



Greece, Russia and the EU: The Way Forward

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Summary

- The visit of PM Mitsotakis to Sochi could open a new chapter in Greek-Russian relations as bilateral deals are in the pipeline.
- The Greek position is firm and unchanging: a normalization of EU-Russian relations would be in Europe's best interests. The Greek government might be prepared to help bring about a new EU-Russia dialogue.
- The strengthening of Greek-American relations will not prevent Greece from employing a multidimensional foreign policy, vis-à-vis Russia, too.
- Stronger Greek-Russian relations could send a message to Turkey that some of its regional policies are alienating other actors. Greek-Russian relations enjoy greater historical depth than Turkish-Russian relations.
- While its strategic commitment to NATO and the EU remains steadfast, Greece is a valuable partner for Russia.
- Greece is in the process of diversifying its sources of natural gas imports, but considers Russia a critical market.

Introduction

“Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis will visit Sochi on 8 December 2021; he will meet President Vladimir Putin in the Russian capital. The visit is the corollary of arduous efforts on the part of both countries to bring bilateral relationship back on track...”

“Greece’s determination to mend its ties with Russia and look beyond the 2018 diplomatic crisis reflects its national interest and is also in line with the general attitude of most EU member states, despite certain problems.”

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis will visit Sochi on 8 December 2021; he will meet President Vladimir Putin in the Russian capital. The visit is the corollary of arduous efforts on the part of both countries to bring bilateral relationship back on track after the 2018 diplomatic crisis. In the summer of 2018, Greece expelled Russian diplomats and accused Russia of interfering in its internal affairs and, specifically, of opposing the Prespa Agreement. The Kremlin refuted the accusations and took tit-for-tat measures. Unpleasant public comments fueled a misunderstanding that would need time and patience to die down. The December 2018 visit of Mitsotakis’ predecessor Alexis Tsipras to the Russian capital was just the beginning of this process.

Greece’s change of government in July 2019 did not reset Greek-Russian relations; rather, it provided an opportunity to continue the work of easing tensions. Putin immediately congratulated Mitsotakis on his electoral victory.¹ Several disagreements, however, such as the Vinnik affair and the decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople to grant autocephalous status to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, continued to overshadow the reconciliation agenda.² Additionally, the outbreak of COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020 would prevent the sort of face-to-face political contact that is helpful for reaching solutions for some time. When Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov flew to Athens in October 2020 and met his counterpart Nikos Dendias, his visit was shrouded in uncertainty.³ However, it would be supplemented by the visit of Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin on 25 March 2021. Russia’s active and high-level participation in the celebrations of the bicentenary of the start of the Greek struggle for independence against the Ottoman Empire was acknowledged at the time by Mitsotakis.⁴ Two months later, Dendias flew to Sochi, where he met with Lavrov once again and shared Greece’s unchanging position with him on the need to normalize relations between Russia and the EU.⁵

The Background

Greece’s determination to mend its ties with Russia and look beyond the 2018 diplomatic crisis reflects its national interest and is also in line with the general attitude of most EU member states, despite certain problems. France, for example, one of Greece’s key partners in developing the strategic autonomy concept, envisages a stronger EU that will actively take part in the ongoing debate on international security and forge closer ties with

¹ President of Russia website, ‘Congratulations to Kyriakos Mitsotakis on His Appointment as the Prime Minister of Greece,’ available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60949>, 8 July 2019.

² For a discussion on Greek-Russian relations, please see another ELIAMEP study: George N. Tzogopoulos, *Greek-Russian Relations: A Potential to Mend Strained Ties*, available at: <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Policy-brief-137-Tzogo-FINAL-EN.pdf>, October 2020.

³ Greece’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, Statements by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Nikos Dendias, following his meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergey Lavrov, available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/statements-of-the-minister-of-foreign-affairs-nikos-dendias-following-his-meeting-with-the-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-russian-federation-sergey-lavrov-athens-26-october-2020.html>, 26 October 2020.

⁴ Prime Minister of Greece website, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis’ remarks after his meeting with the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, Mikhail Mishustin, available at: <https://primeminister.gr/en/2021/03/24/26156>, 24 March 2021.

⁵ *Hi Kathimerini* English edition website, Dendias Says Important to Restore EU-Russian Relations in Meeting with Lavrov, available at: <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1161711/dendias-says-important-to-restore-eu-russian-relations-in-meeting-with-lavrov/>, 24 May 2021.

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“Nevertheless, the idea of revisiting the European approach to Russia and initiating a dialogue is gaining ground.”

Russia.⁶ Germany, for its part, has maintained good ties with Russia for many years, while Chancellor Angela Merkel paid a farewell visit to the Russian capital in August 2021. As Dmitri Trenin puts it, Angela Merkel’s long tenure, as seen from Moscow, ‘was a period of relative, if not always palatable, predictability in German-Russian relations.’⁷ The coalition agreement of the new German government also considers ‘Russia to be a significant international actor’ and acknowledges ‘the importance of meaningful and stable relations.’⁸ A June 2021 proposal by Paris and Berlin to hold a summit with Russia was put on hold due to complaints made by Poland and the Baltic countries.⁹ Nevertheless, the idea of revisiting the European approach to Russia and initiating a dialogue is gaining ground. Italy has also publicly supported the staging of constructive discussions between Brussels and the Kremlin, and Putin has extended an invitation to Premier Mario Draghi to visit Russia.¹⁰

“The management of the EU-Russia relationship represents a key strategic challenge for Europe, and room for collaboration exists.”

Europe must tread extremely delicately if it is to implement a coherent strategy vis-à-vis Russia. Disagreements among member states, and in particular the sensitivities of Poland and the Baltic countries, coupled with concerns over serious human rights violations and the continuation of the crisis in Ukraine, perplex matters. To no one’s surprise, a debate continues to rage in the public discourse, in which scholars and analysts tend to champion different views on the future evolution of EU-Russia relations.¹¹ Against this backdrop, what is required is an honest analysis of any practical success harsh European policies have had in the past in terms of changing Russia’s behavior in the direction desired by the EU. In June 2021, High Representative Josep Borrell said that the EU would simultaneously ‘push back, constrain and engage with Russia, based on a strong common understanding of Russia’s aims and an approach of principled pragmatism.’¹² The management of the EU-Russia relationship represents a key strategic challenge for Europe, and room for collaboration exists. During their September 2021 New York meeting, for instance, Borrell and Lavrov discussed a wide range of current regional issues, including the developments in Afghanistan, Ukraine and Mali, as well as looking at Iran’s nuclear program and the Middle East.¹³

As far as hard security matters are concerned, Greece, as a NATO member-state, follows the policy of the Alliance. In July 2021, Greece was one of the 14 NATO nations involved

⁶ See the text of the speech made by Emmanuel Macron to the Ambassadors’ Conference, available at: <https://lv.ambafrance.org/Ambassadors-conference-Speech-by-M-Emmanuel-Macron-President-of-the-Republic>, 27 August 2019.

⁷ Dmitri Trenin, ‘Merkel’s Legacy, as Seen From Russia,’ available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/85475>, 1 October 2021.

⁸ See the coalition agreement of the new German government, *Mehr Fortschritt Wagen*, available at: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/downloads/27829944/1/koalitionsvertrag-ampel-2021-2025.pdf>, November 2021. (in German).

⁹ Sabine Siebold and Robin Emmott, Gabriela Baczynska, ‘France and Germany Drop Russia Summit Plan after EU’s East Objects,’ available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-germany-drop-plans-russia-summit-after-eu-outcry-2021-06-25/>, 25 June 2021.

¹⁰ Marta Allevalo, ‘Starace: Con Mosca il Dialogo è Possibile, Putin Ha Invitato Draghi,’ available at: <https://www.agi.it/estero/news/2021-11-19/draghi-putin-intervista-ambascatore-starace-14600831/>, 19 November 2021 (in Italian)

¹¹ Carnegie Europe website, ‘Judy Asks: Is Europe in Denial About Russia?’ Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/85810>, 18 November 2021.

¹² European Commission website, EU-Russia relations: Commission and High Representative Propose the Way Forward, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_3010, 16 June 2021.

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia website, Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s meeting with Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission, available at: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4865321, 23 September 2021.

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in the SEA BREEZE military exercise led by Bulgaria on the Black Sea.¹⁴ According to the Hellenic National Defense General Staff, HS Daniolos, a fast attack missile boat, and some personnel took part.¹⁵ Russia's Black Sea Fleet tracked the movements of HS Daniolos in the Black Sea, and Russia decided to publicize the fact.¹⁶ Notwithstanding the tensions between NATO and Russia which culminated in the October expulsion of Russian diplomats and the subsequent suspension of Russia's NATO mission, Greece has looked favorably upon the Biden administration's strategy of exploring a new type of cooperation with Russia. Consequently, Athens hailed the June 2021 Putin-Biden summit in Geneva as a welcome development, along with ongoing talks between various American and Russian delegations.

The Regional Parameter

“Improving Greek-Russian relations is in Greece’s national interest, in the sense of preserving good ties with all UN Security Council permanent members. This is imperative, given the current turbulent situation in the Eastern Mediterranean.”

Improving Greek-Russian relations is in Greece's national interest, in the sense of preserving good ties with all UN Security Council permanent members. This is imperative, given the current turbulent situation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Lavrov has made a crucial but also pragmatic public statement concerning the potential extension of Greek territorial waters from 6 to 12 nautical miles. In it, he noted that: ‘Under the [terms of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea], each participant has the right to establish territorial waters of up to 12 nautical miles, naturally considering elementary common sense and geographical features’. If the plans of two or more participants in the convention clash, Lavrov continued, ‘a solution can only be reached at the negotiating table with due respect for each other's interests as the convention requires.’¹⁷ Furthermore, Russia has consistently backed the UN Secretary-General's efforts to bring about a resumption of the inter-community dialogue with a view to reuniting Cyprus and finding a solution to the Cyprus problem within the existing international legal framework. Lavrov reiterated Moscow's position when he met with President Nicos Anastasiades of Cyprus last September.¹⁸

Good relations between Russia and Turkey have been a cause of serious concern for Greece for many years. The Greek government is thus incentivized to prevent an outcome in which Turkish-Russian ties could strengthen at its expense in the Eastern Mediterranean. Moscow and Ankara do not always agree, but they have been able to reach compromises in countries like Libya and Syria, and in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, Turkish tactics in Ukraine do seem to have crossed Russia's red lines. In May 2021, Lavrov ‘encouraged’ his Turkish colleagues ‘to stop feeding Kiev's militaristic

¹⁴ The 14 countries were Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States. NATO website, ‘NATO ships exercise in the Black Sea,’ available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185879.htm, 19 July 2021.

¹⁵ Hellenic National Defense General Staff website, ‘Participation of Personnel and Units in the Breeze 2021 Black Sea Exercise,’ available at: <https://geetha.mil.gr/symmetochi-prosopikoy-kai-meson-stin-polyethniki-askisi-breeze-2021-stin-mayri-thalassa/>, 19 July 2021 (in Greek).

¹⁶ TASS website, ‘Russian Black Sea Fleet Tracks Movements of Greek Missile Boat in Black Sea,’ available at: <https://tass.com/russia/1312691>, 10 July 2021.

¹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia website, ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at a News Conference Following Talks with Foreign Minister of the Hellenic Republic Nikos Dendias,’ available at: https://www.mid.ru/en/maps/gr/-/asset_publisher/D4tBbKa1q61C/content/id/4406104, 26 October 2020.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia website, Press Release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's meeting with the President of the Republic of Cyprus, Nicos Anastasiades, available at: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4866760, 24 September 2021.

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sentiment.¹⁹ Additionally, Moscow views Ankara’s motivation for shedding light on the problems allegedly facing the Crimean Tatars as a ‘biased interpretation of historical events for destructive purposes and [...] an attempt to satisfy its own political ambitions.’²⁰ Some Turkish experts have diagnosed a harsh and unprecedented tone in the warnings made by Turkey against Russian diplomats.²¹

Greek-Russian relations enjoy a historical depth that certainly surpasses the realpolitik dimension of the current Turkish-Russian partnership. Greece can carefully study Russian priorities in the Eastern Mediterranean, which do not coincide with Turkish regional aspirations, against this backdrop. The Kremlin is seeking to establish stable interactions with every player, to expand its economic and energy interests, to fight the Islamic State and terrorism in general, and to empower its position in the South – principally via Syria – in the context of potential security negotiations with the EU and NATO.²² Thus, working with everybody rather than taking sides has emerged as Russia’s strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean.²³ Rapprochement with Greece could potentially send a clear signal to Ankara to exercise self-restraint. Similarly, Greece’s role could be valuable for Russian calculations in view of an ambitious multidimensional dialogue with the EU.

The Bilateral Agenda

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Russia traditionally enjoys considerable popularity in Greece. A November 2021 survey found it to rank fourth in the preferences of Greek citizens as ‘a necessary ally under current circumstances’, preceded by France, the United States and Arab countries.²⁴ The involvement of Russian planes in the titanic struggle against wildfires last summer was appreciated by the Greek public. And this year is special, due to the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the Greek Revolution. Over and beyond Premier Mishustin’s visit to Athens, cultural cooperation between the two countries continues to flourish. The Embassy of Russia in Greece has honored literary aspects of Philhellenism by frequently posting verses on social media in which celebrated Russian poets including Alexander Pushkin, Wilhelm Küchelbecker and Kondraty Ryleyev praise the uprising of the Greeks against the Ottoman yoke, and has also posted about Ioannis Kapodistrias and Laskarina Bouboulina.²⁵ The exhibition ‘Greek Moscow: from Theophanes the Greek to the present day’ opened in October at the Museum of Contemporary History of Russia as part of the ongoing celebrations.²⁶

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia website, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Interview with the Newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty*, available at: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4741307, 24 May 2021.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia website, Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, available at: https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4740448#23, 21 May 2021.

²¹ Ogul Tuna, ‘Russia’s Recent Severe Warnings to Turkey: Background and Future of the Crisis,’ available at: <https://edam.org.tr/en/russias-recent-severe-warnings-to-turkey-background-and-future-of-the-crisis/>, 27 May 2021.

²² Ruslan Mamedov, ‘Russia: Towards a Balance of Interests in the Eastern Mediterranean,’ available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytcs-and-comments/analytcs/russia-towards-a-balance-of-interests-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>, 6 August 2021.

²³ Andrey Kortunov, ‘Russian in the Eastern Mediterranean: The Art of Balancing,’ in George Tzogopoulos (ed.), *The EU and the Eastern Mediterranean: The Multilateral Dialogue Option*, CIFE Studies: The EU in World Politics, volume 1, 2021.

²⁴ See the Kapa Research Survey: *Balkan Monitor 2021*, available at: https://kaparesearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Balkan-Monitor-2021_final.pdf, October-November 2021 (in Greek).

²⁵ *Greek News Agenda* website, ‘2021 Bicentennial Celebrations by Foreign Embassies and Institutions,’ available at: <https://www.greeknewsagenda.gr/topics/culture-society/7430-2021-embassies>, 23 March 2021.

²⁶ *Athens News* website, ‘Exhibition Greek Moscow: From Theophanes the Greek to the Present Day Opened in Russia,’ available at: <https://en.rua.gr/2021/10/25/exhibition-greek-moscow-from-theophanes-the-greek-to-the-present-day-opened-in-russia/>, 25 October 2021.

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“The Kremlin is seeking to establish stable interactions with every player, to expand its economic and energy interests, to fight the Islamic State and terrorism in general, and to empower its position in the South.”

“Russia remains a critical supplier of both natural gas (45,85%) and petroleum (9,5%) to Greece. However, the country is in the process of diversifying the sources of its fuel imports, and is already far less dependent on Russia than other European countries.”

Prime Minister Mitsotakis will visit Sochi just a few days after the two sides signed a protocol of cooperation that includes several individual agreements in the fields of tourism, energy, transport, science and technology, inter-regional issues, culture²⁷. Russia remains a critical supplier of both natural gas (45,85%) and petroleum (9,5%) to Greece. However, the country is in the process of diversifying the sources of its fuel imports and is already far less dependent on Russia than other European countries. In the first semester of 2021, for instance, ten member states (Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia²⁹

From another perspective, Greece is eyeing the Russian market in the hope of boosting its exports. Although the European policy of sanctions does not allow much optimism in the short and medium-term, there is room for improvement under the current regime. In addition, Greece would like to attract Russian tourists in greater numbers, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Greece, along with the Maldives and the United Arab Emirates, already featured among the preferred destinations of Russian tourists, second only to Cyprus, for summer holidays in 2021.³⁰ Last but not least, the plan to make Greece’s universities more international counts on emerging economies such as Russia to bring students to study in Greece from abroad. By October 2021, the special website of the Greek Ministry of Education *Study in Greece* had received 4,869 hits from Russia.³¹

Conclusion

Greece employs a multidimensional foreign and economic policy and considers Russia a significant partner in this regard. A committed EU and NATO member state, Greece is also looking to further its national interest by looking East. Ever stronger Greek-American ties, which extend to the defense sector, appease exaggerated concerns about the hypothetical risks that might accompany a Greek-Russian rapprochement. The visit of Prime Minister Mitsotakis to Sochi is the end-result of fruitful bilateral negotiations between Greek and Russian delegations since the 2018 diplomatic crisis. The visit is aligned with the general trend in Europe and the US under the Biden administration for deeper dialogue with Moscow and could be fruitful. Barriers and limitations certainly do exist, principally in NATO-Russia relations, but they should not prevent an honest European conversation about the extent to which current policies vis-à-vis Moscow have delivered results. In this context, Greece could play a helpful role with both a bilateral and European perspective.

²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Greece website, Alternate Minister of Foreign Affairs Miltiadis Varvitsiotis’ statement following the 13th Joint Greek-Russian Inter-Ministerial Committee – Signing of a Cooperation Protocol, available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/alternate-minister-of-foreign-affairs-miltiadis-varvitsiotis-statement-following-the-13th-joint-greek-russian-inter-ministerial-committee-signing-of-cooperation-protocol-moscow-30112021.html> 30 November 2021.

²⁸ Stavros Papantoniou, ‘Kyriakos Mitsotakis’ visit to Moscow: Natural Gas, Transport Issues, and the Eastern Mediterranean on the Agenda,’ available at: <https://www.kathimerini.gr/politics/561595054/taxidi-kyr-mitsotaki-sti-moscha-stin-atzenta-fysiko-aerio-metafores-anatoliki-mesogeios/>, 24 November (in Greek).

²⁹ Eurostat website, EU Imports of Energy Products - Recent Developments, available at: EU imports of energy products - recent developments https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=EU_imports_of_energy_products_-_recent_developments, October 2021.

³⁰ TASS website, ‘Russians Mostly Choose Cyprus for Summer Holidays this Year, Says Study,’ available at: <https://tass.com/economy/1302843>, 15 June 2021.

³¹ See data at: <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/561553315/aei-gefyres-synergias-kai-me-india-rosia/>, 28 October 2021 (in Greek).

