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Russia Is Exploiting European Weakness

By Mark Adomanis

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The triumph of Syriza, a radical left-wing party, in Greece's recent parliamentary elections has put renewed attention onto Russia's political influence within the European Union. It turns out that several of Syriza's leading members have very close connections with Russia and that, as an institution, the party has been at the decidedly extreme end of the pro-Russia spectrum.

The new foreign minister, Nikos Kotzias, seemed to go out of his way to water down one of the EU's recent statements on Russia, pointedly removing any mention of additional sanctions. It wasn't as if the EU was particularly eager for confrontation to begin with, so Syriza's influence badly watered down what was already pretty thin gruel.

Kotzias' past is even more disconcerting. According to Marc Champion at Bloomberg, during the 1980s Kotzias attacked the Solidarity trade union in Poland.

You'd think that someone popularly associated with "people power" would have cheered on Poles taking their fate into their own hands, but Kotzias saw Solidarity as retrograde and dangerous because of its support of the American empire and its "anti-Soviet" attitudes.

That a person who wrote such nonsense is now in charge of formulating and executing Greek foreign policy is frightening.

And it's not simply a personal foible of Kotzias. The new Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has also very publicly rejected calls for further sanctions against Russia. While campaigning to be president of the European Commission, on a trip to Moscow, he deliberately echoed Russian talking points by bemoaning the "fascism" and "neo-Nazis" in Ukraine.

Perhaps trying to put away any remaining doubt about where the party stood, Greece's new energy minister, Panagiotis Lafazanis, even went on the record saying that "We have no differences with Russia and the Russian people."

This has all provoked a good deal of indignation in Brussels, where the emphasis is always on consensus and agreement and where Syriza is viewed as a bunch of know-nothing amateurs. If Syriza thinks they're going to get the kid-gloves treatment from the EU's bureaucratic apparatus they are going to be sorely disappointed.

While the Eurocrats are "gravely concerned," Syriza's rise has sparked something bordering on blind panic among conservative think tanks, where any manifestations of pro-Russian sentiment are viewed as direct threats to national security. Many hawks have been warning about Russia's "Trojan horse" tactics in the EU for a number of years now, and Syriza seems like an almost too perfect manifestation of their worst fears. It even involves a bunch of Greeks!

The reality, though, is that Syriza's rise to power has very little to do with brilliant Russian machinations and everything to do with the economic cataclysm that has been visited on Greece courtesy of that country's rapacious, dysfunctional, and incompetent political elite.

Russia has deliberately cultivated links with fringe parties not merely in Greece but throughout Europe. This strategy wasn't decided on because of its superior efficacy, but because the Russians know they have no other options: The country is simply too toxic to deal directly with establishment political parties.

And so Russia has worked with France's National Front, Germany's Die Linke, and all sorts of other extreme left and right parties in the hope that, somewhere down the line, these people will have real influence and power.

In normal times, of course, these sorts of parties are very firmly relegated to the sidelines. Before Greece's economy imploded, Syriza's senior members were little better than carnival barkers, the sorts of earnest but strange people who hand out pamphlets at the local subway station.

But times aren't normal: Ever since the start of the global financial crisis, Europe has suffered through its most protracted period of economic stagnation since the end of World War II. And Greece has suffered more than any other country.

Reading the recession's impact on Greece's economy sounds like recounting the results of a major war: unemployment spiked to almost 30 percent, gross domestic product has fallen by roughly 27 percent, and industrial production has collapsed to a more than two-decade

low. (That's right: Greece's industrial production was higher in 1993 than in 2013.) That is the scale of the economic carnage it took to get a "pro-Russia" party into power.

If Europe wants to head off Russian influence, it needs to get its economic house in order. It's that simple. The extremist parties that Russia has so assiduously courted thrive in environments of dislocation and chaos and wither in environments of prosperity and contentment.

If Europeans have nothing to look forward to other than endless austerity and "structural reforms" that never seem to succeed in igniting actual growth, they will eventually revolt much as the Greeks have.

Europe has been belatedly reacting to pro-Russia sentiments within the bloc by censuring and punishing parties like Syriza or the National Front for their close ties to Moscow. This "strategy" won't work, because it does absolutely nothing to address the underlying problem.

So long as Europe's economy fails to deliver broadly shared prosperity there will be increasingly large discontent, and in that environment it's all but inevitable that more parties like Syriza will eventually come to power.

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