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## **TENSIONS ASIDE, TÜRKİYE AND GREECE INAUGURATE DIRECT MARITIME LINK**

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Setting aside longstanding disputes and tensions, Türkiye and Greece on Monday inaugurated a friendship line ferry link between the seaside town of Izmir in western Türkiye and the northern Greek port city of Thessaloniki.

Greek-based shipping company Levante Ferries announced the MV Smyrna di Levante vessel started passenger and freight services between the two countries on Monday.

The Thessaloniki-Izmir ferry line marks the first direct maritime link between mainland Greece and Türkiye, apart from the existing direct links between some Greek islands in the Aegean and Turkish ports.

The Levante Ferries said the vessel carrying up to 948 passengers and as many as 300 vehicles would both promote the neighbors commercial interests and deepen ties.

The ship began its maiden test voyage from Thessaloniki at 5:15 p.m. (2:14 p.m. GMT) on Monday with 119 passengers aboard, bound for Izmir some 14 hours away.

The vessel featuring Turkish and Greek flags and writing that reads Izmir-Thessaloniki Friendship Line docket at Izmir Port on Tuesday morning.

The ferry firm has over the past three years invested a reported 16 million euros (\$15.5 million) in the three-times weekly route.

Some eastern Greek islands off the Turkish coast offer more ad hoc trips to nearby Turkish ports courtesy of small boats.

We want to link Europe and Asia (and) benefit from market demand to promote maritime and tourist transport, said Greek operator Yannis Dimitriadis.

Relations between Türkiye and Greece are at their worst in years. Undersea gas and oil exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, maritime boundaries, air space, the ethnically split island of Cyprus, the status of the islands in the Aegean Sea that have a demilitarized status and migrants are key parts of the dispute.

Yusuf Karakaş, deputy general manager of the International Service Trade General Directorate at the Trade Ministry, stressed the importance of launching such an initiative.

Considering that three-times trips will be made mutually, we will be able to transfer 17,160 trucks to the opposite side and receive them here. There will be vehicle traffic of over 93,000. There will be over 140,000 trips. Considering that there is an annual passage of over 400,000 at the western border crossing, this is actually becoming a vital element for us with a single ro-ro expedition, Karakaş told reporters.

Given that around 45% of Türkiye's exports go to Eastern Europe, he said, this is a very important step for Türkiye and Greece.

In this sense, we hope that the number of expeditions will increase. Our goal is to be able to advance every dimension of trade at the highest level and reach the whole world.

Izmir Chamber of Commerce (IZTO) Vice President Cemal Elmasoğlu said the line was a wonderful dream that has been realized step by step.

It was a project where we used a common mind. Levante Ferries founded this line, but it is up to us to keep it alive, he noted. We need to cherish what we have. For sustainable success, we have to be together more often. I expect the sector representatives to extend serious support to this line.

We would make a mistake if we look at this line only as Greece. Because we need to evaluate it as an alternative gateway to Europe, Elmasoğlu noted.

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