



Weekly Briefing

**Greece External Relations briefing:
Turkey, FYROM and Russia on Greece's foreign policy agenda
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Turkey, FYROM and Russia on Greece's foreign policy agenda

After years of calmness, foreign policy has returned to the agenda of a Greek government. As the previous weekly report on foreign policy developments also suggests, relations between Greece and Turkey have entered a point of crisis. Ankara's general behavior is considered provocative by the Greek side which is seriously concerned about Turkish President's Tayyip Erdogan's motivations and is counting on the support of the EU. As far as relations between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) are concerned, the two sides are making steps to reach a compromise on the name issue. Such a compromise cannot be taken for granted though. Last but not least, Greece has been one of the European countries which declined to expel Russian diplomats in solidarity with the UK.

In January and February 2018 Greek-Turkish relations entered a point of crisis. March saw a further deterioration. Specifically, on 1 March two Greek soldiers were arrested by the Turkish Army near the border between the two countries at Evros River. According to the official announcement of the Greek ministry of Defense the two soldiers lost their way due to bad weather conditions and crossed into Turkish territory where were intercepted and arrested. The interpretation of Turkey was different as – in its view – the soldiers ‘illegally’ entered the country. Subsequently, a Turkish court in the western province of Edirne ordered the pair be charged with ‘attempted military espionage’ and ‘entering forbidden military territory.’

The incident took place took place during a normal patrol in the forest area of Kastanies at Evros but the return of the two soldiers to Greece has proven to be complicated. The detention of the two Greek soldiers in a Turkish prison is happening while eight Turkish soldiers, who have been seeking asylum in Greece after the failed coup of July 2016, are not being sent back to Turkey despite Ankara's political pressure on Athens. Although the connection between

the two cases has been officially downplayed, it is clear that Ankara finds the new situation convenient to serve its national interest. From its part, Athens has failed to correctly inform public opinion about the future of the two soldiers. In the immediate aftermath of the arrest, it expressed an ungrounded optimism for the return of the soldiers which has not yet happened four weeks later. On 5 March 2018 another Turkish court rejected a request for the release of two Greek soldiers.

Greece did subsequently attempt to count on the support of the US and the EU. On 7 March the Hellenic National Defense General Staff (GEETHA), Admiral Evangelos Apostolakis, received US Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt in his Athens office on but details of their discussion were not disclosed. A few days later Ambassador Pyatt said that the US has been ‘strongly engaged’. Of course the main priority of the US is to prevent a small scale conflict between Greece and Turkey and the issue of the return of the two Greek soldiers could not dominate the agenda. More importantly, Turkey – a NATO member-state – is critically important for the future settlement of the crisis in Syria in which the American army is involved. So, Washington is keen on keeping an equal distance.

Another relevant significant development took place in mid-March. On 16 March a Greek court dismissed the Turkish demand for the handover of eight Turkish soldiers accused by Ankara of having played a direct role in the abortive coup against President Tayyip Erdogan. It explained its decision by arguing that it was not convinced ‘the eight’ would face a fair trial in Turkey. The decision caused anger in Ankara which considers them as ‘traitors’. Obviously, Ankara is able to negotiate with Greece on an exchange of soldiers and use the case of the Greek soldiers as a means of psychological pressure taking into account that this theme is largely influencing Greek public opinion and is damaging the image of the Greek government for its handling of it.

Hoping for an international mediation, the Greek government attempted to count on EU support in parallel to that of the US. Speaking at an EU summit in

Brussels on 22 March, for example, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, said he had assurances from the heads of the EU Commission and EU Council that the issue would be raised with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan during talks in Bulgaria the week after. This happened indeed. At the EU-Turkish Varna summit of 26 March EU top officials such as President of the European Commission Jean Claude Juncker urged President Erdogan for the release the two Greek soldiers. But generally speaking the EU is lacking the appropriate leverage. The answer Erdogan gave was that the issue would only be in the hands of the Turkish judiciary. More importantly, the Turkish President expressed his frustration that the EU had now shown a similar sensitivity in relation to the extradition of the eight Turkish soldiers who were involved in the coup and fled to Greece.

At the time of writing the fate of the two Greek soldiers remains unknown. On 27 March a Turkish court ruled that two Greek soldiers charged with illegally entering the country (and allegedly with espionage) would remain in jail. This decision defied the EU pressure for their release. Turkish media are currently elaborating on particularly painful scenarios. Anadolu news agency, for example, cited an unnamed judicial source that there was concrete evidence to support charges against the two Greek soldiers. According to this source, the sentence for the alleged offense is five years in prison.

To sum up, the case of the two Greek soldiers is a new issue negatively influencing Greek-Turkish relations. Other problems (as already discussed in the previous weekly briefing) are also evident. In mid-March Turkey boosted its presence on the Exclusive Economic Zone of Cyprus causing new tensions. The country dispatched the frigate Barbaros and three corvettes to the field where the American company Exxon was exploring. Also, Turkey did repeatedly violate the Greek airspace in March continuing its usual pattern on the matter. Greek Defense Minister Panos Kammenos commented in an aggressive tone: ‘We will crush whoever dares to question our national sovereignty’. While that kind of verbal statements are indicative of the problematic status of Greek-Turkish relations and even American media such as The Weekly Standard do not

exclude the possibility of a small-scale conflict, such as scenario does not seem likely.

The name issue with FYROM

In March 2018 the governments of Greece and FYROM continued their efforts to find a mutually accepted solution on the same issue. The Greek proposal on the matter contains five possible names: Republika Nova Makedonija (Republic of New Macedonia), Republika Severna Makedonija (Republic of Northern Macedonia), Republika Gorna Makedonija (Republic of Upper Macedonia), Republika Vardarska Makedonija (Republic of Vardar Macedonia) and Republika Makedonija (Skopje) (Republic of Macedonia [Skopje]). At the time of writing it is not clear, whether negotiations are referring to a bilateral usage of the name or an erga omnes usage and if the Constitution of FYROM will be changed.

On 22 March Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias arrived in Skopje for a landmark visit. This was the first by a Greek official in FYROM in 12 years. In spite of the visit and the good climate in talks, sticking points remain. Along with the name issue itself, Greek demands for changes to clauses of FYROM's constitution that are seen as expressing irredentist aspirations are not embraced by Skopje. FYROM also appears to be intransigent that the citizens of FYROM were 'Macedonians' who spoke the 'Macedonian' language. Difficult negotiations are expected to continue in April.

The spy poisoning affair

Following the spy poisoning affair in the UK Greece has been hesitant in expelling Russian diplomats from the country. In the EU Council of 22 March the Greek Premier Alexis Tsipras was skeptical on negative future repercussions if relations between Europe and Russia did further deteriorate. As a matter of principle, Greece does not believe that sanctions constitute an appropriate tool in approaching Moscow but practically has to align its foreign policy with that

of the EU being a member state of the Union. Before the EU Council, Tsipras had spoken with Russian President Vladimir Putin by telephone, discussing and received an invitation to visit Moscow. Greece is generally criticized in both the US and the EU for its rather friendly position vis-à-vis Russia.

Difficult times ahead

The current period is critical for Greek foreign policy. It is the first time during its administration that the SYRIZA-led government is encountered with serious problems and crises which require patient and wise actions not prescribed by the so-called Troika (as it is happening with the national economy). In the case of Greek-Turkish relations the Greek government is paying a heavy price for its lack of preparedness following the official visit of Erdogan in Athens in December 2017 and is currently blackmailed by the Turkish one on the potential return of the two Greek soldiers. With reference to relations with FYROM, the Greek government is lacking the appropriate consensus among political parties to proceed and prefers the semi-secret diplomacy path instead of building a national front. Last but not least, the decision to stand with Russia at the EU level might function as a double-edged sword for the Greek government: while its image is tarnished, it is questionable whether Russia might offer it anything in exchange.