

The EU has reason to be concerned over relations between Greece and Russia

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The Greek Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, visited Moscow last week for discussions with Vladimir Putin. [Dimitrios Triantaphyllou](#) writes on the extent to which EU governments should be concerned at the potential for Greece to seek help from Russia in order to leverage its negotiations with Germany and other creditors within the EU. He notes that while the Greek government has insisted it will not seek financial aid from Russia, there remains legitimate concern over how close the relationship between Greece and Russia actually is.



The recent visit by Alexis Tsipras, the Prime Minister of Greece, to Moscow has once again brought to the spotlight the misunderstood relationship between Greece and Russia – and with it fears that Greece may be breaking ranks with its allies and partners. Does the popular idiom, “there is no smoke without fire” apply in this case or is it a case of wishful thinking on the part of many within and outside Greece?

The Greek-Russian relationship: it’s complicated

The relationship between the two countries manifests itself as one of affinity linked to religion, history and culture as well as one of conflicting interests and alliance obligations, which successive Greek prime ministers have respected. Yet there are times, such as the present, when the delicate balance between sympathy and national interest becomes blurred.

The affinity is partly explained by a number of factors ranging from the commonality of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, to the fact that neither Greece nor Russia experienced the Enlightenment with its trenchant challenge to the relationship between knowledge and the state and its contribution to western Europe’s rush toward modernity. History also played its part with Ioannis Capodistrias, the Czar’s Foreign Minister at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, becoming Greece’s first governor in 1827, while the [Filiki Eteria](#) based in Odessa was influential in leading the call in favour of Greek independence from the Ottomans.

Part of the explanation also lies in the geography of Greece, which has meant that it possesses external borders, has been a flank state during the Cold War and beyond, and had to address twin security challenges during the Cold War – those emanating from its neighbours belonging to the Soviet-led communist world to the north and that of its bigger neighbour to the east, Turkey. The northern threat was viewed as a necessary evil due to the nature of the Cold War while the eastern one was considered to be the most substantive. Unsurprisingly, its allies thought otherwise.

Political legacy or ideology also plays its part in the shaping of Greek-Russian relations. The cleavages between right and left in Greece culminated in a deadly civil war between 1944 and 1949 where the left ended up being defeated, only to become legitimised again in the 1980s, while the right and far right together with the palace played a leading role in Greek politics until the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974. With the return to democracy, coupled with the Cyprus debacle following the Turkish invasion of the island, this cleavage enhanced existing feelings of anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism. It also fostered anti-NATO sentiments connected to the United States’ interventions, whether real or perceived, in Greek affairs – with Greece at this time being a majoritarian left-leaning country that echoed Soviet/Russian viewpoints.

Despite the rationalisation for ever closer relations between the two countries, the Greek ruling elite have always acted carefully by putting their membership obligations in the European Union and NATO first, in spite of the

enduring arguments in favour of Greek exceptionalism (primarily due to geography and divergent threat perceptions with its allies). They have bridged inconsistencies by promoting a multidimensional foreign policy which does not challenge Greece's delicate geopolitics: that is, one that balances the desire to promote the country's regional ambitions and the need to ensure that relations with neighbouring Turkey remain manageable. The danger of marginalisation and long term damage to Greek interests precluded any fundamental stepping over the invisible line that separates alliance obligations from foreign policy adventurism, in spite of steadfast [favourable public opinion](#) vis-à-vis Russia.

Hence, relations between the two countries took the shape of possible cooperation in the areas of energy on the premise that pipelines starting in Russia would traverse Greek territory before ending up in other European markets. Some cooperation in the areas of defence procurement has also been achieved, with the purchase of some military hardware, while other developments have also occurred in the areas of trade and tourism. Since 2010 relations have been in a relative 'deep freeze' as the EU straightjacket logic prevailed at a time of worsening relations between Russia and the West. The sanctions put in place in light of the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing low intensity fighting in Eastern Ukraine have appeared detrimental to Greek interests, in particular due to the country's ambitions to become a regional energy transit hub and the temptation for Greece to seek aid from non EU countries such as Russia and China.

Syriza and Russia

Syriza's rise to power in January this year has been accompanied by an expected process of policy reorientation on a variety of fronts, including foreign policy. This process hinges upon Syriza's view that the primary cause of the country's ills is the austerity noose it currently finds itself in. It also, in the [words](#) of one analyst, "coincides with Germany's rise as the clearly dominant power in continental Europe".

For a leftist like Tsipras, as well as for his right wing, pro-Christian coalition partner, Panos Kammenos and the Independent Greeks, Berlin's influence can only be undercut by increasing Greece's bargaining power. And this could be achieved by playing the Russia card. This might involve refusing to support the extension of EU sanctions against Russia when they are up for review sometime later in the year, adopting the Russian perspective with regard to the EU's energy policy, or hoping that Vladimir Putin will help release Greece from some of its debt.

Is this now a genuine concern for the EU? Alexis Tsipras and his government, for all their ideological proclivities, have been mandated to run a member state of the European Union, together with all its red lines against crossing over toward the temptation of the unknown. As the country runs close to bankruptcy, the rhetorical flourishes of the new government provide cause for concern.

Syriza's rhetoric stresses that Greece will never be 'subjugated' to the will of Germany and its other creditors. It also makes a vocal, public, and acrimonious case for Germany to pay reparations and loans incurred during the [Nazi occupation](#) of Greece between 1941 and 1944, while also misrepresenting history with relative ease in order to feed the nationalist and populist rhetoric of the underdog battling those responsible for the country's woes. All of these positions enhance the case for exceptionalism at a time when Greece requires friends, allies and supporters more



than ever.

Zbigniew Brzezinski's recent [comments](#) in an interview to *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* that should Greece come closer to Russia, it could paralyse NATO, should serve as a warning of the dire consequences which could result from divided loyalties and ill-thought through plans of action. To date no one in the Greek government has dared to cross the Rubicon; the hope is that this will remain the case moving forward.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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