

Greece and Russia: The Myths and the Reality

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The trip of Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to Moscow has provoked strong reactions from certain circles in Europe and the United States. Due to its Orthodox heritage, Greece is seen as a country that is ready to participate in a Samuel Huntington-style "Clash of Civilizations" between the West and Russia.

But in the era of modernity, religious affinity rarely dictates foreign policy choices. In fact, Western media rhetoric about "Orthodox ties" constitutes a form of neo-Orientalism that goes against the logic of international relations.

How can religion play a role in the formulation of Greek foreign policy toward Russia when Tsipras and some of his key ministers are self-declared atheists? Not to mention that church attendance is very low in Greece.

This is like saying that Britain and the Netherlands have enjoyed close trade and energy relations because they have large Protestant populations, or that the United States with its

large Catholic population has reached out to post-communist Poland for reasons of religious affinity.

Many Western analysts do not realize that division is more common than unity in the Orthodox world. After all, Orthodox Ukrainians are now fighting against Orthodox Russians who fought against Orthodox Georgians in the recent past.

Moreover, despite rumors to the contrary, Greek and Russian interests have rarely converged during the last 200 years. Among other things, there is a long history of antagonism between the Greek-speaking Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Moscow Patriarchate for the spiritual leadership of the world's Orthodox Christians.

Besides, Greek political elites viewed with great suspicion the Slavophile tendencies of Russian/Soviet foreign policy in the Balkans because Bulgaria was for decades Greece's main geopolitical competitor. As non-Slavs, most Greeks feel closer to the people of neighboring Mediterranean nations, like Italy.

Having said all that, Russia and Greece do share common interests and goals. The large Russian-speaking Greek community that resides in the former Soviet Union acts as a bridge between the two countries in a fashion similar to that of Russian Jews in Israel.

Both Athens and Moscow have diplomatically supported the internationally recognized government of the Republic of Cyprus and have called for a peaceful resolution of the Cyprus issue, but for different reasons.

Greece has traditionally played the role of protector for the island's large Greek population, while Russia has felt obliged as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to defend international law.

Finally, potential benefits deriving from the export of Russian gas to European markets via Greece has been perceived by both countries as crucial to their economic prosperity.

While it is true that the Tsipras government has indicated a willingness to improve relations with Moscow, it will be very difficult for Athens to distance itself now from the European Union and NATO.

The country is fully integrated into the Western community of nations. The Greek state has maintained its pro-Western orientation since its establishment in 1830. It is probably the most important pillar of Greek foreign policy.

Militarily speaking, Greece cannot move closer to Russia because its NATO membership imposes certain limitations. Strong relations with the United States only mean that Greek diplomacy has to take into account American interests in the region.

On the other hand, the Kremlin has always preferred to deal with individual European countries rather than the EU as a whole for obvious reasons. The Kremlin welcomes the new Greek government's aspiration to develop a more autonomous foreign policy, at a time of increased tensions between Moscow and Europe.

So what does the Tsipras government want from Russia? It's simple. It seeks an improved

relationship with Moscow that would bring investments and cheap energy to the ruined Greek economy. It also wants Moscow to lift its sanctions against Greek agricultural producers.

In addition, Athens is probably playing the "Russia card" in order to improve its bargaining position in the current negotiations with the EU-IMF troika.

However, economics cannot explain everything. Greece is a small and relatively resourceless country with a rich heritage that is a blessing as much as a curse. It creates a sense of cultural overconfidence that constantly gets in the way of formulating realistic policy responses.

Simultaneously, Greece has suffered from identity insecurity due to its perceived cultural uniqueness. Entering the euro zone was meant to reaffirm Greece's European identity, not to reaffirm its exceptionality! As a result, the economic crisis is changing perceptions of the EU among Greek citizens.

To make matters worse, the increasingly crypto-racist language of some European politicians and media against ordinary Greeks is traumatizing the society. It is perceived by most Greeks as a national humiliation. And history shows that emotions such as collective pride can influence the course of a country's foreign policy.

At this time of uncertainty, therefore, Greece is counting its friends and allies. Russia can certainly be one of them on the basis of mutual interest. But not due to their shared Orthodox heritage.

Russia is perceived as a friendlier country because it has avoided pointing fingers and antagonizing Greek society.

Tsipras and his new government cannot ignore citizens' demand for more respect. With certain European politicians and media launching a smear campaign against Greece and its citizens, who can blame them?

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