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The Ukrainian Factor in Greek-Russian Relations: Lost Prospects and Stagnation

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Abstract. The history of Greek-Russian bilateral relations is characterized by periods of close and fruitful cooperation, interspersed with periods of calm and even confrontation. Meanwhile, Greece stands as a state, often carrying out a kind of a dialogue bridge between the West and Russia. The current global changes in the world, including in the political arena, have had a cardinal impact on Greek-Russian bilateral relations, questioning their further mutually beneficial cooperation: the reason for this was the international diplomatic isolation of the Russian Federation by Western states in the context of the Ukrainian conflict, which escalated in early 2022. The objectives of the research were to analyze the current bilateral ties between Greece and Russia in the context of the current state of international relations through the prism of the Ukrainian conflict, to determine the role of Kiev in the diplomatic relations between Athens and Moscow and to study the position of the Greek leadership towards Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. At the same time, the public opinion of ordinary citizens of the Greek state was studied in relation to the current political activities of Moscow, taking into account the disinformation process in the Western and Greek media. The main research methods chosen were the concrete historical method and the case study. The authors concluded that in the context of a protracted conflict between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia, Moscow's relations with Athens, which, in turn, took a pro-Western position, will deteriorate both bilaterally and at the interethnic level. The authors also assumed a change in Russia's regional priorities: Greece, as Moscow's key regional partner in the Balkan region, the Black Sea region and the Mediterranean, was ousted by its main opponent, Türkiye, which was largely facilitated by the cooling of Greek-Russian relations and the position taken by Athens regarding the Ukrainian conflict. Preliminary conclusions are also presented on the consequences of the implemented Greece's current foreign policy towards Russia and the impact of the Ukrainian conflict on Greek-Russian relations.

Key words: Greek-Russian bilateral connections, Russia, Greece, Ukraine, Türkiye, the Ukrainian conflict

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Украинский фактор в греко-российских отношениях: потерянные перспективы и стагнация

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Аннотация. Греко-российские отношения имеют долгую историю, когда периоды тесного и плодотворного взаимодействия сменялись периодами затишья и даже противостояния. Между тем Греция имеет статус государства, зачастую играющего роль своеобразного диалогового моста между Западом и Россией. Нынешние глобальные изменения в мире, в том числе на политической арене, оказали кардинальное влияние на двусторонние греко-российские связи, поставив под вопрос их дальнейшее взаимовыгодное сотрудничество: причиной тому послужила международная дипломатическая изоляция Российской Федерации со стороны западных государств в связи с обострившимся в начале 2022 г. украинским конфликтом. Исследование направлено на решение следующих задач: проанализировать актуальные двусторонние связи Греции и России в контексте современного состояния международных отношений через призму украинского конфликта, определить роль Киева в дипломатических контактах Афин и Москвы, а также охарактеризовать позицию греческого руководства относительно специальной военной операции России на Украине. В то же время изучено общественное мнение рядовых граждан греческого государства по отношению к текущей политической деятельности Москвы с учетом дезинформационного процесса в западных и греческих СМИ. Основными методами исследования выбраны конкретно-исторический метод и кейс-стади. Авторами сделан вывод, что в условиях затяжного конфликта между евроатлантическим сообществом и Россией отношения Москвы с Афинами, которые, в свою очередь, заняли прозападную позицию, ухудшатся как на двустороннем, так и на межнациональном уровнях. Выдвинуто предположение о смене региональных приоритетов России: Грецию в качестве ключевого регионального партнера Москвы в Балканском регионе, Причерноморье и Средиземноморье вытеснил главный соперник Греции — Турция, чему в немалой степени способствовало охлаждение греко-российских отношений и занятая Афинами позиция относительно украинского конфликта. Также представлены предварительные выводы о последствиях реализации Грецией своего внешнеполитического курса в отношении России, а также о влиянии украинского конфликта на греко-российские взаимосвязи.

Ключевые слова: российско-греческие взаимоотношения, Россия, Греция, Украина, Турция, украинский конфликт

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Вклад авторов. Власова К.В.: концептуализация, разработка методологии исследования, научное руководство исследованием. Чекирда А.Л.: проведение исследования, написание и редактирование рукописи. Все авторы ознакомлены с окончательной версией статьи и одобрили ее.

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the established international order determined the path of further development on the world stage, which chief characteristic became unipolarity. However, over time it became clear that the policy of the hegemon represented by the United States runs counter to the interests of many sovereign states (primarily China, Russia, India, etc.). As

Russia's international weight strengthened, Moscow realized that a unipolar world could not function effectively, and that an era of change would soon come when countries that disagree with the US hegemonic policy would strive to establish a multipolar and just world. At the same time, it was gradually realized that Europe would once again become the field of future confrontation between states dissatisfied with the

established unipolar system and states that are interested in maintaining the existing status quo.

After the beginning of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union's active expansion, without taking into account Russia's interests in the post-Soviet space, when the regional countries set themselves the goal of joining European and Euro-Atlantic structures, European security, in fact, was put into question. This resulted in the Ukrainian conflict, which served, if not the beginning, then the continuation of a new Cold War, since it is associated with serious contradictions not only between Kiev and Moscow, but also between Russia and the West, when Ukraine became a platform for confrontation. Simultaneously, it has a significant impact on Russia's relations with other European states: the conflict is also important for Greek-Russian relations, since the current events in Ukraine have put, if not a dot, then an ellipsis in the established cooperation between Athens and Moscow.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of the Ukrainian conflict on Greek-Russian bilateral relations since 2014, when the situation in Ukraine deteriorated and the actual erosion of Ukrainian statehood began.

In order to achieve the goal, the following tasks were solved: firstly, an analysis of Greek-Russian relations in the period from 2014 to 2023 was conducted; secondly, the impact of the Ukrainian factor on bilateral relations between Greece and Russia was examined, given its current crucial role in the relationship between the collective West and Russia.

The object of the study was the examination of Greek-Russian relations. The subject of the study is the Ukrainian factor and its impact on the relationship between Athens and Moscow.

A historical analysis has been employed to examine Greek-Russian relations since 2014, in the context of the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict and the growing confrontation between Western states and Russia. The authors chose the concrete historical method and the case study as the main research methods, which allowed

tracing the development of Greek-Russian relations through the prism of the Ukrainian conflict. The authors of the article based on foreign policy documents of Russia, Greece and Ukraine, in particular on materials published by the Kremlin, national governments and foreign ministries, as well as publications of the Greek and Russian diasporas. A variety of materials from diverse media sources, in addition to national statistical and sociological services, were used in the study.

The analyzed literature indicates that Russian authors (Kuznetsov et al., 2017; Kvashnin, 2021; Nikiforov, 2021; Alexandrova, 2022; Zvyagel'skaya, 2022) did not pay special attention to the Ukrainian factor in relations between Greece and Russia, focusing on the general interaction. At the same time, Greek researchers paid special attention to the Ukrainian conflict¹ and its consequences when analyzing Greek policy towards Russia (Dimopoulos, 2015; Stergiou, 2018; Skarpa, Simoglou & Garoufallou, 2023; Manoli, 2024). A brief review of the sources and literature allows to conclude that the chosen topic is relevant, and without considering the Ukrainian factor, the analysis of current Greek-Russian relations would be incomplete.

Cooperation between Greece and Russia before the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict was very productive. Since the 1990s, the development of their relations was based on the desire of the Greeks to play a mediating role between Moscow and the West in the process of peaceful settlement of regional conflicts (including Cyprus, the Balkans, and the South Caucasus) and in the issues of pan-European security. The "Joint Action Plan for 2005–2006" was the evidence of a common vision of the international problems of the 2000s and a desire to solve emerging difficulties, which became the basis for joint coordination on a number of acute

¹ Carras I. Ukraine and the Ukrainian Crisis as Viewed from Greece // *Ukraine Analytical Digest*. 2016. Vol. 7, no. 15. P. 1–10. URL: https://www.academia.edu/27899958/Ukraine_and_the_Ukrainian_Crisis_as_Viewed_from_Greece (accessed: 01.12.2023).

problems. The same period is marked by the achievement of high mutual indicators in the field of economics, energy, trade and humanitarian cooperation. According to statistics, in 2008 the indicators of mutual trade turnover reached record values, amounting to about USD 5 billion (compare: in 1995 about USD 404 million, in 2007 — USD 3.7 billion).²

However, despite considerable achievements, stagnation also became apparent, which was recognized by both sides as “a long-term trend associated with a rather serious disagreement between the two countries on a number of fundamental issues” (Kvashnin, 2021, p. 101). In this series, the situation in Ukraine as a result of the 2004 Orange Revolution occupies the first place (Rabotyazhev & Solovyev, 2017).

Moscow’s official response to the events of 2004 was rather restrained: it was noted that, despite Ukraine’s interest in the EU and NATO, Russia’s security interests should also be taken into account. Kiev’s partial or complete integration into Western structures meant NATO’s gradual advance to the Russian borders and the emergence of threats to Russia’s national security.

As for Greece, until 2014 Ukraine was, in fact, a “secondary issue of foreign policy”,³ since in 2004 the main foreign policy priority was the implementation of “the EU mega-expansion” and obtaining the first results of integration. At the same time, according to the 2001 national census, about 100,000 ethnic Greeks lived in Ukraine, who, in a cultural context, “are part of a perceived neighborhood and play a certain part in collective representations of Greece’s past” (Dimopoulos, 2015, p. 2).

In fact, in the first decade of the 21st century the Ukrainian case did not have a negative

impact on bilateral relations between Russia and Greece. Both sides built their relations not only on a common cultural and historical foundation, but also on a pragmatic basis, when mutual interest was shown in developing bilateral dialogue in many areas of cooperation.

2014 — February 2022

The internal situation in Ukraine continued to worsen. When Viktor Yanukovich announced the suspension of the signing of the documents on Ukraine’s association with the EU,⁴ protests began, resulting in Euromaidan. As a result of the coup, the president was forced out of power, the Crimea became part of Russia, and the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics were declared independent from Kiev (Sotiriou, 2016).

When analyzing Greece’s reaction to the Ukrainian events of 2013–2014, it should be noted that initially the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eleftherios Venizelos, expressed concern about the situation, calling for refraining from use of force and returning to the negotiating table. However, further events, and especially the “Crimean Spring,” were perceived extremely negatively by Athens: Greece insisted on strict observance of international law and Ukraine’s territorial integrity.⁵ These events were important for Athens in the context of the still unresolved problems around Cyprus and the confrontation with Türkiye in the Aegean Sea. Eleftherios

⁴ ENP Country Progress Report 2013 — Ukraine // European Commission. March 27, 2014. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/fr/mem_o_14_234 (accessed: 01.12.2023).

⁵ Δήλωση Αντιπρόεδρου της Κυβέρνησης και ΥΠΕΞ Ευ. Βενιζέλου μετά τη συνάντησή του με τον προσωρινό Πρόεδρο της Ουκρανίας και με τον Υπουργό Εξωτερικών (Κίεβο, 02.03.14) // Υπουργείο Εξωτερικών [Statement by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs E. Venizelos after Meeting with the Acting President of Ukraine and the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Kiev, March 2, 2014) // Ministry of Foreign Affairs]. March 2, 2014. (In Greek). URL: <https://www.mfa.gr/epikairoita/proto-thema/delose-antiproedrou-tes-kuberneses-kai-upeks-eu-benizelou-meta-te-sunantese-tou-me-ton-prosorino-proedro-tes-oukrantias-kai-me-ton-upourgo-exoterikon-kiebo-0203-14.html> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

² Στατιστική Επετηρίδα της Ελλάδος 2009 & 2010 // ΕΛΣΤΑΤ [Statistical Yearbook of Greece 2009–2010 // ELSTAT]. 2012. (In Greek). URL: http://dlib.statistics.gr/Book/GRESYE_01_0002_00061.pdf (accessed: 01.12.2023).

³ Carras I. Ukraine and the Ukrainian Crisis as Viewed from Greece // *Ukraine Analytical Digest*. 2016. Vol. 7, no. 15. P. 2. URL: https://www.academia.edu/27899958/Ukraine_and_the_Ukrainian_Crisis_as_Viewed_from_Greece (accessed: 01.12.2023).

Venizelos also stressed that in the background of the sanctions policy against Moscow and the aggravation of the crisis, Russia must remain within the framework of the international community and the rule of law, insisting on terminating contacts with the Russian Federation within the framework of the Russia — NATO Council, but expressing a desire to keep political and diplomatic channels open.⁶

The position of the MFA was supported by the opposition New Democracy party, then headed by Antonis Samaras, who claimed the need for a full-fledged and meaningful dialogue to resolve the conflict and to prove its mediating role in the settlement process to the EU.⁷

At the same time, representatives of the “Coalition of the Radical Left” (SYRIZA) expressed the opposite opinion: the head of the foreign policy department of the party, Nadia Valavani, noted that the cause of the crisis was in systematic belittling by the West the importance of the security interests of the Russian Federation, and the policy of the Greek government, oriented towards the EU countries, “does not meet the interests of the Greek people.”⁸

Such an ambivalent position indicates that Greek politicians and expert circles were inclined to understand the Russian position. Initially, Greece was reluctant to take the side of the larger

EU states, actively lobbying for the lifting of sanctions and the resumption of a pragmatic dialogue with Moscow (Koval, 2017, p. 134). This was due to the fact that Greece, as a major supplier of agricultural products to the Russian market, directly felt the negative consequences of the sanctions war. Without wishing to suffer economic losses, in 2015 Athens directly appealed to Moscow to make an exception for the country by lifting the food embargo on the import of some agricultural products.⁹ This was dictated by healthy pragmatism due to the fact that the established constructive dialogue was extremely beneficial to the Greek side: according to statistics, in 2014 Russia came out on top among the importing countries of production from Greece, with the total turnover of the two countries amounting to USD 3.5 billion.¹⁰

The well-known expert, who then held the post of Director General of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), Thanos Dokos stressed that Russia and Western states should seek compromise solutions regarding Ukraine. The most acceptable scenario, in his opinion, would be the simultaneous promotion of Ukraine’s relations with the EU and the EAEU. He also underlined that “Ukraine faces a difficult path ... The situation requires prudence from everyone.”¹¹

In turn, the coordinator of the Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies (CE.RE.ES) Dimosthenis Dimopoulos noted that the policy of the Russian Federation and the current events in Ukraine “should not surprise anyone ... Russia acted with the sole purpose of

⁶ Ομιλία Αντιπροέδρου της Κυβέρνησης και ΥΠΕΞ Ευ. Βενιζέλου σε Διακοινοβουλευτική Διάσκεψη για ΚΕΠΠΑ/ΚΠΑΑν // Υπουργείο Εξωτερικών [Speech by Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs E. Venizelos at the Interparliamentary Assembly on CFSP/CFSPv // Ministry of Foreign Affairs]. April 3, 2014. (In Greek). URL: <https://www.mfa.gr/epikairota/proto-thema/omilia-antiproedrou-tes-kuberneses-kai-upeks-eu-benizelou-se-diakoinobouleutike-diaskepse-gia-keppakpaa.html> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

⁷ Διάλογο για αποκλιμάκωση της έντασης στην Ουκρανία ζήτησε ο Σαμαράς [Samaras Calls for Dialogue to De-Escalate Tensions in Ukraine] // Voria.GR. March 6, 2014. (In Greek). URL: <https://www.voria.gr/article/dialogo-gia-apoklimakosi-tis-entasis-stin-oukrania-zitise-o-samaras> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

⁸ Ο ΣΥΡΙΖΑ, η ΕΕ και η Ουκρανία // Ριζοσπάστης [SYRIZA, EU and Ukraine // Radical]. April 30, 2014. (In Greek). URL: <https://www.rizospastis.gr/story.do?id=7929587> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

⁹ Προς εξαίρεση από το ρωσικό εμπάργκο φρούρες, πορτοκάλια και ροδάκινα // Τα Νέα [Strawberries, Oranges and Peaches to Be Exempted from Russian Embargo // Ta Nea]. February 27, 2015. (In Greek). URL: <https://www.tanea.gr/2015/02/27/economy/pros-eksairesi-apo-to-rwsiko-empargko-fraoyles-portokalia-kai-rodakina/> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

¹⁰ UN Comtrade Database. URL: <https://comtradeplus.un.org/> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

¹¹ Άποψη: Δύσκολη η επόμενη ημέρα // Η Καθημερινή [Opinion: The Next Day Will Be Difficult // Kathimerini]. March 1, 2014. (In Greek). URL: <https://www.kathimerini.gr/world/756294/apopsi-dyskoli-i-epomeni-imera/> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

protecting its national interests and preserving its security” (Dimopoulos, 2015).

Representatives of the ethnic Greek community living in Russia and interested in mutually beneficial cooperation have also advocated a political solution to the Ukrainian conflict. Ivan Savvidi, the owner of *Agrokom Holding*, realizing that the sanctions war is hitting the economic interests of ordinary citizens, addressed an open letter to the President of the Russian Federation. The businessman noted that the Greek people are absolutely convinced that it is unacceptable to support the Cold War strategy. On behalf of the representatives of the Russian-speaking population of Greece and Greek repatriates from the countries of the former USSR, Savvidi asked to review Russia’s sanctions list against Greece as an exception.¹²

The Greeks’ understanding of the Russian position was also confirmed by opinion polls: against the background of a growing wave of global Russophobia, the majority (62%) opposed imposing sanctions against Russia.¹³

Greece’s attitude towards Russia became especially benevolent in 2015, when the coalition government (the SYRISA — the Independent Greeks, ANEL) came to power. The next five years, with Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras at the head of the country, can be called a kind of flourishing in bilateral Greek-Russian relations. During these years, important agreements were reached on the deepening of cooperation and the organisation of an intercultural year in 2016, which indicates the desire of the two states to “establish a constructive dialogue and further develop beneficial relations on a parity basis” (Kuznetsov et al., 2017, p. 24).

¹² Onoiko P.D. Ivan Savvidi’s Appeal to Vladimir Putin with a Request to Exclude Greece from the Sanctions List // Athenian News. August 18, 2014. (In Russian). URL: <https://rua.gr/news/gospol/12464-obrashchenie-ivana-savvidi-k-vladimiru-putinu-s-prosboj-isklyuchit-greysiui-iz-sanktsionnogo-spiska.html> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

¹³ Ray J., Esipova N. Russians, EU Residents See Sanctions Hurting Their Economies // Gallup. April 28, 2016. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/191141/russians-residents-sanctions-hurting-economies.aspx> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

A notable pro-Russian position was taken by the junior coalition partner, ANEL leader Panos Kammenos, who viewed Moscow as a financial alternative to Brussels, calling for borrowing money from Russia at more favorable interest rates in order to repay Greece’s loan obligations (Petsinis, 2016, p. 285). It should be recalled that the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the European Central Bank provided long-term loans to Athens in the most difficult economic situation of 2009–2012, when the country was actually on the verge of default and exit from the EU (the so-called “Grexit”) (Aleksandrova, 2022).

At the same time, Prime Minister Tsipras demonstrated understanding of the Russian position on Ukraine. In particular, following his state visit to the Russia in 2016, he expressed his support in preserving peace, which could only be achieved within the framework of the Minsk agreements, and stressed his country’s interest in ensuring peace, considering the factor of Ukrainian citizens of Greek origin (Kalantzi & Lapshyna, 2020). He also noted that Athens wanted to take the part of mediator between Moscow and the West.¹⁴

Consequently, in the mid-2010s, the visions of Russia and Greece on most of the issues under consideration were consonant. However, their positions on a number of significant issues, primarily related to the sphere of regional security and energy, began to diverge gradually.

The diplomatic scandal of 2018 regarding the Macedonian issue is worth mentioning, when during one of the rounds of Greek-Macedonian negotiations Russia was accused by Greece of interfering in internal affairs. Athens accused Russian diplomats of trying to disrupt the conclusion of the Prespa Agreement, since Moscow was allegedly interested in the failure of the negotiations: in the event of a breakdown of the agreements, further NATO enlargement at

¹⁴ Joint Press Conference with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras // President of Russia. May 27, 2016. (In Russian). URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52024> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

the expense of Skopje could remain on paper. However, the scandal, which culminated in the mutual expulsion of diplomats, quickly faded.

The accumulated frustrations in the energy sector should not be forgotten. Due to the pressure exerted by the USA on the EU and Bulgaria, such joint energy projects with Russia as the Burgas — Alexandroupoli pipeline and the South Stream pipeline failed. These projects were supposed to strengthen Greece's energy security and turn it into the largest hub in the southern and southeastern Europe (Stergiou, 2018). Instead, the South Stream was reformatted into the Turkish pipeline, with Türkiye, Greece's main regional rival, taking its place. As a result, Athens had to focus on alternative Russian projects (Trans Adriatic, Eastern Mediterranean and Trans-Anatolian Natural gas pipelines, Greece — Bulgaria interconnector) (Benashvili, 2020; Vlasova, 2024).

In 2019, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, a staunch supporter of the European and Euro-Atlantic course, became Prime Minister of Greece. In 2019–2022, contacts between Athens and Moscow were irregular, but quite productive. Thus, in March 2021, Russian Prime Minister, Mikhail Mishustin, was invited to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Greek National Liberation Revolution, after which the parties confirmed their “commitment to mutually beneficial cooperation.”¹⁵

In December 2021, Mitsotakis visited Russia. A number of important agreements were signed in Sochi, and another comprehensive joint action plan was approved until 2024. Following the talks, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed confidence that “Greece will continue to advocate a balanced position on issues related to cooperation between Russia and the EU countries.”¹⁶ At the same time, Mitsotakis

confirmed that “Russia plays an important role in the architecture of European security.”¹⁷

Thus, despite the accumulated contradictions, Athens revealed an understanding of the Russian side in the Ukrainian issue. Simultaneously despite strong pressure from Brussels and Washington, Greece tried to follow its national interests, deftly maneuvering between the position of the EU and the opinion of the Greek people, who would lose more than gain from severing economic and political ties with the state with which there are deep-rooted economic, historical, cultural and religious connecting links. However, such a pragmatic political line ended in February 2022, when the Ukrainian issue began to escalate for Russia more and more, and Moscow made the difficult decision to launch a special military operation (SMO).

Period of Special Military Operation

Against the background of Russia's unsuccessful dialogue with Ukraine, which has repeatedly violated the Minsk agreements, and the failed negotiations between Moscow and Washington on the non-aligned status of Ukraine, Russia was forced to start a special military operation on February 24, 2022. This led to a dramatic change in the international situation, and Russia's ties with many Western states virtually came to naught. Greece was no exception.

The Greek Foreign Ministry stressed that Athens had certain obligations to the EU and NATO and intended to “consult and coordinate its actions with European allies” in the future regarding Ukraine.¹⁸

¹⁵ Mikhail Mishustin Held Talks with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis // Government of Russia. March 24, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <http://government.ru/news/41803/> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

¹⁶ Joint press conference with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis // President of Russia. December 8, 2021. (in Russian). URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67320> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

¹⁷ Tzogopoulos G. What Is Next for Russia and Greece? // Russian International Affairs Council. January 14, 2022. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/what-is-next-for-russia-and-greece/> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

¹⁸ Ανακοίνωση του Υπουργείου Εξωτερικών για την αναγνώριση από τη Ρωσία της παράνομης και μονομερούς ανακήρυξης «ανεξαρτησίας» των αποσχιστικών εδαφών του Ντονέτσκ και του Λουχάνσκ της Ουκρανίας // Ελληνική Κυβέρνηση [Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Russia's Recognition of the Illegal and

This position was reflected in the active support of Kiev (Manoli, 2024). The Mitsotakis' administration initiated a proactive engagement in the provision of various weapons: it is known that Greece spent 190 million euros for these purposes by October 2023, entering the top-20 donor countries of Ukraine.¹⁹ In August 2023, information was leaked to the media that Athens would allegedly send Russian-made air defense systems to Kiev, which Greece, despite its membership in NATO, purchased from Russia until 2014.²⁰ Mitsotakis, along with other Western leaders, also pledged to jointly train Ukrainian pilots to master the control skills of American F-16 aircrafts.²¹

During his visits to Ukraine, the Foreign Minister, Nikos Dendias, repeatedly stated that Athens would help restore the historic centre of Odessa, as a tribute to the historically and culturally important city from which the Greek national liberation struggle for independence began.²²

Unilateral Proclamation of "Independence" of the Separatist Territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions of Ukraine // Government of Greece]. December 25, 2023. (In Greek). URL: <https://government.gov.gr/anakinosi-tou-ipourgou-exoterikon-gia-tin-anagnorisi-apo-ti-rosia-tis-paranomis-ke-monomerous-anakirixis-anexartias-ton-aposchistikon-edafon-tou-ntonetsk-ke-tou-louchansk-tis-oukranias/> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

¹⁹ Ukraine Support Tracker Data // The Kiel Institute for the World Economy. October 2023. URL: <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/ukraine-support-tracker-data-20758/> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

²⁰ «Ανακοίνωσα» με διαρροή (;) εγγράφου από την Βουλή την απόσυρση των ρωσικών α/α συστημάτων Tor-M1 και OSA-AKM! [They "Announced" Through a Leaked (?) Government Document the Decommissioning of the Russian TOR-M1 and OSA-AKM Air Defense Systems!] // Pronews. August 24, 2023. (In Greek). URL: <https://www.pronews.gr/amyna-asfaleia/ypetha/ektakto-anakoinosan-me-diarroi-eggrafou-apo-tin-vouli-tin-aposyrsi-ton-rosikon-systimaton-shorads-tor-m1-kai-osa-akm/> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

²¹ Zelenskiy / Official // Telegram. August 21, 2023. URL: https://t.me/V_Zelenskiy_official/7478 (accessed: 01.12.2023).

²² Δήλωση Υπουργού Εξωτερικών Νίκου Δένδια κατά τη συνάντησή του με Αντιπρόεδρο της κυβέρνησης της Ουκρανίας για την Ευρωπαϊκή και την Ευρω-ατλαντική Ολοκλήρωση, Olga Stefanishyna (Οδησός, 03.04.2022) // Υπουργείο Εξωτερικών [Statement by Foreign Minister

Judging by the statements of officials and Greece's line of unconditional support for Ukraine in the conflict, the current Greek government unquestioningly adhered to the political course dictated by Washington and Brussels and consisting in pumping Kiev with weapons in order to weaken Russia as a whole.

However, not everyone in the Greek establishment agreed with the official position. Thus, Alexis Tsipras, the leader of the main opposition party SYRIZA, called the April video speech by Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky together with fighters of the Azov regiment,²³ Ukrainians of Greek origin in the Hellenic Parliament, "a fiasco on the part of the government," stressing that "neo-Nazis cannot speak in the parliament of the country that once fought desperately against Nazism."²⁴

According to opinion polls, 66% of Greek respondents did not support the position of their state regarding the supply of weapons to Ukraine.²⁵ Such sentiments were reinforced by a sharp increase in energy prices and the general

Nikos Dendias During a Meeting with Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration Olha Stefanishyna (Odesa, April 3, 2022) // Ministry of Foreign Affairs]. April 3, 2022. (In Greek). URL: <https://www.mfa.gr/epikairota/proto-thema/delose-upourgou-exoterikon-nikou-dendia-kata-te-sunantese-tou-me-antiproedro-tes-kuberneses-tes-oukranias-gia-ten-europaike-kai-ten-euro-atlantike-oloklerose-olga-stefanishyna-odessos-03042022.html> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

²³ Hereinafter, an organization included in the Unified Federal List of Organizations, containing foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation is mentioned.

²⁴ Αλ. Τσίπρας: Μεγάλο ατόπημα από την πλευρά Ζελένσκι και φιάσκο από την πλευρά της κυβέρνησης [Alexis Tsipras: Zelensky's Big Mistake and the Government's Fiasco] // The President. April 8, 2022. (In Greek). URL: <https://www.thepresident.gr/2022/04/08/al-tsipras-megalo-atopima-apo-tin-pleyra-zelenski-kai-fiasko-apo-tin-pleyra-tis-kyvernisis/> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

²⁵ Δημοσκοπήση: Τι πιστεύουν οι Έλληνες για τον πόλεμο και τη Ρωσία – Τι λένε για την αποστολή όπλων [Poll: What Greeks Think About War and Russia — What They Say About Arms Supplies] // MEGA. March 24, 2022. (In Greek). URL: <https://www.megatv.com/2022/03/24/dimoskopisi-ti-pisteyoun-oi-ellines-gia-ton-polemo-kai-ti-rosia-ti-lene-gia-tin-apostoli-oplon/> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

deterioration of the internal situation in the country: in accordance with statistics, in September 2022, at the peak of Kiev's support from the West, the inflation rate was a record 12% (at the beginning of the year — 1.12%).²⁶ All this led to mass rallies and a nationwide strike (November 10, 2022), at which protesters demanded an improvement in the economic situation, opposing further involvement of Greece in the Ukrainian conflict.²⁷

Representatives of the diaspora also advocated the establishment of a constructive dialogue. Thus, Ioannis Kotsailidis, the chairman of the party "Panhellenic Movement of Greek-Russian Friendship," stressed that the current Greek policy towards Russia "does not express the opinion of the overwhelming majority of the Greek people who want to continue good and constructive relations between our countries based on respect for the principles of international law."²⁸

In addition, various experts have noted the presence of traditionally strong Russophile and anti-American sentiments among the Greek population: most respondents consider the Russian Federation as one of their necessary allies, while the USA is perceived as a global hegemon, which has conducted only a disastrous foreign policy in recent decades (Vlasova & Otashvili, 2021; Paschalidis & Siakas, 2022; Svistunova & Kvashnin, 2024). However, due to the strong influence of the European and American mainstream in Greece today, "the foundations of public Russophilia in Greek society seem to be weakening" (Petsinis, 2016,

p. 295). A significant role in these processes was also played by the national media, whose work, in fact, is based on disinformation. In line with general Western trends, the conflict in Ukraine in the Greek media space is being covered unilaterally, mainly in favor of the Ukrainian authorities. There is a dominance of unreliable information: Russia's military successes are downplayed or not covered at all, and Ukraine's activity is exaggerated by far. It becomes obvious that the Greek population does not have the opportunity to adequately assess the events taking place, which are interpreted only from the side beneficial to the mainstream (Papanikos, 2022). Nevertheless, the majority of Greeks (75%) partially or completely agree that the information they have received about the Ukrainian conflict is unreliable (Skarpa, Simoglou & Garoufallou, 2023).

In the current situation, due to the deterioration of the internal situation, Greece, which needs Russian energy resources, had to make some concessions: Athens was forced to pay for gas in rubles. At the same time, we have to admit that Greece cannot move away from following the common policy of the USA and the EU, since this threatens at best immediate restrictions or the exclusion of the country from the EU and NATO, at worst. As a result, Athens is forced to fully support Kiev, adhering to the original position of condemning Moscow. The visit of Greek President Katerina Sakellaropoulou to Ukraine in November 2022 confirms this: according to her, Greece "will never recognize the illegal annexation of the territories of Ukraine, which Russia is trying to impose."²⁹

However, in the situation when the West voluntarily fenced itself off from the Russian Federation, and the East, on the contrary, became much closer, Moscow had a unique opportunity

²⁶ Inflation Greece 2022 // Inflation.EU. Worldwide Inflation Data. URL: <https://www.inflation.eu/en/inflation-rates/greece/historic-inflation/cpi-inflation-greece-2022.aspx> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

²⁷ Thousands of People Protest in Athens on the Day of the General Strike // RIA Novosti. November 9, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://ria.ru/20221109/mitingi-1830207925.html?ysclid=ma14g2meze159061590> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

²⁸ An Open Letter to the President of the Russian Federation // Πανελλήνιο κίνημα ελληνορωσικής φιλίας [The All-Greek Movement of Greek-Russian Friendship]. July 30, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://pakief.gr/ru/category/press-reizy/> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

²⁹ ΠτΔ: Αμέριστη η υποστήριξη και συμπαράσταση της Ελλάδας προς τον ουκρανικό λαό [President: Greece's Unwavering Support and Solidarity with the Ukrainian People] // APPE-MPE. November 3, 2022. (In Greek). URL: <https://www.amna.gr/home/article/685758/PtD-Ameristi-i-upostirixi-kai-sumparastasi-tis-Elladas-pros-ton-oukraniko-lao-> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

to establish relations with another state playing a prominent role in the Balkans, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. This was Türkiye, Greece's main rival. As evidence of the growing Russian-Turkish cooperation, to which the Greek side, which at the same time sees this rapprochement as a challenge to its own security, has unwittingly contributed, let us mention just a few facts.

Evidently, there are two regional groups of states implementing different and clearly competing initiatives. On the one hand, these are Israel, Greece and Cyprus, backed by the USA and the EU. On the other hand, Türkiye, Russia and Serbia, which are interested in independence (Zvyagel'skaya, 2022, pp. 72–85; Kontos & Georgiou, 2023). Russia's efforts to form a Turkish energy hub are important here (Avatkov & Sbitneva, 2023), while in the mid-2000s, Russia saw Greece in this role.

Despite strong pressure from the USA, Russian-Turkish military cooperation continues to develop: the most important success was the delivery of the *S-400 Triumph* air defense system to Ankara.³⁰ It is noteworthy that today Türkiye is the only NATO country that buys weapons from Russia (until 2014 it was Greece).

A significant blow to Greek-Russian relations was caused by the situation around the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, a symbol of the Orthodox faith and the Greek struggle for independence from Turkish rule, when Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan decided to reopen a mosque there in 2020. The negative reaction of Greece was quite expected, and Athens began to seek the support of its co-religionist Russia. Meanwhile, Moscow decided to take a neutral position, which was perceived by the Greeks as tacit approval by the Russians of the Turks' actions (Nikiforov, 2021, p. 166). In turn, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which

belongs to the "Greek bloc" within the Orthodox world, granted the status of Autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2019, which is not supported by the Russian Orthodox Church (Mudrov, 2022).

It is also important to acknowledge the reciprocal support demonstrated by neighbours: it was Russia that provided Türkiye with decisive assistance in fighting the most powerful fires and earthquakes in 2023, while Greece for the first time in several decades found itself without Russian support in extinguishing its annual catastrophic fires.

In the context of the Ukrainian conflict under consideration, the important mediation role of Türkiye is emphasized (Shumilin, 2023), which provided Istanbul in 2022 as a platform for Russian-Ukrainian negotiations disrupted by Great Britain, as well as the organization of safe sea corridors for Ukrainian agricultural goods (Ay & Söylemez, 2023).

Conclusion

In view of the unfriendly measures taken by the USA and the EU against Russia, and the actual loss by Greece of its status as an intermediary between Western countries and Russia, there is an unprecedented situation in the history of Greek-Russian long-term and fruitful cooperation, where contacts established over centuries have been frozen, and bilateral relations are currently at their lowest point.

It is evident that the Ukrainian factor is currently playing a key role in Greek-Russian relations. However, due to the strong influence of NATO and the implementation of collective policy within the EU, and the different understanding of the further development of the Black Sea region, the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean, Athens, in fact, does not have the possibilities of choosing foreign policy milestones. At the same time, despite the diametrically opposed positions on the Ukrainian conflict, this has never been put in Greek-Russian relations. The loyal attitude of the Greeks and Russians towards each other (the so-called "Russophilia"), which has already

³⁰ Cumhurbaşkanlığı Sözcüsü Kalın: "S-400'ler Türkiye'nin savunma ihtiyaçlarını karşılamak için alınmaktadır" // Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı. 04.07.2019. URL: <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/106934/cumhurbaskanligi-sozcusu-kalin-s-400-ler-turkiye-nin-savunma- ihtiyaclarini-karsilamak-icin-alinmaktadir> (accessed: 01.12.2023).

withstood many tests for thousands of years, confirms the unbroken ties. This fact can certainly influence the restoration of relations between the two countries in the field of high politics. Nevertheless, today a situation is more likely when, in line with European and Euro-Atlantic policy, the Greek establishment will only step up sanctions pressure on Russia. The resumption of good-neighborly relations between

the Hellenic Republic and the Russian Federation is possible, but it will depend not only on the mutual desire of Athens and Moscow, but also on the general situation that will develop in the international arena in the near future. At the same time, it is unlikely that bilateral Greek-Russian relations will reach a new level under the current conditions.

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