted the nomination for his re-election as President of Greece.

This effectively means that Papoulias will serve a second term in the country's highest post, as both the ruling PASOK and main opposition New Democracy (ND) parties endorse the nomination.

Prime minister George Papandreou announced on Friday, during his presentation in parliament of his government's policy statement, that he will nominate Papoulias for a second term in the Presidency, provided Papoulias so desired.

On Saturday, ND leader and former prime minister Costas Karamanlis reaffirmed his party's steadfast backing of Papoulias for re-election to the Presidency.

The Presidential election is due in parliament in March.

Rush for car withdrawal scheme



About 29,000 car owners have traded in their vehicles in the past two weeks to benefit from a government initiative offering cash for the withdrawal of old cars from the roads, according to an industry body.

The figure is higher than expected, falling just short of the 30,000 cars taken to scrapyards in the first nine months of this year, before the launch of the scheme, according to the Alternative Vehicle Management of Greece (EDOE), the organization which certifies the centers that accept vehicles for recycling. "The response of the public to the recycling scheme has been extremely enthusiastic," the head of EDOE, Epameinondas Vonazountas, told Kathimerini, adding that he expected around 100,000 would be traded in by the end of the year.

Scrapyards across the country currently report being overwhelmed, with between 1,000 and 1,500 old vehicles being handed over every day. The rush by car owners caused delays at the launch of the scheme's implementation. "There were problems and

delays at the beginning, as regional transport authorities had to manage a very large volume of documents and license plates but these hiccups have gradually been overcome," Vonazountas said.

Car owners, who should expect to wait anything from 30 minutes to several hours, can contact the nearest of 81 vehicle-recycling centers across Greece and arrange an appointment by calling EDOE's offices on 210.689.9039.

Owners can turn up with vehicles weighing up to 3.5 tons and the recycling center will undertake all the paperwork. Within a week, the car owner should receive a certificate in the mail that they then take to their local tax office to collect compensation ranging from 500 to 2,200 euros.

Those who wish to purchase a new more environmentally friendly car (classified as Euro 4 or Euro 5) are entitled to another 1,000 euros through their local tax office.

This additional cash can be obtained using a certificate issued by the relevant prefectural authority upon the issuance of the new car's registration.