



Why Did Greece Turn Against Russia?

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COVER: Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and President Vladimir Putin Source: Kremlin.ru

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WHY DID GREECE TURN AGAINST RUSSIA?

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Executive Summary

In the summer of 2018, Greece and Russian Federation went through one of the worst crises in their traditionally friendly relations. The falling out was triggered by allegations of Russian meddling in Greek domestic politics aimed at undermining the settlement of the so-called name dispute with neighboring Republic of Macedonia. But it also reflects a strategic turn towards the West overseen by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, once dismissed as a Kremlin ally. At the same time, Russia and Greece have taken care to keep tensions under control. A reset of ties is likely.

From Russia's Trojan Horse to the West's Poster Child

When Alexis Tsipras became Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic (Greece) in late January 2015, Western media saw that as a major coup for the Russian Federation. The radical leftist leader appeared to be yet another of the Kremlin's "Trojan horses." Though fighting German-imposed austerity was his top priority, Tsipras was likewise steadfastly opposed to Western sanctions against Moscow.¹ Russia has been well-disposed to Greece, a fellow Orthodox country. President Vladimir Putin paid a highly publicized visit in May 2016. While visiting the ancient monastic community of Mount Athos, he was accorded honors once reserved for the Byzantine emperor.

Yet, only three and a half years later, the relationship has changed. Tsipras, the former firebrand from the streets of Athens, has morphed into a something of a poster child of the West. Following his famed *kolotoumba* (summersault) of July 2015, he oversaw another round of fiscal consolidation to meet the conditions of a eurozone bailout package. The Greek prime minister's stock has gone up in the United States as well. U.S. President Donald Trump welcomed Tsipras to the White House in October 2017. The visit resulted in

a \$1.4 billion deal to upgrade Greece's fleet of F-16 fighters. And the former activist of the youth branch of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) has turned into a torchbearer for the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Following the signature of the Prespa Agreement with the Republic of Macedonia, laying a roadmap for resolving the protracted "name issue" between the two countries, Greece has lifted its veto over its neighbor's accession to the Atlantic Alliance as well as into the European Union (EU). Indeed, it is now a passionate advocate for Skopje's membership.

"Tsipras, the former firebrand from the streets of Athens, has morphed into a something of a poster child of the West."

By contrast, Greek-Russian relations have turned sour. In July 2018, the government in Athens took an unprecedented step in expelling two Russian diplomats and barring two more from entering the country. They were blamed for colluding with nationalists in northern Greece who were fighting the compromise reached with Skopje, whereby the Republic of Macedonia would change its name to the Republic of North Macedonia. Greek public opinion has been opposed to any name containing "Macedonia," which many Greeks regard as part of their Hellenic

1 Griff Witte and Karoun Demirjian, "Greece's leftist government sparks fears of Russian beachhead in Europe," *Washington Post*, 29 January 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/greeces-leftist-government-sparks-fears-of-a-russian-beachhead-in-europe/2015/01/29/79cca26a-a7dd-11e4-a06b-9df2002b86a0_story.html?utm_term=.1447ba319d73; and Meike Dülffer, Carsten Luther, and Zacharias Zacharakis, "Caught in the web of Russian ideologues," *Die Zeit*, 7 February 2015, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-02/russia-greece-connection-alexander-dugin-konstantin-malofeev-panos-kammeno>.



President Donald J. Trump shakes hands with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras at their joint press conference in the Rose Garden at the White House, Tuesday, October 17, 2017. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

heritage from the times of Alexander the Great.²

Russia, in turn, speaks loudly against NATO expansion in the region and has worked to disrupt the process. The Macedonian government called out Ivan Savvidi, a Russian-born tycoon based in Thessaloniki, for passing cash to opponents of the Prespa Agreement on its side of the border, including soccer hooligans and a newly emerged pro-Kremlin party named United Macedonia. Western dignitaries such as the U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis castigated Russia for interfering in the domestic affairs of the

Republic of Macedonia.³ As a result, Greece and Russia have reached a low point in their relationship. In the words of Russian Ambassador to Athens Andrey Maslov, “The past years were a time of an unprecedented boom in Russian-Greek relations. [But] the actions of the Greek side ... have become a disappointment for us.”⁴ How did we get to this point in Russian-Greek relations? What is likely to come next?

² Dimitar Bechev, “Will Greece and Macedonia end their name dispute?,” *Al Jazeera Opinion*, 25 January 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/greece-macedonia-dispute-18012411124832.html>.

³ “U.S. Defense Secretary warns of Russian meddling in Macedonia referendum,” *Reuters*, 17 September 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-macedonia-usa/mattis-warns-of-russian-meddling-in-macedonia-vote-idUSKCN1LX0ER>.

⁴ Tweet quoted by Nikos Kostandaras, “Athens and Moscow’s Stunning Falling-Out,” *New York Times*, 23 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/23/opinion/athens-moscow-greece-russia-tensions.html>.

A Steep Learning Curve

Back in 2014-2015, there were plenty of reasons why Putin's Russia and Tsipras' Greece should join forces. The Kremlin benefited from the fact that radicals took the helm in Athens. The return of the Eurozone crisis diverted attention from the conflict in Ukraine and potentially threatened the hard-won unity among the 28 members of the EU. Both members of the new governing coalition, Tsipras' Syriza and the populist conservative Independent Greeks (ANEL), had sympathies or links to Russia. In the European Parliament, Syriza's deputies had consistently voted against motions that put Moscow on the spot for the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine. ANEL's leader Panos Kammenos, now minister of defence, had been a regular visitor to Moscow. The then-incoming foreign minister, Nikos Kotzias, a university professor, had hosted lectures by Russia's far-right Eurasianist ideologue Alexander Dugin, who is popular with the Russian military.⁵

“Playing the Russia card in an attempt to win better terms from the EU than Tsipras’ predecessor Andonis Samaras did not work.”

It made sense for Tsipras to reach out to the Russians, too. Russia was popular with his constituents. Steeped in anti-Americanism, Tsipras' voters bought the view that the legitimate government in Kyiv had fallen prey to a fascist mutiny. The pro-Syriza daily *Avgi* (The Dawn) praised cooperation with Russia as a source of economic benefits at a time when the country was suffering unprecedented hardship. Tsipras himself sang from the same song sheet. “Our nations share deep-reaching ties that have their roots in common struggles in history and in common spiritual traditions. We have always kept these ties alive regardless of changing circumstances.”⁶ Tsipras made a point by receiving the Russian ambassador as his first foreign visitor upon assuming office in January 2015.⁷ His line of thinking resonated across society and the political spectrum. The opposition—the center-right New Democracy and the remnants of the once-mighty All-Greek Socialist Movement (PASOK)—was receptive to the idea of engaging the Russians. After all, successive Greek governments, as far back as the early 1980s, had worked consistently to nurture economic and diplomatic ties with Moscow.

Several months into his premiership, Tsipras made his move. In April 2015, he became the second EU leader after Italy's Matteo Renzi to travel to Moscow following the signature of the Minsk II Accords. Tsipras hoped that he would be able to cash-in on the new positive momentum. Yet, high expectations, predictably, led to disappointment. Though they signed a memorandum on advancing

⁵ Dullfer et al, op.cit. Xenia Kounalaki, Kotzias, Dugin and the EU, *Kathimerini* (English edition), 29 January 2015, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/166715/article/ekathimerini/comment/kotzias-dugin-and-the-eu>.

⁶ Statement made before talks with Vladimir Putin, Moscow, 8 April 2015. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49217>.

⁷ He was followed by the Chinese ambassador.



Signing ceremony of Russian-Greek documents on May 27, 2016. (Source: Kremlin.ru)

economic ties, the Russians did not make an exception for Greece from the countersanctions banning EU agricultural produce from the Russian market. More importantly, Putin was of no use when it came to Greece's standoff with the eurozone creditors.

Playing the Russia card in an attempt to win better terms from the EU than those acquired by Tsipras' predecessor Andonis Samaras (New Democracy) did not work. The Kremlin offered kind words, but no pledges to Greece. After the talks, Putin denied that Tsipras had asked for any assistance, adding that "if Greece starts a privatization process, Russia will be ready to take part in these tenders."⁸ That statement sat odd with Syriza's campaign promise to scrap privatization altogether. As far as Russia was concerned, it was for the EU to fix its own mess. Tsipras should have known better. Russia had declined to bail

out struggling Cypriot banks in 2013 even though its own nationals' assets had been under threat. All Moscow had done, on the Cyprus occasion, was to reschedule an earlier loan to Nicosia.⁹

The theory that Greece could attract long-term Russian investment did not stand the test either. The pro-Syriza commentariat long entertained the idea that the extension of the planned TurkStream gas pipeline into Greece and then, via the Western Balkans, into the rest of the EU, could attract billions. The energy minister in Tsipras' first cabinet, Panagiotis Lafazanis, was an ardent promoter of the plan. In June 2015, at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, he signed a memorandum of understanding and floated the prospect that Vneshekonombank (VEB) could finance the Greek leg of the pipeline. However, those grand plans failed to materialize. TurkStream 2 is still in question as Gazprom and the

⁸ "Russian Companies Ready to Take Part in Greek Privatization – Putin," *Sputnik*, 8 April 2015. At the time, Russian Railways was under discussion as a potential investor into Greece's indebted rail network.

⁹ For further details, see, Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press, 2017, chapter 4 on Greece and Cyprus.



Hope that the TurkStream gas pipeline would spur investment in Greece have not materialized. (Source: Gazprom)

European Commission have not settled their regulatory dispute about the application of EU rules on third-party access to transit infrastructure. Lafazanis' career, meanwhile, came to an end. Splintering from Syriza over the bailout, his party, Popular Union, failed to make it into the Greek parliament at the early elections in August 2015.

The Rift Explained

Ultimately, Greece's opening to Russia in 2015 proved to be a dead end. The cool-down in relations has been driven by Tsipras' lack of experience and setting initial expectations too high. There have been structural forces at play as well.

First, Greece never meant for Russia to replace NATO or the EU. Like other countries in Southeast Europe, the Hellenic Republic has been hedging between East and West. Tsipras has been walking down a path trodden by Andreas Papandreou, the godfather of Greek populism. Papandreou's Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) won power in 1981 on the promise to cut ties with NATO and revisit membership in the then-European Economic Community (EEC). Nothing of the sort happened. Though it flirted with the communist bloc and the likes of Muammar Gaddafi and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Greece ended up even more deeply enmeshed in the West. Both during the Cold War and after its end, NATO and especially the EU remained the country's ticket to prosperity and bulwark against arch-rival, the Republic of Turkey. Links to Russia were an add-on expected to enhance Greece's strategic position.

Tsipras is acting in much the same way. The EU and NATO provide Greece with badly needed security in uncertain times. Tensions with Turkey have been on the rise lately. The disputes with the regards to sovereignty rights in the Aegean (territorial waters, sea shelf, airspace) that used to poison Greek-Turkish relations in the 1980s and 1990s are re-emerging. Dog fights between military jets

remain common.¹⁰ To make matters worse, statements by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other politicians have challenged Greece's sovereign rights over certain islands. There are further irritants too: e.g. the asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc. entering Greece from across the border with Turkey. Last but not least, hydrocarbons off the shore of Cyprus continue unabated. In February this year, a Turkish patrol boat rammed a Greek coastguard vessel.

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From the perspective of Greece, the conflict with Turkey underscores the value of multilateral institutions as providers of security. Take the EU, for instance. The refugee deal arranged by Europe's leaders with Erdoğan in March 2016, though not a silver bullet, has relieved some of the pressure on Greece. Ankara's effort to reset ties with the EU, which has picked up pace in recent months, has benefited Athens, too. In August 2018, Turkey freed the two Greek soldiers it had arrested at the border and detained for

¹⁰ In April 2018, one Greek pilot died in a crash after intercepting Turkish planes.



Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras with Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev. (Source: tarea.gr)

close to half a year.¹¹

Unlike the 1980s or the 1990s, Russia cannot be trusted to be on the Greek side when it comes to disputes with Turkey. The elevated level of diplomatic and economic cooperation between Moscow and Ankara, overseen by Erdoğan and Putin, is not to Athens' favor. In the 1990s, Greek policymakers valued Russia as a counterweight to Turkey. Moscow was in a position to provide advanced weapons

systems to the Greek Cypriots.¹² Russia, together with its close ally Armenia as well as friendly Middle East countries such as Syria and Iran (plus the Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK), formed a loose alliance capable of checking Ankara. That policy, however, is long past its expiry date. Starting from the mid-2000s, Russia and Turkey have had thriving diplomatic and commercial relations. After the short-lived crisis over Syria in 2015-16, Erdoğan and Putin relaunched their relations. Russia and Turkey are working side-by-side in Syria through the Astana Process and pursue strategic ventures such as the TurkStream gas pipeline, the sale of Russian-made S-400 missiles to Ankara, and a nuclear power plant

¹¹ According to the official Greek version, the soldiers had strayed into Turkish territory due to a fog. There have suspicions, however, that they were in fact involved in illegal pushback of asylum seekers. The two were held as a tit-for-tat for Turkish servicemen who escaped to Greece and applied for asylum following the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. Greek authorities have rebuffed Turkey's extradition demand while the case is pending before the local courts.

¹² In 1998, for instance, Greece deployed Russian-made S-300 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), the first NATO member to do so. The SAMs had originally been procured by Cyprus, but ended up on the Greek island of Crete after Turkey threatened to intercept the Russian Federation vessels delivering them to the government in Nicosia.

on Turkey's southern coast.¹³ Faced with that reality, Tsipras' strategy has been to invest in links with the U.S. as well as with America's traditional allies in the Eastern Mediterranean such as Israel. Four-way cooperation between Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt has been thriving.¹⁴

Second, Greece and Russia are at odds in the Western Balkans. While Russia is sabotaging the West, the Greek interest is to have a stable hinterland. Close commercial, political, and societal links tie Greece to its northern neighbors. It was on Athens' watch as president of the EU's rotating council in 2003 that the EU first offered membership to the countries of the former Yugoslavia and Albania. Macedonia has been somewhat of an aberration. Starting from NATO's Bucharest Summit in 2008, Greece wielded its veto in both the Alliance and the EU to put pressure on Skopje.

For close to a decade, nationalist Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski used the impasse as an alibi to isolate his country from the West and consolidate his grip on power in Macedonia. But the arrival of a new government in June 2017 changed the equation. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev pushed for a compromise. Tsipras and Kotzias seized the opportunity and negotiated the Prespa Agreement with Zaev's government. The deal foresees Macedonia's changing its constitution to adopt "Republic of North Macedonia" as an official name. In return, Greece would lift its objection to its neighbor's accession to NATO and the opening of membership talks with the EU (both in 2019). The temporary name Greece and international organizations have been using to label the country, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), is to be

scrapped. In addition, the Prespa Agreement entails the endorsement by Athens of the existence of a Slav Macedonian nationality speaking its own language (defined as "Macedonian"). All those concessions have triggered stiff opposition in both countries. In effect, Zaev and Tsipras are putting their political careers on the line.¹⁵ The deal would have not been possible without (North) Macedonia's aspiration to EU and NATO.

Russia benefits if Prespa fails (in case either side fails to implement it),¹⁶ the West suffers a defeat, and Greece reverts to a policy of obstructionism. It is not clear how great a risk Moscow is prepared to take in pushing back. However, it is a natural partner for nationalists in both countries who are fighting the compromise. Russia's position has further dampened the enthusiasm Tsipras had for cooperation with it.¹⁷ The cool down in Russian-Greek relations is made worse by the spat between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople over the recognition of Ukraine's ecclesiastical independence. Located in Turkey, the patriarchate is not accountable to the government in Athens. However, it is run by ethnic Greeks and has much of northern Greece, Crete, and the

13 More in Bechev, *Rival Power*, Chapter 5.

14 On Greek foreign policy, see, Spyridon Litsas and Aristotle Tziampiris, *Foreign Policy under Austerity – Greece's Return to Normality?*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

15 Kotzias resigned as foreign minister in October 2018.

16 Zaev has been able to marshall a two-third majority in the Macedonian *Sobranie* to start the constitutional amendment procedure, but there are several more votes ahead. The Greek parliament will proceed to ratify the Prespa Agreement by simple majority.

17 ANEL, the junior partner in the coalition, is against the Prespa Agreement.



Dodecanese Islands under its jurisdiction.¹⁸ One of the reasons Greece expelled Russian diplomats in July and denied entry to Moscow Patriarchate clergy is Russian efforts “to impose the presence of the ‘Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society’ in Greece, an organization created by the Czars’ secret services in the 19th century with a view to de-Hellenize the patriarchates of the Middle East.”¹⁹ A long-standing rivalry between Moscow and Constantinople (and Athens) over the leadership of the world’s 250 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, hitherto kept under wraps, has burst out into the open.

One last area of divergence is in energy policy. Though it courted Russia, Greece never put all its energy eggs in one basket. Since the summer of 2013, when the Shah Deniz II consortium selected the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) as a transit route for Azerbaijani gas bound for the EU, Greece has emerged as a key part of the Southern Gas Corridor. Athens is similarly involved in developing the North-South routes advocated by both the European Commission and the Russia-sceptic EU members in Central and Eastern Europe as an alternative to dependence on Gazprom shipments. Greece and Bulgaria

have been working on an interconnector linking the northern city of Komotini to Stara Zagora. Also, there is a project for a floating storage and regasification unit off the port of Alexandroupolis, which will open markets in Southeast Europe to imports of liquefied natural gas (LNG). At a minimum, the prospect of bringing in LNG strengthens the bargaining position of DEPA, the public gas utility, in negotiating contract terms with its main supplier, Gazprom. Cross-border connections, access to LNG, and the advent of gas from the Caspian via TAP all undercut the Russian company’s dominant position on the gas market in Southeast Europe.

18 The Russian Orthodox Church prohibited its members from attending churches under the Ecumenical Patriarchate. That might lead to a sharp fall in the number of pilgrims in Mount Athos (known as Agios Oros or Holy Mountain), an autonomous monastic community in Northern Greece. One of the monasteries, St. Panteleimon, founded by monks from Kievan Rus in the 11th century, is still inhabited by Russian monks and is known as “Rossikon,” that is “the Russian monastery.” However, it is under the jurisdiction of Constantinople. Neil MacFarquhar, “Mount Athos, a Male-Only Holy Retreat, Is Ruffled by Tourists and Russia,” *New York Times*, 20 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/20/world/europe/mount-athos-greece-russia-eastern-orthodox-church.html>.

19 “Putting national interest first: Soberly and firmly,” Statement by the MFA of the Hellenic Republic, 10 August 2018, <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/putting-national-interest-first-soberly-and-firmly.html>.

What Next?



It is premature to talk of Greece turning into a sworn adversary of Russia. Tsipras' survival in power is not a given, particularly if he fails to secure the ratification of the Prespa Agreement. New Democracy is ahead in the polls and may well dethrone Syriza in next year's general elections. A future government in Athens might seek to re-engage the Russians. Indeed, some evidence of this is already evident. Greek Defense Minister Kammenos, following talks with Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu in Moscow on October 29, vowed to press ahead with strategic partnership with Russia. This is a signal that Greece is returning to its traditional foreign policy posture: anchored in the West, but keeping an open door to other powers such as Russia.

This is why Russia has chosen not to escalate its conflict with Greece. Time may well be on Moscow's side. Interests occasionally clash, but this does not preclude a reset of relations driven by pragmatic calculations as

the environment shifts.²⁰ If the center-right opposition comes to power in Athens, ties could rebound. In other words, business as usual. 🌐

²⁰ Constantinos Filis, "Orthodox myths: Greece's pragmatic approach towards Russia," European Council on Foreign Relations, 29 October 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_orthodox_myths_greeces_pragmatic_approach_towards_russia.





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