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“How to hold a ‘Conversation in the Library’? Both a challenge and a responsibility to talk about the political and cultural geography of an island and an archipelago deeply rooted in my family’s history. Rhodes, my maternal grandparents’ homeland, where history, heritage, and fate have shaped identity-building processes through deeply grounded human connections. Endless stories about Ottoman and Italian heritage, local myths and legends, patterns of cross-cultural interactions and trust that my mother, Marianthi, used to tell me, and which made me familiar with the specificities of both Dodecanese geohistory and maritime emotionscapes. If that, a conversation in the library should not be loud and noisy; but rather gentle and introspective. It became clearer to me after a while, Tarik Tüten’s kind invitation to participate in this project was not only about multicultural heritage, multilayered history and co-existing communities; it was also about reflecting on the salient relevance of collective memory, on negotiating our differences and, eventually, on who we are and how we would like to be remembered. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this Conversation.”

Ioannis Georgikopoulos

Rethinking Dodecanese Identity

Cross-cultural Patterns and Geopolitical Challenges

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the distinctive characteristics of Dodecanese identity and its inherent capacities in a networked world. Rooted in a rich multicultural past, this regional sense of belonging has shaped local populations across various geographical scales and has been successfully integrated with both Greek and European identities. Historically, due to geopolitical, geostrategic, and economic factors— including the Cold War, Greek-Turkish bilateral disputes, and politico-economic mismanagement—Dodecanese identity remained largely confined to a subnational territorial framework. However, the resolution of Greece’s political and financial crisis in the late 2010s calls for new interpretations that consider the evolving spaces of power and identity shaped by cultural signifiers and the forces of globalization. In this context, it is crucial to rethink ethnocentric and Eurocentric perspectives, adapting them to contemporary geohistorical realities. From an interdisciplinary perspective, this analysis explores how the unique features and capacities of Dodecanese identity can offer a deeper understanding of current regional and national challenges, highlighting assets that reconcile divergent narratives and geopolitical dynamics.

External Pressures, Internal Considerations

Situated at a key crossroads in southeastern Greece, the Dodecanese archipelago finds itself at the center of geopolitical divisions and recurring regional dynamics, as evidenced by escalating tensions with Turkey, energy agreements, and migration flows. These developments should not be viewed in isolation; rather, they reflect the intricate interplay and complementarities of multiscale interactions.

Since the early 1970s, the Aegean dispute between Greece and Turkey has served as an extension of the Cyprus Question. More recently, strategic partnerships among Greece, Israel, Egypt, and Cyprus—particularly in natural gas exploration and exploitation—alongside ongoing conflicts in the Near and Middle East, have further embedded the Aegean Sea into the broader geopolitical equation of the Eastern Mediterranean. Beyond the direct diplomatic implications for neighboring states, unresolved tensions invite external interference, leading to conflicts of interest on a larger scale. Both bilateral (Greece-Turkey) and multilateral (Mediterranean, Middle East) rivalries have extended across NATO’s southeastern flank, drawing in major global powers such as the United States, Russia, and China. The critical role of American diplomacy in fostering consensus—especially during the 1996 Imia crisis and the 2016 maritime security operation in the Mediterranean—along with Russia’s and China’s strategic and economic penetration of the region, from Piraeus’ port to naval bases in Syria and investments in Cyprus and the Dodecanese, underscores the high stakes of this complex geopolitical landscape.

Since 2015, efforts to manage maritime resources and recalibrate regional stability have been further complicated by the urgency of the refugee crisis. By February 2016, nearly one million Syrian refugees and Middle Eastern economic migrants had crossed Greece’s maritime borders. National desecuritization strategies, combined with the absence of a cohesive European foreign and security policy, were quickly exploited by professionalized criminal networks with a deep understanding of

regional hubs and transport geography. As a result, the population of the Dodecanese archipelago was abruptly exposed to the destabilizing effects of these evolving crises. This new set of challenges has heightened the region’s vulnerabilities, particularly concerning maritime borders and the pressures of globalization. In this context, the question of how to engage with global interconnectedness while fostering a self-confident and consensus-driven identity resurfaces, highlighting the enduring significance of national peripheries in an emerging multipolar world.

As Dieckhoff and Gutiérrez (2011) argue, cultures are not organic, self-contained entities with impermeable boundaries; rather, they are continuously shaped and redefined through processes of borrowing and exchange. At the same time, despite their fluidity, identity systems maintain distinct sets of values, symbols, practices, representations, and traditions—what McNeill (1986) terms “Mythistory”, a crucial component of internal group cohesion that carries a legacy of meaning. Reconciling these two seemingly opposing yet complementary perspectives requires a reconceptualization of underexplored infra-territorial and extra-territorial assets. In this regard, peripheral regions and regional identities play a key role, as they often foster diverse strategies of distinction that allow for the socio-historical reinterpretation of meaning-making mechanisms (Paasi, 2011).

Within this framework, the geopolitics of Dodecanese identity presents a compelling case study in examining the intersections of demographic and geographic partition, territoriality, and globalization. Greece and Europe face mounting political, economic, and cultural challenges—challenges that may seem insurmountable if approached solely through dominant economy-oriented methodological frameworks. However, as the historical experience of the Dodecanese suggests, regional and local perspectives can bridge cultural diversity with both national and European consciousness. In doing so, they have the potential to serve as intermediaries in the creation of a stable political and cultural foundation for coexistence.

The Imperial Framing of the Dodecanese Archipelago

From the Doric Hexapolis—a league of six cities in the southeastern Aegean Sea—to the Byzantine naval themes (administrative districts), the Dodecanese islands have consistently played a significant role within broader geopolitical frameworks at various scales (Ahrweiler, 1966). However, it was not until the period of Latin rule (1309–1522) that a more systematic spatial organization and the emergence of a distinct regional consciousness took shape. This transformation was largely driven by the interplay between commercial expansion and defensive strategies, particularly those implemented by the Knights of Saint John to counter piracy and Muslim conquest attempts.

With their capture of the Dodecanese, the Knights became a crucial asset in the Frankish hegemony over Greek seas (Kasperson, 1966). Under papal jurisdiction, the archipelago served both as a geopolitical foothold for further expansion into the Levant and as a European-oriented defensive barrier against the rising Ottoman power. This political and institutional structuring of the islands as military, cultural, and commercial strongholds contributed to the formation of an early, solid identity marker for both the region and its inhabitants.

Simultaneously, social and economic activities played a growing role in shaping the region’s symbolic landscape. Economic resurgence fueled population growth, and islands such as Rhodes, Cos, and Symi emerged as vital regional shipping centers. Stability, the gradual involvement of local Orthodox inhabitants in island administration, and their participation in the archipelago’s

defense fostered greater interaction between the local population and their occupiers. As a result, the islanders became increasingly familiar with the geopolitical narratives of the Order of Saint John, which encompassed myths, symbols, and chivalric legends, as well as a drive for landscape domination manifested in massive fortifications, engineering projects, churches, and convents. The enduring imprint of these elements is evident in recurring identity signifiers that, alongside other regional traditions, continue to shape the contemporary Dodecanese sense of belonging.

Beginning in 1522, the establishment of Ottoman imperial rule profoundly reshaped the sociopolitical structures of the Dodecanese. The new decentralized governance model increasingly relied on locally rooted power elites within a highly diverse sociopolitical landscape. However, political and administrative conditions varied significantly between islands, with urban centers subjected to stricter control than smaller, semi-autonomous territories. For instance, the sociopolitical organization of cosmopolitan Ottoman port cities—such as Rhodes and Cos—was shaped by interconnected economic and personal networks mobilized by a diverse range of cultural communities, including Muslims, Greek Orthodox, and Jews, within a framework of cooperation, interdependence, and occasional conflict. In contrast, rural island societies and smaller islands, predominantly Greek Orthodox, enjoyed greater political autonomy through municipal councils (*demogeronties*) and certain privileges granted by the Ottoman authorities (Georgikopoulos, 2024). In all cases, self-governance was a defining feature of local religious communities under the millet system, as the primary concern of the Ottoman administration remained tax collection and the maintenance of domestic peace and stability.

As in other imperial territories later incorporated into the Greek state (Koliopoulos & Veremis, 2002), localism, religion, and language were key elements of identity for the Ottoman subjects of the archipelago. Religious institutions, such as the Dodecanese Church under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, played a crucial unifying role, while local loyalties and trade languages further reinforced communal bonds. Additionally, the Ottoman imperial framework fostered a unique form of unity in diversity, facilitating extensive personal and commercial alliances throughout the Mediterranean (Georgikopoulos, 2017). These interconnections exposed Greek Orthodox shipowners and Jewish entrepreneurs in the archipelago to new ideas, production methods, and lifestyles associated with Western influences. As a result, the Dodecanese islands entered the modern era as a maritime crossroads that maintained regional cohesion while adapting to broader geopolitical realities.

The emergence of an independent Greek state (Hellas) introduced a dual identity dynamic. Outwardly, it was tied to a shared Hellenic heritage, trade, and diaspora networks as well as the concept of an “Orthodox Commonwealth”. Inwardly, it retained a sense of *Romiós* kinship, rooted in the shared identity of the former Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire (Beaton, 2019). This complex interplay of identities underscored the evolving geopolitical and cultural significance of the Dodecanese within both the Greek national narrative and the broader Mediterranean world.

Aspects of National Identity Building

In the early 19th century, the emergence of the Greek independence movement instilled a sense of national solidarity among Orthodox islanders, influenced by both Russian geostrategic interests in the Mediterranean and the revolutionary climate in Western Europe and North America (Prévélakis, 2006). Enthusiasm for the Greek cause led to harsh Ottoman reprisals against the seafarers of Casos,

Calymnos, and Symi, coinciding with broader internal shifts and the gradual decline of the empire. By the late 19th century, the movement for incorporation into the Kingdom of Greece had become the unifying force among the diverse Orthodox communities of the Dodecanese.

The diplomatic efforts of the archipelago's flourishing diaspora communities—spread across South Africa, British-controlled Egypt, France, Italy, and North and South America—played a crucial role in raising international awareness of the issue. Benefiting from both the spiritual and intellectual networks of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the liberal frameworks of Western democracies, this prosperous and well-educated Greek-Dodecanese diaspora became the financial and diplomatic backbone of what would come to be known as the “Dodecanese Question” (Georgikopoulos, 2020).

Pro-integration (*Ensomatosi*) ethnic lobbying abroad¹ and the patriotic regional sentiment at home—both fueled by the consciousness of an imagined national unity—became persistent advocates of the archipelago's Greek identity and significant pressure points for the Italian administration (1912–1943). Although the Italian authorities initially maintained the privileges of religious communities until 1937, their broader policy sought to impose a centralized governance model that was foreign to the Dodecanesians. While Italy actively developed Rhodes, Cos, Leros, and Castellorizo as major military bases during World War II, local patterns of organization—such as autonomy and the management of land and maritime resources—remained deeply entrenched (Kasperson, 1966). At the same time, exposure to multiscale realities, the enduring presence of cross-cultural interactions, and the strong structure of nuclear family units continued to define Dodecanese society.

The turbulent backdrop of foreign invasion and conquest provided a powerful catalyst for the transition from local and regional consciousness to a modern Greek national identity—often framed as an anti-foreign ideology. At the same time, the Italian administration and its relatively flexible application of national governance standards offered alternative avenues for integrating Dodecanese identity into the competitive post-Ottoman era. The colonial condition brought both advantages—such as economic progress, employment opportunities, civic order, and infrastructure development—and disadvantages, including the threat of brutal sanctions and political repression. Meanwhile, instances of positive social interaction between the rulers and the ruled contributed to the nuanced character of the occupation (Doumanis, 2005). Nevertheless, the Italian regime's attempts to construct a historical narrative linking the Dodecanese Latin past to modern administrative principles ultimately failed to supplant the region's deeper social and cultural foundations of identity.

In this context, Greek nationalism successfully promoted a strong neo-Hellenic myth that transformed the traditional island communities into a homogeneous nation and integrated the fragmented geographical entities into a unified part of the Greek state (*Helleniki Epikrateia*). The incorporation of the Dodecanese into Greece aligned with both the region's historical and cultural identity roots and the geopolitical imperatives of the time, particularly the need for stability in the aftermath of World War II and during the early Cold War. However, this

1 Especially from the committed and active Dodecanesian League of America and the National Dodecanesian Council, under the highly skilled and effective leadership of Nikolaos G. Mavris.

ideological project primarily addressed the islands' Greek-speaking Orthodox majority², leaving little space for religious minorities in Rhodes and Cos.

Despite this, the Dodecanese Muslim community managed to maintain its presence, whereas the once-thriving Sephardic Jewish population faced a tragic fate as a victim of Nazi Germany's *Judenpolitik* during the occupation of the archipelago (1943–1945)³. Following a brief period of British rule (1945–1947), the union of the Dodecanese with Greece gradually pressured the remaining Muslim community to conform to the homogenizing force of the Greek nation-state (Georgikopoulos, 2016).

Following the 1947 Paris Treaty, the union with Greece led to the implementation of top-down identity strategies aimed at integrating the new maritime periphery into the processes of national homogenization. To understand how the Greek state undertook this effort—both to ensure internal unification and gain external recognition—it is necessary to re-examine the sociopolitical and economic mechanisms that have continuously reshaped the regional identity of the Dodecanese.

The transition from a symbolic sense of ethnicity to the material aspects of national identity was more complex than Dodecanesians initially anticipated. The introduction of patronage politics and standardized, academy-supervised education laid the groundwork for this new sociopolitical reality (Georgikopoulos, 2016). Dodecanese identity became increasingly intertwined—albeit not without difficulties—with the Greek political system, exposing the region to both its benefits and drawbacks. Among the former were political and economic stability, civic participation, and regional representation in the Hellenic Parliament. However, this integration also brought ideological polarization, clientelism, and what Lavdas (1997) describes as “disjointed corporatism”. At the same time, having fulfilled its primary goal of unification with Greece, the once-dynamic Greek-Dodecanesian diaspora began to lose its influence, subsumed under the broader image of the Greek presence abroad. For many decades, its role was largely reduced to sending remittances that supported Greece's struggling economy and its chronic balance-of-payments deficit (Koliopoulos & Veremis, 2002).

By the early 1960s, Greece's economic growth and increasing prosperity brought long-awaited formal interactions between Athens and regional interests. However, these developments coincided with growing political instability. The onset of military rule in 1967—though ideologically rejected—had little direct impact on Dodecanese production activities or the region's established patterns of political and economic dependency. Despite successful initiatives for political and social consensus after the fall of the military junta in 1974, shifting political dynamics and a reliance on debt-financed prosperity sidelined many of the periphery's comparative advantages. Over the next three decades (1980s–2000s), Dodecanesians increasingly prioritized personal or group benefits over long-term management of the islands' cultural and natural assets—an attitude that reflected broader national trends. From the early years of its European Union membership, Greece leveraged its geopolitical and symbolic significance to secure financial assistance, yet structural reforms remained largely

2 107,292 residents out of a total population of 115,343, according to the 1947 general population census of Dodecanese. Source: National Statistical Service of Greece (ELSTAT).

3 The Italian-ruled Dodecanese was not included in the Greek-Turkish exchange of populations following the Lausanne Treaty of 1923. According to the 1947 census, the members of the Jewish community were estimated at 71 inhabitants whereas those of the Muslim community at 6,368.

unfinished business (Prevelakis, 2017). A critical yet often overlooked consequence of this centralized approach was the deepening of clientelist networks, a decline in local and regional historical awareness, and a loss of economic competitiveness (Georgikopoulos, 2023).

The financial and political crisis of 2009–2019 ultimately exposed the system’s vulnerabilities. The Dodecanese, heavily reliant on tourism, was among the hardest-hit regions. For decades, unchecked tourism-driven development—backed by government funding and susceptible to corrupt socio-political networks—led to widespread neglect of the islands’ aesthetic, natural, and cultural value. As mass-market sun-and-sand tourism became the dominant economic model, the destination image of Dodecanese cities became less competitive compared to the diversified offerings of other European regions⁴.

After decades of ethnocentric introspection and rent-seeking behaviors, the financial crisis served as a catalyst for reactivating the Dodecanese’s traditional community-based networks. A renewed emphasis on local strategies of distinction and a resurgence of regional identity have reaffirmed the importance of cultural heritage in shaping the archipelago’s human geography. Moving forward, the question remains: how can the maritime heritage of the Dodecanese contribute to redefining both Greek and European maritime identity in today’s increasingly unstable geopolitical landscape?

The Resilience of Patterns of Trust and Interdependency

From a geopolitical perspective, regional and local histories, actors, and practices offer valuable insights for rethinking dominant paradigms and adapting them to the challenges of an emerging multipolar world. In this regard, Dodecanese identity serves as a useful framework for understanding the enduring geopolitical significance of pre-modern loyalties and solidarities within a post-modern context characterized by continuous change and fragmentation.

Modern institutions, such as national identity and the European project, play a crucial role in this process. What may initially appear as contradictions—between localism and global integration—can, in fact, be complementary. Today, patterns of local identification and regular cross-border interactions coexist and intersect with broader phenomena such as cosmopolitan localism (Appadurai, 1996) and state-driven globalization (Foucher, 2013). Defined by both continuity and rupture, Dodecanese identity is constantly reshaped by the opportunities and challenges presented by the wider geopolitical landscape, while simultaneously projecting its preserved traditional resources into the contemporary era. This dynamic legacy is reflected in various tangible and intangible forms, including the annual Medieval Rose Festival of Rhodes, which reenacts historical and folk traditions; the steady cross-border mobility between the archipelago and the Turkish coastline; the uninterrupted connection between the Church of the Dodecanese and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople; the transnational network of the Greek-Dodecanesian diaspora; and the multicultural experiences of Rhodes and Cos.

4 Promotion of sustainable tourism activities -involving the preservation and enhancement of cultural and natural heritage, including the arts, gastronomy or the preservation of biodiversity, according to Eurostat’s definition – was already the case for French Catalonia (region of Pyrénées-Orientales) and the Tuscany region in Italy.

How can these elements become a strategic asset for both Greece and Europe? As part of the broader Mediterranean consciousness, the Dodecanese exemplifies how communities have historically integrated new populations, offering a model for reassessing the role of peripheral regions in fostering both national and European stability and transformation (Georgikopoulos, 2022). The region, deeply affected by the refugee crisis, has demonstrated resilience by transitioning from initial shock to pragmatic and locally driven solutions. In Rhodes and Telos, for example, Syrian refugees have been employed by local businesses, which facilitated their acquisition of social insurance numbers, fostering social and economic integration. Moreover, the enduring presence of indigenous Greek Muslim communities in Rhodes and Cos, alongside the islands’ interreligious urban landscapes—marked by churches, synagogues, and mosques—illustrates the potential for facilitating immigrant integration into Greek and European society (Georgikopoulos, 2018).

Ultimately, the resilience of traditional values appears to foster a strong affinity with pluralism, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence—qualities deeply embedded in the archipelago’s historically progressive yet conservative political culture.

From both a geopolitical and economic perspective, the characteristics of Dodecanese identity can contribute to regional stability and development. The cross-border socio-economic exchanges—encompassing cultural interactions, trade, tourism, and shopping—between the Greek islands and the Turkish coastal towns of Marmaris, Izmir, Bodrum, and Kaş (Kaurinkoski, 2013; Georgikopoulos, 2017) illustrate how regional practices can effectively collaborate with state agencies in border management. The growing influence of local and regional stakeholders underscores the importance of bottom-up initiatives capable of mitigating the tensions fueled by stereotypical oppositions—such as those between Greeks and Turks or the broader dichotomy of “the West and the rest” (Ferguson, 2011). This remains a crucial challenge that, if properly addressed, could foster regional stability through mutual socio-political trust⁵ and lay the groundwork for bilateral (Greece-Turkey) and multilateral (European Union, private investments, interregional alliances) economic partnerships that promote sustainable development.

Moreover, Dodecanese identity embodies a system of values, norms, and traditions that remains relevant in the context of globalization. Rooted in both territorial and network-oriented socio-political landscapes, these cultural features could serve as valuable assets for Greek and European identities in fostering cross-cultural understanding and openness. While Orthodox Dodecanesians continue to cultivate local strategies of distinction while also embracing national myths, symbols, and traditions⁶, other historical realities resurface as reminders of the transition from a dual (Ottoman-Westphalian) system to fragmented structures of pre-modern origin. The Dodecanese Muslim community, for example, primarily identifies with its local and regional heritage rather than with a specific national affiliation. As a result, this population represents a form of Ottoman legacy that remains well integrated into the insular social framework, bound together by shared memories and a collective sense of territorial belonging.

5 Regarding issues such as the Aegean dispute and Turkey’s geopolitical doctrine in the Eastern Mediterranean.

6 In the Dodecanese, there is no secular tradition because of the specific geo-historical experience. The combination of religion and nationalism had gone unchallenged as a means of introducing, under foreign occupation, regional identity into modernity.

Beyond their attachment to land, the existence of cosmopolitan and religious networks connects members of the broader Dodecanese community through local, regional, and national Mythistory. The Dodecanese diaspora in Europe, the United States, Africa, and Australia expresses its global dimension through deep-rooted traditional values that have been intertwined with Greek national consciousness and Orthodox Christianity since the Ottoman era (Mavrogordatos, 2003; Georgikopoulos, 2020). The resurgence of regional patriotism and the growing political and economic influence of these communities abroad have also shaped the foreign policies of host countries regarding Greek and European concerns (Sheffer, 2003; Bruneau, 2022), as demonstrated by the Obama administration's crucial mediation efforts during the 2015 Greek political crisis, which sought to prevent a “Grexit”.

Moreover, third and fourth generation diasporic Dodecanesians frequently organize family visits to their ancestral homelands, reinforcing or rediscovering their local and regional ties. This practice is also evident among the descendants of Rhodian Jews who escaped the 1944 deportations. Since the early 2000s, organized group visits to the Jewish quarter and synagogue in Rhodes’ Old town have become a standardized form of memory tourism for this expanding transnational network (Sintès, 2010). These tangible and symbolic connections to their ancestral homeland remain central to the Dodecanese diaspora, serving as key promoters of regional identity. By establishing and maintaining international, trans-state, and trans-local networks, these communities facilitate the exchange of significant political, economic, and cultural resources, contributing to the advancement of glocal strategies.

From both geopolitical and cultural perspectives, it is increasingly clear that reinterpreting the diverse character of Dodecanese identity could serve as a valuable tool for Greek and European foreign policy and cultural diplomacy. Ensuring security, stability, and progress depends not only on forming strategic maritime partnerships (Stavridis, 2017) but also on recognizing the advantages embedded in the maritime way of life—such as a risk-taking mentality, a drive for discovery and innovation, adaptability, and a strong inclination toward interconnectedness. Dodecanesians, both in Greece and abroad, act as bridges between Western and Eastern realities within the ever-evolving landscape of globalization. Ultimately, the region's multifaceted Mythistory could serve as a strategic asset enabling Greece and Europe to reconcile with complex and often overlooked geopolitical realities and to respond effectively to the pressing challenges of our time.

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