



# Weekly Briefing

**Greece External Relations briefing:  
The Greek-Russian misunderstanding  
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## **The Greek-Russian misunderstanding**

*In September 2018 Greece and Russia celebrated the 190<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties. Despite some celebration events and the importance both sides attribute to history, the current juncture does not favor closer ties. In July Greece decided to expel two Russian diplomats and prohibit the entrance to the country of two additional Russian citizens. Russia responded one month later in a similar way. The foreign ministries of the two countries have issued hostile statements blaming each other for this diplomatic crisis. As a result Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov did not visit Athens in September according to schedule. But despite the negative climate Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras is expected to visit Moscow during the winter and meet Russian President Vladimir Putin. This meeting will be of high significance as it is the first time in their recent history that Greece and Russia are experiencing serious tensions in the bilateral relationship.*

Greece and Russia do traditionally enjoy warm relations. The current period is marked by tensions though. The misunderstanding started in July 2018 although – only one month before, in June – Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias had visited Moscow and met his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in a good climate. In particular, as the Greek daily *Hi Kathimerini* first reported on 11 July, Greece decided to expel two Russian diplomats and ban the entrance to the country of two more. The main reason for this decision was the documentation by Greek authorities of numerous coordinated efforts by Moscow to expand its influence in Greece. The efforts included the activities of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society as well as the alleged funding of demonstrations in Athens and Thessaloniki against a resolution with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) on the name issue. It was the first time Greece took that

type of measures against Russia. It had refrained from doing so even in response to the Skripal poisoning affair last spring.

The reaction of Russia was not mild. On 13 July, the Russian Foreign Ministry summoned Greek Ambassador to Moscow Andreas Frygnas to whom is expressed a strong protest in relation to the expulsion of two Russian diplomats and the ban of two Russian citizens from entering the country. According to the Russian position, the Greek actions are not supported by the facts, are ‘absolutely unfounded’ and can cause serious damage to the bilateral relationship. More importantly, Moscow believes it is Washington that pushed Athens to proceed to the afore-mentioned measures. For its part, Washington had already supported the decision of Athens and called upon Moscow to stop the ‘destabilizing behavior’. State Department Spokesperson Heather Nauert said so in a tweet of 12 July.

A few days later, communication tone was more aggressive. On 18 July, Spokesperson of the Russian Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova associated the expulsion of diplomats with an ‘organized campaign’ and said her country was aware of ‘instruments [that] have been used against the countries and politicians who refused to bow to British actions [and that pressure] did not come just from British politicians but also from their American partners’. In response to these comments, the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs saw ‘disrespect for a third country and a lack of understanding of today’s world, in which states, regardless of their size, are independent and can exercise an independent, multidimensional and democratic foreign policy’. And it concluded no one has the right of interfering in Greek domestic affairs.

Under these circumstances, the visit of Sergey Lavrov to Athens, which would normally take place in September as it had been discussed between himself and Kotzias in June, was postponed. Russian Ambassador to Athens Andrei Maslov gave an interview to TASS news agency and talked about unsuitable timing. He also said Russia would expel Greek diplomats but the dates of their expulsion and the number of diplomats due to be expelled were

then unknown. At that time, Greece was mourning the victims of devastating wildfires hitting the Attika region and Russia temporarily froze the diplomatic crisis. But on 6 August, it announced the tit-for-tat measures. According to RIA news agency Russia expelled Greece's trade representative as well as a Greek diplomatic employee responsible for the country's communications policy in Russia. It also prohibited a senior official from Greece's Foreign Ministry from entering Russia.

Greece believes the Russian counter-decision is not based on evidence but is arbitrary, and retaliatory. On 10 August, a statement issued by the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged Moscow to abandon mindsets of operating in Greece 'without respecting laws and regulations' and of making threats. Going further, it illustrated Moscow as 'a comrade in arms with Turkey providing it with a number of facilitations in the security sector'. Five days later, it was the turn of the Russian Foreign Ministry to respond by underlining it had not initiated the steps leading to the degradation of Russian-Greek relations and suggesting it had been 'unjustifiably reproached for infringing upon Greece's interests in the Balkan region and for undermining the Prespes agreement' on FYROM's name. Moreover, it regarded 'unacceptable to distort history and to interpret the goals of establishing the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society'. In the view of Moscow, this Society is solely implementing cultural and educational projects as opposed to the Greek allegations.

After the serious public disagreements of July and August, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras sought to ease the Greek-Russian misunderstanding. Speaking in the Thessaloniki International Fair on 9 September he said he had been extended an invitation to visit Moscow and meet President Vladimir Putin in the last months of 2018. He also explained that, normalcy can be possibly restored after a 'brief adventure'. The Kremlin's initial response was rather cold. Presidential aide Yuri Ushakov commented such a visit had not yet been discussed. But a few days later Russian president's press secretary Dmitry Peskov said Tsipras' visit could take place during the winter indeed. This

meeting can play a catalytic role for the new course of Greek-Russian relations. Although Greece generally wants to maintain good cooperative relations with Russia and to promote friendship between the two peoples, this task is currently difficult.

### **Relations strained despite 190<sup>th</sup> anniversary**

Greek-Russian relations are strained after the respective expulsion of diplomats. But this does not seem to be the only problem. Additional thorns are distorting the relationship. To start with, the decision of a Greek court to extradite Alexander Vinnik to France did not please Russia. Vinnik is a former bitcoin operator and – according to Associated Press – he is accused of defrauding thousands of people worldwide, including about 100 French nationals, by launching cyberattacks through his platform. The decision of the Greek court was announced almost immediately after the expulsion of two Russian diplomats. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs commented ‘Greek authorities continue to complicate relations with Russia’ because ‘Greece turned a blind eye to a request from the Prosecutor General’s Office of Russia to extradite Vinnik to his home country’. And it warned ‘Russia cannot leave these actions unanswered’.

Greek-Russian relations are also perplexed by different religious priorities despite the common Orthodox Christianity. On the whole, Greece is concerned about Russia’s effort to influence the Greek Orthodox hierarchy and to gain influence in Mount Athos, which President Vladimir Putin visited in May 2016. But in September 2018 a new crisis broke out. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople decided to start the process in order grant autocephalous status to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. This decision is clearly questioning the role of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine which considers itself as the only legitimate Orthodox Church in the country. For its part, Russia’s Orthodox Church responding by saying it would no longer participate in structures chaired by the

Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. As a result, the row in Orthodox Christianity is deepening.

On a more positive note, 2018 is an important year for Greece and Russia because it marks 190 years of diplomatic relations. On 17 September, an official celebration event took place on the Greek island of Poros where the Russian frigate Admiral Essen docked. Ambassador Maslov, Commander Anton Kuprin, and Mayor of Poros Yannis Dimitriadis laid wreaths to the marble plaque at the residence of Governor of the First Hellenic Republic Ioannis Kapodistrias. Two days later, on 19 September, an exhibition of historical material concerning the foreign policy of the Russian Empire was inaugurated in Moscow by Lavrov and Greek Ambassador Fryganas. In his speech, the Russian Foreign Minister spoke about ‘the spiritual unity of the peoples [of Greece and Russia] and the bonds of sympathy’.

### **Conclusion**

For some years – while most EU countries were considering Russia as the problem – the Greek approach vis-à-vis Moscow was more moderate. This became apparent in the spring when Greece did not agree with the response of other EU countries in the aftermath of the Skripal affair. But in July Greece decided to proceed alone and take measures against Russia by providing some evidence about Russian meddling activities in Greek politics. The tit-for-tat reaction of Russia to the expulsion of Russian diplomats from Greece is not surprising. This is a lose-lose situation for both sides. Greece is causing anger to a good economic partner (despite the European policy of sanctions) and Russia is losing a relatively friendly voice in European circles. Bilateral dialogue is now required. A modus vivendi between Athens and Moscow can be found but time and patience are needed. The forthcoming meeting between Tsipras and Putin can be a breakthrough.