



Greek-Russian Relations: A Potential to Mend Strained Ties

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Summary

- The relationship between Greece and Russia will require a careful approach to rebuild it fully after the 2018 strain to bilateral relations.
- The diplomatic crisis of 2018 over the naming of Northern Macedonia is still a thorn in Greek-Russian relations and will require work to build on and restore trust in the long-term.
- Russia appears skeptical about US foreign policy in Greece but the strengthening of Greek-American relations is still a cornerstone of Greek foreign policy.
- There is room for an increase in bilateral trade between Greece and Russia.
- The role of Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean is highly significant, however, Greece, is wary of the good relations between Ankara and Moscow given the current tense climate in Greco-Turkish relations. An improvement of Greek-Russian relations is placed in the interest of Athens in that regard.
- Closer collaboration between Greece and Russia in international organizations on non-sensitive issues is in the best interest of both countries.

Introduction

“Only one month after the then Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikos Kotzias, had visited Moscow and met his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in what were called positive meetings in a good climate, Athens expelled two Russian diplomats and banned the entrance to the country of two more.”

“Russia adapted tit-for-tat measures.”

The visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Athens offers an opportunity for the two countries to talk about the difficult yet possible rewarming of their ties. Greece and Russia need a sincere dialogue based on realism and their common interests which will leave past disagreements aside and concentrate on a positive agenda for the future. Greece and Russia traditionally have enjoyed good relations, but have not yet succeeded in overcoming the disagreements that came to the forefront in 2018 over the Prespa Agreement. When Athens and Skopje were negotiating the Prespa Agreement which paved the way for NATO’s enlargement in the Balkans, Moscow was highly skeptical about the impact of the accord on its policies in the region. Greece’s decisions were aligned with American and European policies and aimed at promoting peace and stability in the Balkans by reaching a compromise on the name issue. By contrast, Russia, which had recognized North Macedonia with its then constitutional name, opposed what it perceived as outside interference and the establishment of terms and conditions on the deal which it disagreed with.¹

The critical incident that brought on strained relations for both sides occurred in July 2018. Only one month after the then Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikos Kotzias, had visited Moscow and met his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in what were called positive meetings in a good climate,² Athens expelled two Russian diplomats and banned the entrance to the country of two more. It also decided to publicize the reasons for this decision. As reported in the daily *Kathimerini*, on 11 July 2018 the Russian diplomats were accused of intrusion into domestic affairs and illegal acts against Greece’s national security. Their activities, the report suggests, included unsuccessful efforts to circulate information and bribe Greek state operatives.³ In another piece *Kathimerini* focused on the attempt of the diplomats to expand Russia’s influence in Greece, via local authorities and bishops, and through organizations with close links to Moscow, including the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society.⁴ The Greek government decision to expel the Russian diplomats was remarkable and was a turning point in bilateral relations. Athens had not withdrawn any of its diplomats from Moscow in response to the Skripal affair.⁵

The swift Russian demarche to the diplomatic incident was not mild. On 13 July 2018, the Russian Foreign Ministry summoned the then Greek Ambassador to Moscow Andreas Fryganas to relay its protest against the Greek ministry actions. It considered the expulsions as ‘absolutely unfounded [...] coming in conflict with the nature of bilateral relations and capable of causing them serious damage’. Moscow’s view was that, ‘Washington [was] behind the Greek government’s anti-Russian decision, timed to coincide with the NATO summit.’⁶ More importantly, Moscow believed Washington pressured Athens to expel the diplomats. The Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova associated the expulsion of the diplomats with an ‘organized campaign’

¹ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks during a press conference following talks with Foreign Minister of the Hellenic Republic Nikos Kotzias, Moscow, available at: https://www.mid.ru/en/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3257405?novelty-display-dynamic=novelty, 13 June 2018.

² Statements by Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Kotzias following his meeting with his Russian Federation counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/statements-of-minister-of-foreign-affairs-nikos-kotzias-following-his-meeting-with-his-russian-federation-counterpart-sergey-lavrov-moscow-13-june-2018.html>, 13 June 2018.

³ Vassilis Nedos, ‘Greece Decides to Expel Russian Diplomats’, available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/230551/article/ekathimerini/news/greece-decides-to-expel-russian-diplomats>, 11 July 2018.

⁴ Ties with Moscow under Strain after Athens Expels Diplomats, available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/230592/article/ekathimerini/news/ties-with-moscow-under-strain-after-athens-expels-diplomats>, 12 July 2018.

⁵ Kerin Hope, ‘Greece to expel two Russian officials amid North Macedonia dispute’, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/68e75e3a-8511-11e8-96dd-fa565ec55929>, 11 July 2018.

⁶ TASS website, ‘Foreign Ministry Says Washington behind Expulsion of two Russian Diplomats from Greece’, available at: <https://tass.com/politics/1013076>, 13 July 2018.

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.’⁷

Not seeing eye to eye

The Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) considered the Russian announcements an example of ‘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 a multidimensional and democratic foreign policy’.⁸ And concluded that no one had the right to interfere in Greek domestic affairs.

Washington supported the statements of the Greek MFA and called upon Moscow to stop its ‘destabilizing behavior’ in a tweet by State Department Spokesperson Heather Nauert.⁹

Russian-Greek tensions were publicly reduced for some weeks because Greece was in a period of mourning victims from the horrific wildfires in Mati, which killed over 102 people. Russia not only extended condolences but also offered to provide assistance should it be needed.¹⁰ This truce did not last long as reciprocal measures were finally announced on 6 August by the Russians. 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. It also prohibited a senior official from Greece’s Foreign Ministry from entering the country.¹¹

“Under such tense circumstances Lavrov’s scheduled September visit to Athens was cancelled.”

Unpleasant exchanges between Greece and Russia continued throughout the summer. Greece responded to Russian counter-measures by suggesting it had taken action only after documenting tangible incriminating evidence whereas it never interfered or attempted to interfere in Russia’s internal affairs.¹² Both sides accused each other of meddling in internal affairs. Zakharova claimed that Russia did not initiate the degradation of Russian-Greek relations and defended the educational and cultural role of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society.¹³ Under such tense circumstances Lavrov’s scheduled September visit to Athens was cancelled. Speaking at the Thessaloniki International Fair on 9 September the then Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras appeared more optimistic and said that normalcy could possibly be restored after a ‘brief adventure’.¹⁴

At the cultural level, relations remained strong despite the diplomatic crisis. For Greece and Russia, 2018 was a very important year as it marked 190 years of diplomatic

⁷ Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, available at:

https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/3299553#31, 18 July 2018.

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs announcement on statements from the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-announcement-on-statements-from-the-spokesperson-for-the-russian-ministry-of-foreign-affairs.html>, 18 July 2018.

⁹ See the relevant tweet: <https://twitter.com/statedeptspox/status/1017422958405586944>, 12 July 2018.

¹⁰ *Russia Today* website, ‘Greek Inferno Death Toll Rises to 80, Russia Promises Help’, available at: <https://www.rt.com/news/434244-greek-fires-casualties-rise/>, 25 July 2018.

¹¹ Andrew Osborn, ‘Russia Expels Greek Diplomats in Retaliatory Move’, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-russia-envoy-idUSKBN1KR1L2>, 6 August 2018.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs announcement ‘Putting National Interest First: Soberly and Firmly’, available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/putting-national-interest-first-soberly-and-firmly.html>, 10 August 2018.

¹³ Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, available at: <https://greece.mid.ru/en/press-center/news/on-russian-greek-relations-briefing-by-foreign-ministry-spokesperson-maria-zakharova-august-15-2018/>, 15 August 2018.

¹⁴ *CNN Greece* website, ‘Thessaloniki International Fair: Tsipras’ Press Conference’, available at: <https://www.cnn.gr/politiki/story/146011/deth-2018-h-synenteyxi-tytoy-toy-alexi-tsipra>, 9 September 2018.

relations which were celebrated with high level visits and exhibits. The official celebration took place in September on the Greek island of Poros where the Russian frigate Admiral Essen was docked. The Russian Ambassador to Greece, a Russian Commander and the Mayor of Poros laid wreaths to honour the Governor of the First Hellenic Republic Ioannis Kapodistrias.¹⁵ In Moscow, a historical exhibition of the foreign policy of the Russian Empire was inaugurated in Moscow by the Russian Foreign Minister and the Greek Ambassador to Russia. In his speech, the Russian Foreign Minister spoke about ‘the spiritual unity of the peoples [of Greece and Russia] and the bonds of sympathy’.¹⁶

Moves to ease tensions: Prime Minister visits Moscow

Following diplomatic endeavors by both Athens and Moscow, former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras travelled to the Russian capital in December and met with President Vladimir Putin. They both sought to ease any tensions in their bilateral relations. In the press conference following their meeting, President Putin said about the summer’s tensions: ‘Hopefully, this page really has been turned’.¹⁷ He also outlined the positive aspects of the bilateral relationship, stressing collaboration in the energy sector as Russia provides a significant percentage of Greece’s natural gas and oil needs. Additionally, he praised the work of the mixed commission on economic, industrial, scientific and technical cooperation as well as of the Russian-Greek Business Council and talked about closer ties in tourism and culture.

Several bilateral agreements were signed after this meeting covering themes such as trade relations, rural development, energy, transport, tourism, education, research and technology, telecommunications, ICT, business partnerships, etc.¹⁸ During the visit, Prime Minister Tsipras also informed President Putin about the gesture of good will to reopen the Russian consulate in Alexandroupolis. A few months later the consulate was reopened after more than 100 years.¹⁹

“The atmosphere in the December 2018 Putin-Tsipras meeting was relatively good but challenges remained high.”

The atmosphere in the December 2018 Putin-Tsipras meeting was relatively good but challenges remained high. The leader of the main opposition New Democracy party, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, visited Moscow in February 2019 and said that his government would work toward strengthening bilateral ties.²⁰ The last months of the SYRIZA administration and the first of New Democracy (after July 2019), saw both Tsipras and

¹⁵ Porosnews website, ‘Poros and Russia Honoured 190 Years of Diplomatic Relations’, available at: <https://www.porosnews.gr/latest-news/%CE%BF-%CF%80%CF%8C%CF%81%CE%BF%CF%82-%CE%BA%CE%B1%CE%B9-%CE%B7-%CF%81%CF%89%CF%83%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE-%CE%BF%CE%BC%CE%BF%CF%83%CF%80%CE%BF%CE%BD%CE%B4%CE%AF%CE%B1-%CF%84%CE%AF%CE%BC%CE%B7%CF%83%CE%B1/>, 19 September 2019.

¹⁶ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks at the opening of an exhibition dedicated to the 190th anniversary of diplomatic ties between Russia and Greece, Moscow, available at: https://www.mid.ru/en_GB/vistupleniya_ministra/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQUMdqBY/content/id/3347535, 19 September 2018

¹⁷ Statements by the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alexis Tsipras, at the joint press conference with the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/statements-by-the-prime-minister-and-foreign-minister-of-greece-alexis-tsipras-at-the-joint-press-conference-with-the-president-of-the-russian-federation-vladimir-putin-moscow-7122108.html>, 7 December 2018.

¹⁸ Statements by the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alexis Tsipras, at the joint press conference with the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/statements-by-the-prime-minister-and-foreign-minister-of-greece-alexis-tsipras-at-the-joint-press-conference-with-the-president-of-the-russian-federation-vladimir-putin-moscow-7122108.html>, 7 December 2018.

¹⁹ Athens-Macedonian News Agency website, ‘Russian Consulate in Alexandroupolis Reopens more than a Century Later’, available at: <https://www.amna.gr/en/article/394714/Russian-consulate-in-Alexandroupolis-reopens-more-than-a-century-later>, 23 September 2019.

²⁰ Ekathimerini website, ‘Mitsotakis: Russia Can Depend on Greece as a Reliable Partner’, available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/238176/article/ekathimerini/news/mitsotakis-russia-can-depend-on-greece-as-a-reliable-partner>, 28 February 2018.

Mitsotakis make positive steps to bridge any differences with Russia.

Bilateral relations suffer another blow

An additional thorn to any rapprochement in bi-lateral relations was the Alexander Vinnik affair. Vinnik, a Russian citizen and former bitcoin operator, was arrested during a Greek family holiday in 2017 upon a request from the US, which accused him of laundering billions of dollars. Justice Minister Costas Tsiaras ruled in favour of extradition to France in December 2019. The ministerial decision mentioned that a second extradition destination should be the United States and lastly Russia.²¹ Russia on its part expressed its regret that Greek authorities turned a blind eye to its request to extradite Vinnik to his home country.²² The Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikos Dendias, who visited Moscow in November 2019, discussed the Vinnik affair with Lavrov. Lavrov claimed that his Greek counterpart had promised to review Russian documents and their argument for extradition, but made its decision without informing Moscow.²³

“Greek-Russian relations were also strained by the 2018 decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople to grant autocephalous status to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.”

Greek-Russian relations were also strained by the 2018 decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople to grant autocephalous status to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.²⁴ This decision puts into question the role of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine which considers itself as the only legitimate Orthodox Church in the country. The Ecumenical Patriarchate’s choice was soon followed by the Church of Greece.²⁵ Russia believed that these decisions were arguably shaped by American priorities and relevant pressure on the Greek government. The view of the US is that, ‘Russia is using religion as part of its hybrid warfare strategy, as a tool to achieve political objectives and spread false narratives’.²⁶ In his recent speech at Souda Bay US naval base in September 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also said ‘[Prime Minister Mitsotakis] and I also agreed to explore closer cooperation to overcome challenges that Russia poses through malign influence activities such [...] trying to co-opt the Orthodox Church’.²⁷ In response, head of the Synodal Department for the Russian Church’s Relations with society and media, Vladimir Legoida, said that US diplomacy uses the Phanar for its purposes.²⁸

Fast forward to upcoming Russian state visit

Against this backdrop, the visit of Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in Greece will not be

²¹ Reuters website, ‘Greece to Extradite Russian Cybercrime Suspect to France’, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-extradition-idUSKBN1YO274>, 20 December 2019.

²² Ekathimerini website, ‘Russian Bitcoin Laundering Suspect Vinnik to be Extradited to France’, available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/247777/article/ekathimerini/news/russian-bitcoin-laundering-suspect-vinnik-to-be-extradited-to-france>, 20 December 2019.

²³ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s answers to media questions, available at: https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/3977778, 23 December 2019.

²⁴ The National Herald website, ‘Ecumenical Patriarchate Responds to Charges Regarding Ukraine Autocephaly’, available at: https://www.thenationalherald.com/archive_general_news_greece/arthro/ecumenical_patriarchate_responds_to_charges_regarding_ukraine_autocephaly-50589/, 16 July 2019.

²⁵ RFEL website, ‘In A First, Greek Church Recognizes Orthodox Church of Ukraine’, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/in-a-first-greek-church-recognizes-orthodox-church-of-ukraine/30213458.html>, 12 October 2019.

²⁶ US Embassy website, ‘Ambassador Pyatt’s Remarks at Foreign Affairs International Conference on Religious Diplomacy’, available at: <https://gr.usembassy.gov/ambassador-pyatts-remarks-at-foreign-affairs-international-conference-on-religious-diplomacy/>, 12 November 2019.

²⁷ Secretary Michael R. Pompeo and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis Joint Press Statements after their meeting, available at: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-greek-prime-minister-kyriakos-mitsotakis-joint-press-statements-after-their-meeting/>, 29 September 2020.

²⁸ Orthodox Times website, ‘Ecumenical Patriarchate attacked by Russian Church on Pompeo’s Statement in Greece’, available at: <https://orthodoxtimes.com/ecumenical-patriarchate-attacked-by-russian-church-on-pompeos-statement-in-greece/>, 30 September 2020.

“...the visit of Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in Greece will not be an easy one diplomatically as there are still underlying issues that remain.”

an easy one diplomatically as there are still underlying issues that remain. Although Athens and Moscow enjoy cultural and economic proximity and Greek and Russian citizens feel close to each other for historic and religious reasons, foreign policies are not shaped by emotions. In the ongoing standoff in the Eastern Mediterranean between Greece and Turkey over oil exploration rights, the good ties between Russia and Turkey are certainly being taken into account by the Greek government although Russia stresses that its partnership with Turkey did not target third countries. In recent days however, both the Russian Foreign Ministry and the Embassy of Russia in Greece social media accounts have published messages that can perhaps appease Greek fears vis-à-vis Turkey.²⁹ Russia also frequently refers to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as a basis for solving maritime differences. Lavrov has offered to mediate between the two countries, if asked – unlikely, given that the problem is an area of concern for the American administration and NATO first.³⁰ In spite of restrictions, a better Greek-Russian understanding will enhance the effort of the Greek government to expose Turkish provocative actions in the Eastern Mediterranean at the international level.

Keeping the lines of communication open

“...a rewarming of relations between Greece and Russia will certainly be in the best interests of both countries.”

No doubt, a rewarming of relations between Greece and Russia will certainly be in the best interests of both countries. Secretary General of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs Amb. Themistoklis Demiris and the new Ambassador of Greece to Moscow Aikaterini Nasika are working towards this end. In the end of July, Prime Minister Mitsotakis made public his interest to hold a telephone conversation with President Putin about the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean,³¹ while important meetings between Greek and Russian officials took place during that timeframe. There are open and regular lines of communication between the Greek and Russian foreign ministers. Greek diplomatic representatives in Moscow hold regular meetings with Russian government officials as do their counterparts stationed in Athens. In mid-October 2020, Lavrov was cited in international media as saying that ‘Russia never considered Turkey as a strategic ally’. His talks in Athens will certainly concentrate on this theme.³² In July, for example, Greece had expressed its disappointment with Kremlin’s apathetic response to the transformation of Hagia Sophia into mosque.³³

The strengthening of Greek-American relations and Greece’s alignment with EU foreign policy and investment rules are non-negotiable for the Greek government. Also, Greece’s policy of energy diversification – including via importing LNG from the US – challenges Russian calculations. But existing limitations do not mean that other opportunities for cooperation with Russia should not be explored. There is always room for improving bilateral relations and a level of sincerity and common understanding of each country’s position is needed. There is potential to increase trade between the two countries on products that do not fall under any restrictions. Last year, Greek exports to Russia

²⁹ *Orthodox Times* website, ‘Russian Foreign Ministry referred in a tweet to Battle of Navarino and Sinking of Ottoman Fleet’, available at: <https://orthodoxtimes.com/russian-foreign-ministry-referred-in-a-tweet-to-battle-of-navarino-and-sinking-of-ottoman-fleet/>, 21 October 2020.

³⁰ George Tzogopoulos, ‘The Greek-Turkish Standoff: A New Source of Instability in the Eastern Mediterranean’, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/columns/european-policy/the-greek-turkish-standoff-a-new-source-of-instability-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>, 23 September 2020.

³¹ *Ekathimerini* website, ‘Mitsotakis Speaks with Putin about EastMed, Hagia Sophia’, available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/255010/article/ekathimerini/news/mitsotakis-speaks-with-putin-about-eastmed-hagia-sophia>, 22 July 2020.

³² *Ahval* website, ‘Russia Never Considered Turkey as Strategic Ally, Says Lavrov’, available at: <https://ahvalnews.com/russia-turkey/russia-never-considered-turkey-strategic-ally-says-lavrov>, 14 October 2020.

³³ *Ekathimerini* website, ‘Minister: Russian Statement on Hagia Sophia Almost Hostile’, available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/254862/article/ekathimerini/news/minister-russian-statement-on-hagia-sophia-almost-hostile>, 18 July 2020.

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amounted to \$258 million USD and imports from Russia reached \$3.8 billion USD. It is interesting to note that both suffered a significant decline in comparison to 2018 numbers. The organization of the Greece-Russia Year of History in 2021 also has the potential of adding to the positive agenda.³⁴ Additionally, Russia is emerging as a key player in the Mediterranean and often sides with Greece in regional disputes, as is the case with the Libyan civil war. Last but not least, Athens and Moscow are considering working together in areas of interest in international organisations such as the UN, the OSCE, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Council of Europe. The need to respond to challenges such as terrorism, climate and the COVID-19 pandemic finds them in accord as they both agree on the importance of the principle of multilateralism.

Relations are most likely to improve with this state visit, as there are many areas of common interest that will allow both countries to put previous differences in the past and work towards a common positive agenda.

³⁴ TASS website, 'Russia, Greek Top Diplomats Discuss Current State of Legal Framework for Cooperation', available at: <https://tass.com/politics/1199979>, 11 September 2020.