

After expulsions, Greek media don't doubt Russia has been meddling

Greece unexpectedly announced on 11 July it was expelling two Russian diplomats and barring two more from entry for "illegal activities perpetuated within the Greek state and which constitute interference in Greece's domestic affairs".

Greek government spokesman Dimitris Tzanakopoulos announced the moves during an interview with SKAI, one of the country's biggest private broadcasters. So far, the only confirmed name is Victor Yakovlev, who has been working in the Russian embassy in Athens.

The day after the announcement, there is still little official information. Tzanakopoulos was quoted in the *Kathimerini* newspaper on 11 July as saying the activities included an attempt to bribe Greek state officials and illegally obtain and distribute sensitive information pertaining to Greece's domestic affairs. The article was titled "Tzanakopoulos on the issue of the Russian diplomats: every state must respect the international law and the Greek government".

Numerous sources said one of the main issues that prompted the expulsion was the resolution of the name dispute between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FRYOM). The Greek government believes that the Russian diplomats attempted to provoke opposition against the Greek government by supporting numerous rallies across Greece condemning the agreement signed on 17 June.

The Russian government has said it will respond with its own expulsions of Greek diplomats, *Kathimerini* reported on 12 July, quoting Russia's Tass news agency. However, at the time of writing on 13 July, it had yet to do so.

These major developments have caused considerable political turmoil in Greece. Dozens of news reports were published on 11 and 12 July, and more significantly, many opinion pieces trying to interpret this sudden and unexpected complication in relations.

Greece didn't expel any Russian diplomats over the Skripal assassination attempt and was among the few EU leaders who expressed doubts about the need to harden the EU stance against Russia. Furthermore, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias visited Russia on 13 June and the trip was presented in the Greek media as constructive and an indicator of the positive climate between the two countries.

On the other hand, Greek media reporting of the EU-Western Balkans summit in May and the 17 June agreement with FYROM highlighted Russian attempts to derail Euro-Atlantic integration in the region. After the expulsions, the media are discussing new aspects of Russian issues.

The Greek government's position

The government has not commented much or in detail on the expulsions. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, in Brussels for the NATO summit, said there should be a “new architecture of security with Russia” and that “further dialogue with Russia is needed”, adding that: “We don’t speak from a safe place, because we too are confronted with difficulties which have to do with interference in our domestic affairs; we consider that the Minsk Accords must be implemented

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by everyone. We furthermore believe that the dialogue with Russia must intensify and that the NATO-Russia Council must be upgraded”. These remarks were reported by the *To Vima* newspaper on 12 July.

On 11 July, Giorgos Katrougalos, the alternate minister of foreign affairs, tried to dismiss the idea that tension with Russia would grow. Speaking to *Kontra Channel* TV, he said: “Russia is an important country which traditionally has had friendly relations with Greece and we want to improve these relations in the future. There are, however, international rules that define bilateral relations; there are rules for diplomatic relations. Such rules cannot be violated, even by a friendly country... I want to reassure you that we regard this episode as incidental. We don’t think that it will affect our relations with Russia. Our actions were not the result of pressure or other plans. We reacted to something which we believe it violated the standard diplomatic practice”.

Greece’s major opposition party, *Nea Dimokratia*, issued a media statement in which it criticized the government for the lack of information on such a serious matter: “There are many indications that at present the stakes in Greek-Russian relations are very high. Unfortunately, once more our knowledge on yet another serious matter of foreign policy is based on anonymous diplomatic circles, media articles and unspecified sources. There is nothing official, nothing responsible on the matter. It is obvious that any attempt at interference in the domestic affairs of our country is inexcusable and we condemn it. They should be met with severity and readiness. We have supported this position for many years”. These remarks were quoted in the *liberal* newspaper on 12 July.

The allegations

Greece’s allegations against the diplomats did come to light in various sources. According to the news portal *Newsit*, extensive spy networks had been uncovered: “Athens is essentially talking - in diplomatic terms – about espionage and spies, naming the *Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Union*. Greece is claiming that in recent times, various mechanisms associated with Russian interests did try to manipulate municipalities and high-ranking bishops by material and financial means and tried to obtain influence in the monastic community of *Agio Oros*, in a way that signifies an attempt to breach Greek sovereignty. According to other newspapers, there is talk of an attempt to bribe state officials, which was not successful” (‘The expulsion of Russian diplomats - A Cold War between Athens and Moscow’, 11 July).

News portal *Zougla* said: "The Greek Foreign Ministry had received numerous reports and notes on the role of Russia, particularly in northern Greece, on contacts and activities aimed at business circles and the church, as well as organisations like cultural unions or associations of national interest. This was taking place at the time of intense negotiations between Athens and Skopje with a view to ending the name dispute" ('A spy thriller in Northern Greece', 11 July).

According to the newspaper *To Vima*, the Greek government had notified the Russian government of its intentions to expel the Russian diplomats on 6 July "on the grounds of their illegal activities linked with demonstrations and protests on the occasion of the agreement between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia on the name dispute, according to revelations made by a diplomatic source to Reuters. The same source told Reuters that 'We had notified the Russian authorities about the activities of the 4 diplomats and citizens long before. On Friday we made it official and provided them with a reasonable time limit to leave the country" (11 July).

Public debate and attitudes

This incident prompted the writing of opinion pieces on a scale not seen for several months. Attitudes can be divided into three categories.

A new framework for Greek-Russian relations

The first category is the general view that Greek-Russian relations have entered uncharted waters and the climate is far from positive. Some headlines which reflect this: 'The Greek-Russian mystery', *To Vima*, 12 July; 'Greek-Russian relations: from friendship to conflict', *To Vima*, 11 July; 'Greek-Russian relations are in the worst possible condition', *To Vima*, 12 July; 'A sudden crisis in Greek-Russian relations due to the Skopje dispute', *Proto Thema*, 11 July; 'A spy thriller between Athens and Moscow with unpredictable consequences', *Newsit*, 11 July; 'The expulsion of Russian diplomats from Greece – a Cold War between Athens and Moscow', *Newsit*, 11 July.

How relations develop will depend on Russia's reaction, given that the Greek government is already trying to downplay the scale of the crisis.

The factual dimensions

It is interesting to observe that even analysts or columnists who have been very critical of the government, particularly on domestic or economic policy, did not question whether Russia was guilty, and highlight that Russia is carrying out similar activities in other countries, including the US or Germany. A good example is an opinion piece in *Proto Thema*: "It is very well known that in recent years Moscow has tried to augment its influence in Greece. To this end, it uses the Orthodox religion. The Orthodox religion is the central parameter of the Russian national ideology... There is information that the Greek authorities - with the constant advice of the American embassy - were following closely direct and indirect Russian activities. The Americans frequently prepared dossiers in an effort to push Athens to take action. However, the Greek government did not want to take any action that would endanger bilateral relations. Even when the Russian diplomats exceeded their duties, there were simple discreet notifications that seemed to have some effect. It is also well known



that much more than the Russian agencies, it is the officials of American, German and other Western agencies that consider Greece a country easy to manipulate, in a manner exceeding their diplomatic function... According to sources, the four Russian diplomats just went too far. Their actions are attributed to Russia's insecurity caused by the prospect of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia integrating into NATO" (12 July).

Even outlets that are often balanced when reporting issues involving Russia had no doubts about its culpability in this matter.

The geopolitical considerations: Greece, the West and Russia

In most of the opinion pieces published on 11 and 12 July, speculation about the implications of the situation for Greece's relations with the West and Russia dominated. Cautious and moderate approaches seemed to be the most common. However, even in the case of articles that express suspicions about the Greek government's decision, there is no doubt that this action signifies one of the strongest indications of Greece's choice to firmly position itself into the Western camp. This is even more significant given that that Greece is governed by a party of the left, which, particularly in the first months of its rise to power (2015), did try to create strong ties with Russia, particularly in the energy sector and the economy, frequently presenting Russia as a possible alternative to Greece's Western partners. From that respect, the choice of the Greek government to make public its decision on the beginning of NATO's summit in Brussels (July 11) is far from being a coincidence.

In the discussion of the factors that triggered the Greek government's actions many analysts point to the improved and very close relations between Russia and Turkey, the political instability in Greece and the fear that foreign factors, such as Russia, might attempt to destabilize the government due to the name-dispute agreement. It should be noted however that many opinion pieces harshly criticize the decision of the Greek government, either as a sign of a total surrender to American pressure, as a decision that will eventually hurt Greek-Russian relations to Greece's detriment or as an action that intended to change the agenda ahead of the NATO summit, which eventually provided FRYOM with a preliminary invitation to join the organization. But this is more linked to disapproval of the government than a more balanced discussion of the wider geopolitical repercussions.

