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Editor's Choice

DIM Diplomatic evenings

speech delivered on October 20, 2025

H.E. the Ambassador of the Hellenic Republic,

Mrs. Lili Evangelia Grammatika

GREEK FOREIGN POLICY IN TODAY'S REGIONAL CONTEXT

I am very happy to be here today, and I consider it an honour to be invited as a speaker at the first edition of *Diplomatic Evenings* organised by the prestigious Școala Națională de Studii Politice și Administrative (SNSPA) of Bucharest and more specifically the Centre for Study of International Development and Migration (DIM) within the Faculty of Political Sciences of SNSPA.

I have to caution you that I am not an academic, but rather a practitioner of foreign policy and in this capacity, I will present today an overview of Greece's foreign policy in the current regional context. I will try my best to outline Greece's multi-layered approach, including a focus on the regional and the bilateral relations and the prospects ahead.

The challenge for such an endeavour is that our region and the entire world are evolving at a rapid pace. Constants which formed the rules-based international order we are accustomed to, and which have guided the conduct of international relations for many decades since the end of the 2nd World War are being questioned.

In this transitional and evolving context, Greece – situated at the crossroads between three continents (Europe, Asia and Africa) - remains a pillar of stability and a reliable partner and ally, committed to a principled foreign policy, upholding the rules of international law and democratic values, and actively seeking to contribute to the strengthening of global security, peace and prosperity.

Moreover, Greece has been a member of NATO since 1952 and of the EU since 1981. It has a deep-rooted strategic partnership with the US and has long been a bridge between the West and the East. Regionally Greece is

key for resilience and security in all fields, including energy, military mobility and reinforcement if need ever arise.

These are the fundamental parameters of Greece's foreign policy.

As I mentioned, the challenges we face are increasingly complex and require new concerted ways to effectively address them.

The security environment in our neighbourhood has significantly deteriorated in recent years, with an ongoing aggression by Russia in Ukraine and a grave crisis with devastating humanitarian effects in Gaza. The Houthis in Yemen have been attacking ships navigating the Gulf, disrupting maritime traffic between Asia and Europe. The situation in Syria and Libya continues to cause grave concerns.

Migration remains a significant challenge that tests the unity and cohesion of Europe, as well as lately the pertinence of the existing international framework on asylum and migrants' rights.

Technological advances have paved the way for new types of threats undermining the security of our nations below the threshold of conventional armed attack. Hybrid warfare, including cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns target the core of our societal resilience, threatening democracy and even independence.

Climate change has increased the occurrence of natural disasters and necessitates concerted efforts for effective prevention and crisis management.

Artificial Intelligence presents enormous opportunities and risks at the same time. A new era is dawning, and the international community needs to urgently adapt and elaborate the necessary policies to safeguard freedom, democracy and the individual and social liberties that have been the basis of progress and prosperity throughout the world.

Against this background, Greece is engaging actively in multilateral and bilateral efforts to promote security and prosperity in the wider region and beyond. The importance of connectivity and alternate routes to ensure resilience and independence has accrued.

On the multilateral level, I need to highlight that Greece is currently serving as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for the period 2025 and 2026.

This is the third time Greece has the privilege to be a member of the UN Security Council and we are doing our utmost to act as a stabilising actor in what has turned out to be very turbulent times.

Three words of Greek origin, but of universal meaning, guide Greece's tenure: Dialogue, Diplomacy and Democracy.

This year also marked the 80th anniversary of the United Nations, a significant milestone for the Organisation that has stood as a custodian of international law and of the peaceful resolution of disputes consecrated in the UN Charter. It has significantly advanced human rights and served as a springboard for advancing health, education, and equality for all.

Undeniably, there have been shortcomings and bureaucratic burdens, that the new UN80 initiative - launched in March of this year- aims to identify and address, hopefully reforming the United Nations and making them more agile, improving their efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Greece is supportive of these efforts.

We, along with many other nations, have been a member since the UN was established. We are concerned by the fact that multilateralism is increasingly under strain and that fundamental tenets of the post-1945 world are being questioned, with revisionist narratives resurging and with attempts to revive the imperial ambitions of previous centuries.

Greece firmly condemns revisionism. We are committed to promoting dialogue and peaceful coexistence on the basis of international law and in line with the UN Charter, serving as a bridge between the North and the South, the East and the West.

International concerted efforts remain key for solidifying peace and addressing humanitarian emergencies. This has been aptly reflected in the recent Gaza Peace Summit. Greece was invited and participated in the Sharm-el-Sheikh meeting convened by US President Trump and Egypt's President Al-Sisi (a week ago, on October 13).

We welcome the agreement on President Trump's Gaza Plan. It is a major step towards peace and stability, and the parties involved need to uphold the terms.

Greece supports the two-state solution in line with the UNSC resolutions. Hamas needs to demilitarize, and it is also imperative that humanitarian assistance is allowed to enter Gaza unimpeded to avert the humanitarian catastrophe that looms for hundreds of thousands of civilians, among which women and children are the most vulnerable.

For Greece, stability in its periphery is crucial and unfortunately, this has not been the case in recent years. After all, as a gateway to Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, Greece sits 900 miles away both from Gaza and Ukraine.

This provides me with an opportunity to touch upon the migrant crisis. Greece, as a frontline EU country, has been under significant pressure facing increased migrant flows for over a decade now.

I will focus mainly on the migrant influx from Türkiye and Libya – the Eastern Mediterranean Route as it is labelled.

This is by no means intended to underestimate the impact of the Ukrainian refugee crisis when the Russian aggression against Ukraine began in 2022. Greece did not shy away from burden sharing in this respect and has also welcomed thousands of Ukrainian refugees, even if not directly neighbouring Ukraine. It is worth noting that according to the latest data of May this year, there are approximately 35.000 Ukrainian refugees hosted in Greece, primarily women and children, who have received temporary protection status.

The bulk of the migrant challenge for Europe, however, stems from the Southern periphery, where protracted instability and poverty prevail.

Although the migrant flows from Türkiye to Greece were of significant concern for a number of years before that, it was the conflict in Syria, which provoked in 2014-2015 an unprecedented, massive wave of refugees. Encouraged by the Turkish authorities at the time to move onward to the West to relieve pressure on Turkish local communities, they overwhelmed

the border controls in Greece, with over a million people using all means available to cross from Türkiye to the nearby Greek islands in order to proceed to Germany and other Western European countries. The German Chancellor at the time, Angela Merkel, ultimately brokered an agreement to allow these refugees to resettle in Europe and the enormous pressure was eased through the EU-Türkiye agreement signed on 18th March 2016, which provided that Türkiye would receive a hefty amount of EU funding (€6 billion) for addressing the needs of Syrian migrants within its territory, and in exchange, would tighten controls and avert migrants from illegally crossing into Greek islands, accept their return from the Greek islands and also, for every Syrian returned from the islands, EU Member States would accept one Syrian refugee who had waited approval to resettle in Türkiye. While this agreement is still the basis of cooperation with Türkiye, its implementation to date has been partial and well below initial expectations. The EU has accepted the resettling from Türkiye of approximately 44.000 Syrian refugees and Türkiye has accepted only 2.140 returns from the Greek islands, well below the 1:1 ratio agreed (instead the ratio is 1:20+).

On the positive side, in the last couple of years the operational cooperation of the Turkish authorities with their Greek counterparts has improved, which is always a welcome step.

On the negative side, Türkiye practically refuses any returns from Greek islands since 2020 when they were suspended due to COVID (Türkiye only accepts return of its own nationals caught illegally entering Greece).

That was the year when Türkiye also attempted (from 28 February until April 2020) to instrumentalize refugees, directing them to overrun the land border between Türkiye and Greece in Thrace (including along the river Evros). The decisive stance of the Greek government, securing the border and countering the repeated attempts of refugees to cross illegally into Greece, heightened for a brief period the tensions between the two countries and ultimately led Greece to building a fence along a large part of its land borders with Türkiye.

Greece now seems a precursor in every respect. It was the first EU member state to face the instrumentalization of migrants by a third state with a view to testing the limits of crisis management, exhausting personnel and resources and undermining societal cohesion and national security. This was a form of hybrid destabilizing acts, that some years later other EU Member states now face from Belarus.

Even if no longer considered a crisis, the migrant flux continues, in the last year increasingly from Libya to the Greek island of Crete. Even if on a fragmentary basis, the situation highlights the need for vigilance.

Numbers provide a useful picture for better understanding. Already in 2022 there was a +113% increase in comparison to 2021 in the Eastern Mediterranean route (amounting to an additional 43,900 migrants). The following year, in 2023 there was an increase of +57%, that is an additional 60,800 migrants, compared to 2022 and then last year an increase of +200% in comparison to 2023. This trend has continued unabated this year and the increase rate was around 37% increase from month to month.

The migrant ethnicities now are mostly Egyptians, Sudanese and Afghanis. We are all well aware of the dire situation once again in Sudan. Egypt has been cooperating and facilitating the return of Egyptian nationals who crossed illegally into Greece.

In 2024 almost 70.000 migrants lodged first-time applications in Greece. Moreover, EU-wide in 2024, relative to the population, the highest number of first-time asylum applications was lodged in:

- Cyprus (730 per 100,000 inhabitants);
- Greece (660);
- Ireland (350).

In Cyprus the problem also stems from the occupied by the Turkish armed forces northern part of the island, where illegal migrants are allowed to cross in the free sovereign territory, overwhelming the capacity of the Cypriot authorities.

Greece appreciates all the assistance and contributions it receives from the EU and from individual member states, including in the framework of FRONTEX, the European External Border Control Agency.

Moreover, Greece has been allocated funds to improve the reception centres on its Eastern Aegean Islands and in this framework, by the end of 2023 new Reception Centres were opened in Lesvos, Samos, Leros, and Kos, and the Reception Centre of Chios was upgraded, thus adding a total of 12,000 places. In cooperation with the UNHCR, the IOM and the EU a number of projects addressing the integration and the well-being of migrants were also successfully implemented in Greece.

What has become more evident throughout these experiences is that cooperation remains key for tackling migration. No one can deal with this alone. We need more concerted action and operational cooperation to destroy the smugglers networks. The same commitment must be shown towards enhancing our collective resilience to counter any new attempt to instrumentalize migration flows, wherever it may originate from. It cannot come down to geography only and to the frontline states. We need to find an effective, lasting way to deal with migration, all aspects of it.

As we prepare for the implementation of the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum adopted in May 2024 after a tedious exercise in compromise, I will highlight that solidarity and responsibility are its key parameters. Properly implementing the Migration and Asylum Pact is crucial.

It is also necessary to pursue innovative ideas. The idea of return hubs, while needing further elaboration, seems like a way forward that should be explored, requiring of course cooperation with countries of origin and transit and making use of the vast potential of synergies between the EU and third countries that could be interested in the concept.

Furthermore, protecting the borders and enhancing returns are the cornerstone of any effective migration policy.

It is by no accident that migration dominates, one way or another, the public discourse in almost every country. Because managing migration

remains a persisting challenge for all, from both a humanitarian and a security perspective, especially within current geopolitical realities.

Indeed, we do not have the luxury to ignore the situation in a 360o perspective. European security is indivisible.

Greece maintains traditionally strong relations with the all the Middle Eastern and North African countries. Historical ties and trade have been the basis of continuing bonds and cooperation.

I will focus mainly on the strategic partnerships that Greece has with Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Egypt is a key country for the stability of the entire MENA region. We cooperate closely in a multitude of issues and have signed a bilateral delimitation agreement of the continental shelf and exclusive economic zone between our two countries.

Greece also has a strategic partnership with Israel.

We also cooperate in the framework of trilateral schemes with Cyprus.

Of course, security in the Mediterranean cannot be ensured without a mutually acceptable, just, and viable solution to the Cyprus issue, within the established UN framework. This remains a high priority for Greece.

As for the Greece-Türkiye bilateral relationship, Greece continues to seek dialogue and cooperation, trying to build on a relatively calmer atmosphere for establishing a climate conducive for progress in the delimitation of our maritime zones. It takes two to tango and the threat of war and revisionist theories projected by Türkiye are counterproductive. We support Türkiye's European aspirations and enhancing cooperation on the basis of the principle of good neighbourly relations and the respect of international law, including the law of the sea.

Moving on to the northern borders of Greece lie the Western Balkans. As the oldest European Union member in the region, Greece has always had a vision for the Western Balkans inside the European Union family. A vision that would reduce tensions and conflict, and embed the rule of law

and fundamental freedoms, driving development and prosperity for its people.

There has been progress, but that progress has not been enough. 22 years after the Thessaloniki Agenda, significant challenges remain. Thus, the countries of the Western Balkans need to take the definitive decision to leave behind the traumatic legacy of the past. And the political leadership of the Western Balkans needs to choose to embrace their European future. By improving democratic governance, consolidating the rule of law and freedom of expression, pursuing difficult internal reforms and most importantly committing to good neighbourly relations. Reviving nationalist narratives and agendas should have no place today in a region on the cusp of joining the European Union.

Speaking of EU enlargement, I would be amiss if I didn't also mention the European integration perspective of Moldova and Ukraine. Greece has been consistently supportive, on the same merit-based approach as for all candidates.

The recent parliamentary elections in Moldova have demonstrated the wish of its people to maintain their European path, as well as the importance of EU countries support for enhancing the resilience of Moldova's democratic institutions and countering disinformation.

Completing my clockwise geographical approach, I reach Ukraine, which I would like to reiterate the proximity with Greece at only 900 kms away. We are in the fourth year since Russia brought back violence, misery and destruction to the European continent. From the very beginning, Greece has stood firmly with Ukraine and the Ukrainian people who are fighting for their freedom and independence, and for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of their country.

Today, we are facing once again a critical juncture. The personal engagement of US President Trump gives a dynamic perspective that peace may be achieved. But we must work collectively towards a durable and just end to destruction and suffering in the country, and this starts with a ceasefire. Moreover, there can be no peace formula without Ukraine

at the table or borders redrawn by force. We must also work towards the reconstruction of Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine and the evolving international context has set in motion the realization that Europe must actively seek to ensure more strategic autonomy and enhance its defence capabilities.

The developments in this respect in the EU have been significant since the beginning of this year. The White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030, marked a significant milestone in the EU's efforts to strengthen its ability to respond to threats. It built upon the ReArm Europe Plan for formulating a comprehensive response to the defence and security challenges Europe needs to address in order to protect Europe's citizens, territorial integrity, critical assets and infrastructures, and its core value and democratic processes. The SAFE package and last week, the Defence Readiness Roadmap announced, foreseeing among other initiatives a Drone Wall and Eastern Flank Watch, set the stage for strengthening the EU's capacities and enhancing its ability to act as a credible global actor and robust security provider.

Mobilising financial tools and incentives of €800 billion in total is a major enabler for the EU to assume greater responsibility for its own security and becoming a better partner for both NATO and the US. A stronger EU can only make NATO stronger and vice versa.

I note in this respect that Greece has consistently over decades spent more than 2% of its GDP on defence as the guidelines of NATO had set, and currently its defence expenditure in over 3%.

This shift in European priorities takes forward and encompasses the realization that security and multidomain resilience are intertwined. And in this respect connectivity and secure alternative routes are key.

What does this mean for Greece and Romania in this regional context?

Well, significant opportunities that need to be seized for the benefit of the entire region.

I will briefly highlight that the bonds between Greeks and Romanians go back centuries. There are many historical, cultural, religious affinities

that provide a sturdy basis for our bilateral relations. It should be noted that this year we celebrated 145 years since the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between our two countries.

Greece has been supportive of Romania in all its contemporary endeavours; in joining NATO in 2004 and then the EU in 2007, more recently the Schengen zone in 1/1/2025 and once again in its efforts to become a member of the OECD in 2026. Greece chairs the Friends of Southeastern Europe countries Group in OECD and supports Romania in all its evaluations, as well as has offered technical expertise on certain areas such as public revenues authority digitalization.

Undoubtedly, the longstanding presence of Greek merchants and communities on Romanian territory has fermented the contemporary trade relations and the return of a dynamic Greek business community on Romania, with 5 billion dollars FDI stock and 3,2 billion Euros bilateral trade volume in 2024. The numbers indicate the strength as well as the enormous potential.

This potential also lies in the prospects of improving connectivity between our countries, linking the main hubs of Greece, such as Thessaloniki and Alexandroupoli with Varna in Bulgaria and Costanta in Romania, including Odessa in Ukraine and Moldova. This proposal made by the Greek PM at the last Ukraine-SEE countries that took place in June in Odessa, was embraced by President Zelensky and is already being elaborated and in coordination among the Transport Ministers of the 5 countries. European Transport Commissioner Tzitzikostas announced in this respect the upcoming signing in November of a trilateral agreement between Greece-Bulgaria-Romania for a highway linking Thessaloniki with Bucharest.

These connectivity projects significantly contribute to the security and the resilience of the entire region. With the war in Ukraine, instability in the Middle East, and rising global economic fragmentation, supply chains are shifting. Europe needs new, secure, and diversified trade

corridors-ones that reduce dependency on maritime chokepoints or politically sensitive routes through Russia or Iran.

This is where Greece's geographic and strategic relevance increases exponentially. It offers alternative routes that are dependable and bypass the constraints of the Straits.

They offer dual use assets-critical for both civilian trade and military mobility under NATO and EU frameworks. The wheels have been slow to be set in motion. The foundations were set more than three years ago in trilateral meetings of the Prime Ministers of the three countries (in 2022), followed up by Letters of Intent signed between the Ministers of Defence in 2024 and a couple of transport ministers coordination meetings. Moreover, the importance of promoting connectivity was also acknowledged in the Baltic Sea-Black Sea-Aegean transport corridor and the discussions in the framework for the 3 Seas Initiative, which Greece joined in the fall of 2023 at the Summit held here in Bucharest.

In parallel, there has been progress regarding the Vertical Gas Corridor linking the LNG terminals in Greece with Bulgaria and Romania, to Hungary and Ukraine, also including Moldova, enhancing the energy security of the wider region. The upcoming Partnership on Transatlantic Energy Cooperation (P-TEC) Ministerial in Athens on 6-7 November, will also be an important opportunity to advance cooperation between the US and our countries for enhancing the energy security of the wider region.

There are broader synergies and corridors planned and promoted. Cooperation and connectivity can be transformative. And reliability and resilience will be the litmus test.

There was just now a Ministerial meeting on cross-regional security and connectivity held in the margins of the EU Foreign Affairs Council in Luxembourg, bringing together EU Member States and EU officials with Black Sea and South Caucasus partners Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

I would also be amiss not to highlight the IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor), unveiled at the 2023 G20 Summit, a

multimodal trade and energy corridor linking India to Europe via the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel-then onward to Greece.

In concluding, I would like to highlight that since the ancient times, Greece has been a corridor for trade. It is uniquely placed, and connectivity projects are first and foremost peace projects, in that they are conducive to stability.

The complexity of the challenges we face in a dynamically evolving international environment requires strong, dependable partnerships among likeminded neighbours, such as Greece and Romania.

We share a lot of the same concerns and goals.

Thank you.

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