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LONG-TERM SYMPATHY TRANSFORMED INTO A VISIBLE RIFT:

Greece, Russia and the war in Ukraine



Main thesis

1. Despite long-term historical and cultural ties between Greeks and Russians, Greece firmly stands on the side of Ukraine, supporting its defense against Russia's full-scale aggression and following the line of NATO and the EU.
2. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has transformed the gradual decline of Greek-Russian economic and diplomatic relations into a deep rift that will be very difficult to overcome.
3. Russian influence in the Greek political system today can only be traced to a few marginal far-right political parties and mass media outlets. This will remain the same unless Greece's relations with the West suffer a break anytime in the future.

Introduction

There is a long and rich history of relations between Russians and Greeks stretching back to the Byzantine period. These are based on cultural affinities (Orthodox Christianity) and the legacy of the East Roman Empire. Moreover, Greece gained its independence in the early 19th century after an uprising against the Ottoman Empire, with the assistance of France, Great Britain and Russia. This assistance was instrumental for the liberation of the Greeks from the Ottomans. Further on, in the 20th century, the Greek Communist Part (KKE), which enjoyed substantial social support, was consistently pro-Soviet, thus cultivating Russophile sentiments among its electorate. In other words, among the Greeks there was a lot of sympathy for Russians.

However, since the beginning of the 21st century, attempts at substantive economic cooperation between the two countries, before and during the Greek economic crisis, have not worked out. Russia's meddling in Balkan affairs, in which Greece too has a stake, led to tense diplomatic relations. The Greek government and the vast majority of the political parties also reacted negatively to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Greece has firmly taken the side of Ukraine, following the line of NATO and the EU. As long as the Ukrainian crisis lasts, the prospects of reconstructing Greek-Russian relations are dim.

Greek-Russian relations before 2022

Over the last fifty years, Greek-Russian relations ran parallel to Greece's tormented relations with the West. The seven year-long period of military rule (1967-1974) in Greece was a dictatorship tolerated, if not supported, by the US. Moreover, after Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in July 1974, Greece left the military branch of NATO. In practice this move meant that, until 1980, when Greece rejoined the military branch, the Greek armed forces did not participate either in NATO's military staff or in joint military exercises. Greece made that dramatic move, which was welcome by Russia, as a response to NATO's indifference to the invasion of Cyprus by a NATO member state (Turkey) and its neutrality in the standoff between Greece and Turkey.

Thereafter, anti-Americanism prevailed in Greece in the 1970s and the 1980s, despite the fact that Greece was firmly anchored to the Western block. While anti-Americanism was not equated with pro-Russian feelings, after the 1974 transition to democracy Greek political elites made overtures to the USSR. The prime ministers (PMs) Konstantinos Karamanlis, a conservative politician and founder of the conservative New Democracy (ND) party that governed in 1974-1981, and Andreas Papandreou, a socialist politician and founder of the Pasok party that governed in 1981-1989, paid official visits to Moscow during their respective terms in power.¹

There was a new impetus in Greek-Russian relations after the government change of 2004, when ND came to power again under Kostas Karamanlis (the nephew of Konstantinos Karamanlis). Russia was the first country that the new Greek PM visited in 2004. Two more meetings between Karamanlis and Putin took place in 2007 and 2008. There was potential for further economic rapprochement between Greece and Russia, but a major bilateral energy project was aborted. A pipeline was to link Russia with Greece through Bulgaria to the possible detriment of US interests in the region. Based on press reports, it seems that the Greek PM had agreed to this plan. However, due to US reactions, Athens eventually failed to implement it. This plan would have made Greece the gateway for Russian oil and natural gas exports to European markets.²

In the following decade (the 2010s), in the wake of the Greek economic crisis, Greek-Russian ties were stable but did not become stronger. Greece twice, but only momentarily, turned to Russia for economic assistance but failed to obtain it. In 2010 the then Greek PM George Papandreou (the son of Andreas Papandreou) met with Putin in Moscow. However, he received no promises of financial aid as the Greek economic crisis started to unfold. In 2015, Alexis Tsipras, the then PM and leader of the radical left Syriza party, paid a visit to Moscow. He asked for Russian financial aid to ease the pressure on Greece by the country's creditors, but to no avail. Greek-Russian relations turned sour in 2018 when Greece and North Macedonia ended a long-term dispute over the latter country's name. Sensing the Western influence over the two countries, Russia actively worked against such a rapprochement. Soon Greece expelled two Russian diplomats accusing them of interference in the Macedonian question.

Greek-Russian relations after 2022

Russia's full-scale aggression of Ukraine in February 2022 represents a game changer in Greek-Russian relations. Greece, led by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis from ND, openly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Further on, Greece expelled 12 Russian diplomats in April 2022 and periodically sent weapons to Ukraine in 2022-2024. Greece could not have distanced itself from the EU's uniform policy against Russia after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, because of a past comparable Greek experience. Despite a recent rapprochement between Greece and Turkey, Russia's handling of Ukraine reminded Greece of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, while Russia's rhetoric about Ukraine resembled to a considerable degree Turkey's revisionist rhetoric and actions in Cyprus and the Aegean Sea.³

1 Dimitris Terzis, *Mia diakratikí schési me polý megáli istoría, Efimerida ton Synakton*, 8.12.2018. https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/174979_mia-diakratiki-shesi-me-poly-megali-istoria

2 Giorgos Christides, *Could Europe Lose Greece to Russia?*, BBC, 12.03.2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31837660>

3 Manos Karagiannis, *Why is Athens Sending Weapons to Kiev?*, *E-Kathimerini.com*, 01.05.2024, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/1237697/why-is-athens-sending-weapons-to-kyiv/>

The war in Ukraine also had a huge impact on the attitude of Greeks towards Russia and Putin. In 2017, around 64 percent of Greeks had a favorable view of Russia. However, that percentage share dropped to 27 percent in 2002 and stood at 32 percent in 2023.⁴ In March 2024, more Greeks considered Russia to be a more unreliable power than the US, China or the European Union. In 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin's popularity among Greeks stood at 41 percent (second only to French President Emmanuel Macron). However, in 2022 the Russian president's popularity fell to 19 percent and then rose to 31 percent in 2024.⁵ Nevertheless, according to Standard Eurobarometers, Greeks remain one of the EU societies with the strongest opposition to financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine (in the last one conducted in October 2024 – 67 percent were against and 28 percent were for).⁶

The meager direct influence of Russia on Greek political parties

While on the left of the Greek political system there used to be a lot of sympathy for Russia, today the little sympathy there is can be traced mostly to the right. On the left, the pro-Soviet party KKE had linkages with the USSR from the period of the civil war (1946-1949), which it waged against the then Greek government. But after 1989, it severed its ties with the successors of the Soviet regime because it considered Gorbachev and Yeltsin to be reformists. While the KKE, which at the beginning of 2025 enjoys the support of around 8 percent of Greeks, denounced Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it has not taken the side of Ukraine either. Arguing that the main culprit is Western imperialism, the party has remained ambivalent about the war and Ukraine.

On the right, a few, but not all, far-right parties adopted a variety of pro-Russian stances that probably reflected the personal views of selected far-right politicians rather than elaborate political party strategies. Far-right parties gained a great amount of influence in Greek politics in the wake of the economic crisis that lasted between 2009-2018. At the end of 2024, their combined support in polls approached 20 percent. However, the far right in Greece remains very fragmented.

Currently, the Greek Solution (GS) party, led by Kyriakos Velopoulos, a TV journalist, enjoys the greatest popularity among the voters of the far right. The GS party obtained less than 5 percent of the vote in the most recent parliamentary elections (2023), but its electoral influence may be growing. Indeed, GS sprang from 4 percent of the vote in the European Parliament (EP) elections of 2019 to 9 percent in the EP elections of 2024. At the end of 2024, GS was polling at almost 8 percent.

Other far-right parties that are currently represented in parliament include the Victory party, which obtained 4 percent of the total vote in the national elections of 2023 and the European Parliament elections of 2024. There is also the Spartans, a party that obtained 4 percent of the vote in the elections of 2023 but quickly after that started to disintegrate and

4 Moira Fagan, Sneha Gubbala, Jacob Poushter, Overall Opinion of Russia, Pew Research Center, 10.07.2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/10/overall-opinion-of-russia/>

5 Τι πιστέvous οι Έλληνες - Μέρος V' Η Ελλάδα στην Ευρώπη & στον κόσμο και η μετανάστευση, Dianeosis, April 2024, https://www.dianeosis.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/TPE2024_Part_B.pdf

6 Standard Eurobarometer 102, Autumn 2024, European Commission, p. 47. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3215>

is now facing collapse. Last but not least is a new far-right party called “Common Sense”. This group emerged in Greece in the European Parliament (EP) elections of 2024. The party currently polls at 5 percent of the total vote. Notably, all these parties are personalistic, i.e., they lack a developed organization and comprehensive political programme. Thus, political party leaders feel free to conflate their own, often unclear, views with the policy choices of their parties.

Without being explicitly pro-Russian, Velopoulos, the GS party’s leader, justified Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. He claimed that Russia was obliged to respond to NATO’s expansion into Eastern Europe, i.e., Putin had to react to the alleged interference of the West in Ukrainian politics. Velopoulos criticized the anti-Russian stance of NATO and Greece and the coverage of the war by Greek media that he considered to be pro-Ukrainian. In Velopoulos’ own words:

“What does NATO want in the doorstep of Russia?”

“What do Americans want in Eastern Europe other than suffocating Russia?”

“What is the prize for Americans in that region?... It is to control all the natural resources (natural gas) of Ukraine... The interest of Americans is to economically destroy Russia.”

Russia is a “wounded bear that was obliged to make a distraught, albeit barbaric, invasion.” As for Putin, despite his brutality, he is considered a “real leader. He raised his country from the ashes and rebuilt it”.⁷ At the same time, the “Americans sent troops all over Eastern Europe, established there a missile defense umbrella and thought that Putin would put up with it.”⁸

The Victory party, on the other hand, has rejected the Greek government’s imposition of sanctions on Russia. Its leader, Dimitris Natsios, has also condemned the supply of weapons by Greece to Russia. He has claimed that Greek history demands otherwise, because Greeks have sent only “intellectual weapons” to Russia. These are namely, according to him, the Greek Christian Orthodox monks Cyril and Methodius, who in 9th century AD travelled to Russia to spread the word of God.⁹

Natsios reportedly has ties to the Russophile clergy of some Christian Orthodox monasteries at Mount Athos. The latter have mobilized their ecclesiastical following to support Natsios’ party in the parliamentary elections of 2023 and may have funded the party through donations.¹⁰ The party’s leader has rejected claims that he has received donations from the monasteries and has responded that he is neither Russophile or Anglophile, but “Godphile” (theofilos, in Greek) and “Greco-file” (hellenofilos, in Greek).¹¹

Afroditi Latinopoulou, a provocative nationalist and leader of the “Common Sense” party, has voted in favor of Ukraine in the EP but may want to attract pro-Russian Greek voters too.

7 Ii’periodos (Proedrevomenis Koinovouleutikis Dimokratias), Greek Parliament, 01.03.2022

<https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/en/Praktika/Synedriaseis-Olomeleias?search=on&SessionPeriod=d1e63fbc-9e29-4a80-9986-adb70123628e&pageNo=12>

8 O K. Velópoulos se mia synéntefxi ef’ ólis tis ýlis | Chorís Makigiáz, Attica TV, 09.04.2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxE-vV6cpoE>

9 Dimitris Natsiós gia masonía, NATO, Konstantinoúpoli, Nikh, 05.10.2022, <https://nikh.gr/nea/242-dimitris-natsios-gia-masonia-nato-konstantinoypoli>

10 Eleftheria Petropoulou, To omichlódes topío gýro apó to kómma Níki - Poioi kai giati to stirízoun, *Capital*, 01.06.2023, <https://www.capital.gr/politiki/3718838/to-omixlodes-topio-guro-apo-to-komma-niki-poioidi-to-stirizoun/>

11 D. Natsiós sto Naftemporiki TV: Stóchos i eísodos tis «Níkis» sti Vou, Naftemporiki TV, 13.06.2023, <https://www.naftemporiki.gr/politics/1482628/d-natsios-sto-naftemporiki-tv-stochos-i-eisodos-tis-nikis-sti-voyli/>

After all, Latinopoulou, now a Member of the European Parliament, joined the newly-formed parliamentary group “Patriots for Europe”, in which the parties of Marine Le Pen and Victor Orban participate too.

The moderate indirect influence of Russia on Greek politics through intermediaries

While no major newspaper or TV channel openly supports Russia, there are on the fringes of the Greek media landscape a website called “Banking News” and a YouTube channel named “Militaire” that are pro-Russian. Another partial exception is the “Open” TV channel, which until January 2025 was owned by the Greek-Russian Ivan Savvidis who was born and raised in the USSR. In the 1990s, during the transition from state socialism, he obtained a tobacco company in Russia (which he has sold recently) and became a deputy of Putin’s party in the Russian Duma. Estimated to have a net worth of 1.4 billion USD (with his family), Savvidis is considered one of the pro-Putin Russian oligarchs.¹² He is also the president of PAOK, one of the most important Greek football clubs. His TV channel periodically presents the “opposite view”, a shorthand for pro-Russian reporting on the Ukrainian crisis. However, none of the above can be considered staunch supporters of Putin that one finds in other Southeast or East European countries.

Only a few journalists reflect pro-Russian opinions. For instance, Dimitris Liatsos, a Greek press correspondent in Moscow who has been hosted by the fringe “One” TV channel and equally obscure YouTube channels, voices strong pro-Russian sentiments through his Facebook page “Ideochoros”.¹³ Another journalist is Thanasis Avgerinos, who is also a Greek correspondent for the “Open” TV channel in Moscow. He thinks that Russia has been unjustifiably demonized by the West, while Ukraine is responsible for the conflict in Crimea in 2014. Avgerinos has also supported the view of Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the war crimes committed by the Russians in Ukraine are not substantiated.¹⁴

Finally, among the 20 Christian Orthodox monasteries in Mount Athos, one is Russian, the St. Panteleimon Monastery. It is inhabited by Russian and Greek monks and owns large properties on the Mount Athos peninsula. Putin himself visited that monastery in 2005 and 2016 and established ties with the monks.¹⁵ The monasteries exert influence on far-right voters in Northern Greece, who are church-goers and periodically contact the monks residing in Mount Athos for inspiration and intellectual guidance.

Conclusion

It would be irresponsible in electoral terms for a Greek mainstream political party to be openly pro-Russian in the third decade of the 21st century. However, Greek far-right parties and to an extent the left KKE party hold a quiet, if not ambivalent, pro-Russian stance. The pro-Russian views of the local far right may have resulted from the personal interests and whims of party leaders. There were considerable shares of Greek public opinion that were

12 Ivan Savvidis and Family, *Forbes*, 11.01.2025, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/ivan-savvidis/>

13 Ideochóros, <https://www.facebook.com/ideoxoroschannel/>

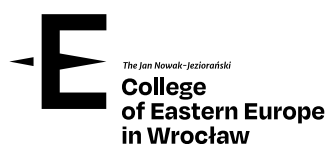
14 O Thanásis Avgerinós isopedónei ton Pantelí Valasópoulo ston aéra tou Open!, Open Channel, 06.09.2024, <https://www.newsbreak.gr/media/696637/o-thanasis-aygerinos-isopedonei-ton-panteli-valasopoylo-ston-aera-toy-open/>

15 Simon Shuster, Russia’s President Putin Casts Himself as Protector of the Faith, *Time*, 12.09.2016, <https://time.com/4475613/putins-pilgrimage/>

pro-Russian at least until February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. The incumbent center-right Greek government is adamant in its opposition to the Russian aggression in Ukraine, as is the majority of public opinion. After all, for the last 50 years Greeks tend to see invasions of foreign countries in the same light as the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974. Any such invasion provokes negative responses among Greeks.

Nevertheless, on the margins of the Greek political system and the mass media system there are marginal pro-Russian “voices”. They rely not so much on admiration for Russia but on anti-Western perceptions and emotions that linger on in Greece. This is because of the past tendency of Western powers (the UK and US) to intervene in Greek politics (e.g. in the civil war of 1946-1949 and during the military regime of 1967-1974). The influence of pro-Russian “voices” has been rather limited and particularly during the last several years of economic recovery and government stability in Greece. But it may become a rising influence if any time in the future Greece falls back into political turmoil or economic crisis.

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