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Greek Election Wins Putin a Friend in Europe

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Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras

The landmark victory of radical leftist party Syriza in Greece's general election Sunday signals the country will strive to increase its ties with the Russian government, but will likely be unsuccessful in any attempts to sway European Union policies on Russia, political analysts said Monday.

Syriza, also known as the Coalition of the Radical Left, had 36.34 percent of the vote after the final ballots were tallied Monday. With an anti-austerity platform and a pledge to remain in the euro zone, the party — which has formed an unlikely coalition with the right-wing Independent Greeks party in order to gain an overall majority — has been a staunch opponent of EU sanctions imposed on Russia over its annexation of Crimea and the ongoing fighting in Ukraine. While Syriza's affinities to Russia suggest President Vladimir Putin could have secured a loyal ally in a generally hostile Europe, Greece's fragile position within the EU makes it an improbable pro-Russian crusader.

"I doubt Greece will have enough weight in the EU to have a substantial impact on its policy toward Russia," Dimitris Papadimitriou, professor of politics at the University of Manchester, told The Moscow Times on Monday. "It will not want to risk a major confrontation with the EU over the imposition of sanctions against Russia. But it would not be surprising if the new government gets closer to Russia and looks to it for greater support."

Greece's new prime minister, Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras, established contact with Russia prior to being elected. Like other leaders of formerly fringe European political parties, Tsipras was received as a highly honored guest by the Kremlin. The leftist leader met with Russian officials in Moscow last May, including Valentina Matviyenko, chair of the Russian parliament's upper house who had served as Russia's ambassador to Greece in the late 1990s.

According to Greek media, Tsipras used the occasion to chastise the EU's policy on Ukraine, denounce European sanctions against Moscow and support separatist referendums in eastern Ukraine that the West said were illegitimate.

Greek objection to sanctions against Russia is in part motivated by the losses the country has suffered over Russia's subsequent ban on a range of food products from the European Union, according to Syriza officials. Kostas Isihos, the party's foreign policy boss, told government newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta on Monday that Greek farmers, whose exports to Russia include fruit and olive oil, had lost some 430 million euros because of the sanctions.

Common Interests

The terms used in Russia's anti-Europe rhetoric also seem to have infiltrated Tsipras' vocabulary.

"It is a regression for us to see fascism and neo-Nazis entering European governments again and for this to be accepted by the EU," Tsipras was quoted as saying in May by the state-run Athens News Agency, a few days after Putin claimed that militant nationalism of the kind "that once led to the appearance of the Nazi ideology" had raised its head in Europe.

Syriza's natural leaning toward Russia stems from its origins as an amalgamation of communist, socialist and other leftist forces, according to Papadimitriou. The party with which it has formed a coalition, the right-wing Independent Greeks, also supports Russia because of its own platform that calls for conservative social policies in line with Orthodox Christian teachings.

Putin warmly congratulated Tsipras on his victory Monday, expressing confidence "that Russia and Greece will continue to develop their traditionally constructive cooperation in all areas and will work together effectively to resolve current European and global problems," according to the Kremlin's website. Putin also referred to "current difficult conditions" and wished Tsipras success in working in them.

Despite their affinities, the prospect of immediate cooperation between the countries — political or economic — is slim given that both Athens and Moscow share a pressing problem: their struggling economies.

While Tsipras toils to renegotiate the terms of a 240 billion euro bailout deal with

the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund, Russia is grappling with double-digit inflation, slumping oil prices and the dramatic devaluation of its currency.

"If Russia didn't have its own economic crisis, it might be willing to financially support the new Greek government's anti-austerity measures," said Vasily Koltashov, head of the Institute of Globalization and Social Movements' economic research center. "It is unlikely that Greece views Russia as a useful partner right now. Chances are that they view Russia as a partner in [economic] trouble."

Friends in Europe

Russia has courted Europe's far-left and far-right political parties, which it views as platforms to influence European policy-making, according to political pundits.

The prospect of increasing Russian influence seeping into the EU became all the more probable when radical European parties made significant political gains during last May's European parliamentary elections.

France's far-right National Front topped the French poll with nearly 25 percent of the vote, earning 23 seats in the European Parliament. Syriza finished first in voting in Greece with 26 percent of ballots, securing six seats in the European legislature.

According to the Budapest-based Political Capital Institute, a policy research center, far-right parties in 15 out of 21 EU states have been vocal about their sympathies toward Russia.

"The [European] system is under pressure," Papadimitriou said. "Challenges to the system can come from the left or the right."

Other political parties at the extremes of Europe's political spectrum — also supportive of Russia — have applauded Syriza's victory.

National Front leader Marine Le Pen told France's RTL radio station that Syriza's win represented a "monstrous democratic slap in the face by the Greek people to the European Union."

"Syriza is the first anti-systemic, radical left party to come to power in Europe," Papadimitriou said. "I doubt it will be the last."

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