Greece-Russia: The implications of a breakup

Description

Since the creation of the modern Greek state, and especially after the fall of the colonels' regime in 1974, Athens has always sought to maintain stable relations with Moscow, drawing on age-old historical, cultural, and spiritual ties that foster Russophile sentiment, as well as on Greece's vital geostrategic location.

But events in Ukraine since 2014, especially after the Russian invasion in February 2022, have led to a notable deterioration in relations between Athens and Moscow.

A fluctuating and decisive historical relationship

It was during the reign of Catherine II, marked by the Russo-Turkish wars of 1768-1774 and 1787-1791 that the idea of encouraging a Greek revolutionary movement to consolidate Russia's position in the Black Sea, the Aegean, and the Eastern Mediterranean was born. In 1770, the arrival in Morea of the Orloff brothers, officers in the Imperial Russian Navy, led to a revolt against the Ottomans led by local notables. Despite the failure of this attempt, the Russians prevailed in 1774. They imposed the Treaty of Koutchouk-Kaïnardji, by which Russia established itself as the protecting power of the Christian populations of the Ottoman Empire and the point of reference for their aspirations of national emancipation.

On the eve of the Greek uprising in Odessa, home to a thriving Greek community, the Friendly Society (*Filiki Etairia*), a secret organization pushing for independence, was founded. The abortive attempt to co-opt the Corfiote Ioannis Kapodistrias, Foreign Minister under Tsar Alexander I, and finally the election of Prince Alexander Ypsilanti, from a Phanarist family, as head of the Friendly Society, strengthened hopes that Orthodox Russia would support Greek revolutionary efforts. With the St. Petersburg Protocol to establish three autonomous Greek principalities subject to the suzerainty of the Sultan, and by its increased role in Greek affairs after 1825, Russia positioned itself as one of the guarantor powers of the newly established Greek state.

Nevertheless, Greek-Russian relations fluctuated, marked by periods of conflict after 1870, with the emergence of the Macedonian question. Russian diplomacy, sidelined by Great Britain in Greek affairs, emerged as a protective power for the Slavic peoples of the Balkans, attempting to guarantee their access to the Aegean Sea. In 1878, the signing of the Treaty of San Stefano, creating "Greater Bulgaria," to which most of Macedonia was ceded, was seen as a gift from Petersburg to the newly established principality of Bulgaria.

The divergence of Greek and Russian interests continued into the early 20th century, with the Russian Revolution of 1917 ushering in a new era of mutual suspicion. Greece's role in the Russian Civil War, through its participation in the Ukrainian campaign in 1919 and Communist Russia's rapprochement with the Kemalist movement, was detrimental to Greek interests in Asia Minor. However, it was in the 1940s that the Greek-Soviet confrontation reached its peak. Despite the joint mobilization of the two countries against the Axis powers, the Greek civil war accentuated antagonisms and deepened divisions.

The Greek government joined the "Western camp," while the Greek Communist Party aligned itself with the USSR. During the Cold War, relations between the two countries remained dictated by their divergent geostrategic and geopolitical interests without leading to confrontation. On the contrary, several attempts were made to normalize relations. Indeed, the dissolution of the USSR acted as a significant catalyst, multiplying opportunities for rapprochement between the two countries; this period was marked in particular by joint opposition to Operation Allied Force in

Yugoslavia in 1999, right up to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.

2014-2019: the reconfiguration of Greek-Russian relations

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 undoubtedly marked the start of a gradual turnaround in relations between the two countries, unseen since the end of the Cold War. Concerned about the geopolitical implications of the sovereign debt crisis and the fate of Ukraine's Greek community – 150,000 strong(1) and whose allegiance to Kyiv is uncertain – Athens then adopted a moderate stance towards Moscow. In the Greek parliamentary elections of January 2015, the victory of Syriza, which favors a multi-dimensional, equidistant foreign policy, confirmed this position. Shortly afterward, Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller met with the new Prime Minister Alexis Tsípras to discuss energy relations between the two countries (2). This was followed by the November 2015 meeting on Greek-Russian cooperation in energy, transport, infrastructure, and agrifood. Vladimir Putin's second official visit to Greece in May 2016 will culminate in this temporary normalization.

However, in July 2018, relations were shaken by the expulsion of two Russian diplomats accused of interference for bribing officials, clergy and members of far-right organizations to secure their opposition to the Prespa agreement, reached between Athens and Skopje under UN auspices in June 2018, ending a 25-year dispute over the name of North Macedonia (known provisionally as the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" from 1993 to 2018)(3). On this occasion, government spokesman Dimitris Tzanakopoulos states, "*Greece has demonstrated in a multidimensional policy that it wants good relations with all states, but all states must respect international law. The government insists that it is impossible to accept behavior that does not respect the Greek state"*(4). The Russian Foreign Ministry, which saw Washington's hand in this decision, expelled two Greek diplomats posted in Russia in return.

Meanwhile, in 2019, pastoral conflicts between Ukraine and Russia also contributed to the Greek turnaround(5). The Maïdan events of the winter of 2014-2015 launched the process of creating the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, *"which resulted from the merger of two Ukrainian autocephaly groups that any other Orthodox Church did not recognize, but finally obtained canonical recognition ("Tomos") in January 2019 following the granting of autocephaly by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew"*(6). This decision effectively ended the Moscow Patriarchate's control over Kyiv, leading to a rupture between the Patriarchate of Constantinople, marked by close ties with Athens, and that of Moscow, a loyal ally of the Kremlin. While Slavs, and above all, Russians, constitute *"the demographic substance of the Orthodox world,"* the spiritual and institutional levers remain *"mainly in Greek hands"*(7). In this respect, the national awakenings resulting from socio-political recompositions and transformations in the post-Soviet space have led to a *"reconfiguration of the geopolitics of Orthodoxy, in which the Ecumenical Patriarchate, closely linked to Greece, plays a pivotal role"*(8).

2022: The break is complete

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 will accelerate and confirm the deterioration in relations between the two countries. The charge finds Greece at a moment of internal political realignment, marked by the resolutely Euro-Atlanticist orientation of the government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis, which took office in 2019 and was re-elected in 2023. This orientation is now accepted by a significant proportion of the Greek population, convinced of neo-revisionist affinities between the Russian and Turkish powers. Greece will be among the first countries to supply arms to Ukraine. Despite its opposition to the EU's anti-circumvention measures, which could damage the interests of its shipowners, Greece has so far provided almost 190 million euros in military aid(9) while at the same time taking an unprecedented hard line with Moscow. As early as February 2022, K. Mitsotakis stated, "*Greece will never recognize the illegal annexation of Ukrainian territories,"* adding that *"Russia undermines the rules-based international order and violates Ukraine's fundamental rights to independence and sovereignty."* Indeed, the similarities between the invasion of Ukraine and Turkey's invasion and occupation of Cyprus in July-August 1974 are obvious for Athens.

From Moscow's point of view, the Greek position becomes even more problematic in light of the military and diplomatic rapprochement with the United States and, to a lesser extent, France. The Greek-American rapprochement, in particular, took concrete form in the military cooperation agreement of October 14, 2021, which extends the defense cooperation agreement of July 8, 1990, and provides for access to Greek military bases in northern Greece (Alexandroúpoli, Litóchoro, Vólos) – marking a break with the neutralist and sovereignist policy of eliminating American bases initiated

from 1981 under the socialist government of Andréas Papandréou. This Greek-American rapprochement was confirmed by Kyriakos Mitsotakis' speech to the US Congress on May 17, 2022.

The port of Alexandroúpoli is emblematic of this rapprochement. While Moscow had long perceived it as a potential link between the Mediterranean and the Balkans/Black Sea zone, the Mitsotakis government wanted it otherwise: with the active support of US Ambassador to Athens (2016-2022) Geoffrey R. Pyatt, previously ambassador to Ukraine during the Maïdan events of February 2014, the Greek government is transforming the port into a Western energy, military and logistics hub, much to the chagrin of Moscow and Ankara. Now a transshipment point for Western arms deliveries to the countries of the Black Sea – in this case, Bulgaria, Romania, and, now, Ukraine – the port reinforces the US military presence in Eastern Europe and embodies how the war in Ukraine is reconfiguring Europe's economic and diplomatic balances.

Notes:

(1) "Τι θα συμβεί στους 150.000 Ελληνες που ζουν σήμερα στην Ουκρανία" ("What will happen to the 150,000 Greeks living in Ukraine today?"), *iefimerida*, February 27, 2014.

(2) Catherine Chatignoux, "Greece optimistic about energy deal with Gazprom," *Les Echos*, April 22, 2015.

(3) Vasilis Nedos, "Απέλαση Ρώσων διπλωματών από την Αθήνα" ("Russian diplomats expelled from Athens"), *H Καθημερινή*, April 11, 2018.

(4) "Τζανακόπουλος για ρώσους διπλωμάτες: Οχι σε συμπεριφορές που παραβιάζουν το διεθνές δίκαιο" ("Tzanakopoulos on Russian diplomats: No to behavior that violates international law"), *To Βήμα*, July 11, 2018.

(5) Jean-Arnault Dérens, Laurent Geslin. « Tempête sur les églises orthodoxes. Comment le conflit ukrainien déchire les mondes orthodoxes », *Revue du Crieur*, vol. 21, n° 2, 2022, pp. 50-67. Kathy Rousselet, « La crise entre le patriarcat de Constantinople et le patriarcat de Moscou », *Annuaire français de relations internationales,* Académie des sciences morales et politiques, 2021, pp. 791-804.

(6) "Ukraine: War brings new prospects for the Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches," *Religioscope*, September 22, 2022.

(7) Aris Marghelis, "War in Ukraine: What's at stake for Greece?", *Diploweb*, September 18, 2022.

(8) *Ibid.*

(9) Ukraine Support Tracker, *Kiel Institute for the World Economy* (consulted on July 18, 2023)

Thumbnail: Meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Moscow, December 8, 2021.

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