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Russia Gave Greece Only 'Gas and Sympathy'

By Hannah Gais

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Since the Syriza party came to power in Greece's January elections, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has made a point of ruffling feathers in Brussels. His trip to Moscow last week has, however, put some in Europe on high alert.

Analysts have cited Tsipras' comments disparaging Europe's sanctions on Russia, his party's ties to Russian political figures and his recent charm offensive as signs that Greece is not only pivoting away from the European Union but will soon become Russia's "Trojan Horse" in Europe — a means of weakening the union from within. These fears, however, are greatly exaggerated.

Syriza's Russia ties have faced significant scrutiny ever since the party's big electoral win.

One of Tsipras' first meetings as prime minister was with Andrei Maslov, the Russian ambassador to Greece.

Tsipras is critical of sanctions and is one of the few major European leaders to have publicly spoken out against the government in Kiev, accusing them of harboring neo-Nazis.

It should have come as no surprise, then, that just days before Tsipras traveled to Moscow, he re-asserted that EU sanctions against Russia are "senseless" and a "road to nowhere."

In an interview with TASS, one of Russia's state-owned media agencies, he signaled that he would be willing to put his foot down if the EU was to impose additional sanctions on Russia and that the EU should not take Greece's support for granted.

"Don't think that Greece's position is a given, the situation has changed and now there is another government in Greece. And now you should ask us before you take any decisions," Tsipras told TASS, recounting a conversation he had with European Council President Donald Tusk.

"I support the point of view that there is a need for a dialogue and diplomacy, we should sit down at the negotiating table and find the solutions to major problems."

Other officials in Syriza and their coalition partners, the Independent Greeks party, have even stronger ties to the Kremlin.

Defense Minister Panos Kammenos and Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias both have documented ties to Alexander Dugin, a Russian Eurasianist and academic close to Putin.

A trove of e-mails released by a Russian hacker group and analyzed by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty shows that both Kammenos and Kotzias have been in communication with Georgy Gavrish, a close friend of Dugin's. Gavrish also lived in Greece for a few years, up until 2013. There has been no evidence to date that Syriza has received monetary support from Dugin or his associates.

While these connections are sensational, hype over them obscures the larger picture — Russia and Greece have a long history of cooperation.

In recent years, under Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis, who was in office from 2004 to 2009, bilateral relations flourished.

Karamanlis held several meetings with Putin, far more than he had with American leaders. He worked closely with the Russians on major energy projects, such as the Burgas-Alexandroupolis and South Stream pipelines.

Greece also bought materiel from Russia, the first NATO member to do so.

In other words, Tsipras' behavior is not without precedent, nor is it without public support.

A Pew Research Center poll in the summer of 2014 found that 61 percent of the Greek public held a generally favorable view of Russia.

Warmer relations with Russia may not bode well for Greece's relationship with the rest of the euro zone, and a full pivot to Russia could pose serious problems to its membership of the European Union.

That said, it is not an inevitable, or even probable, situation.

Russia's "offer" to Tsipras — to the extent that there was one — was without substance.

Greece was not granted an exemption from Russia's ban on European agricultural imports, nor was it offered any form of financial aid for its struggling economy.

Instead, Tsipras walked away with a joint action plan meant to increase cooperation in trade, tourism and energy, including discussion of a possible deal with Gazprom.

One headline in the Greek center-left newspaper Efimerida ton Syntakton described the meeting as "gas and some sympathy."

The so-called pivot is most likely posturing. Tsipras, like his predecessors, understands that Greece's economic crisis isn't a burden it can bear alone.

Despite Greek officials periodically referring to Russia as a "Plan B," Tsipras must surely realize that Greece will have to stick with the European Union if it has any hope of emerging from economic crisis.

"Greece is not a beggar asking different countries to solve its financing problems," Bloomberg reported Tsipras as saying. "It's a European problem. For a European problem, a European solution will be found."

How that European problem will be solved has yet to pan out. But one thing is certain, Tsipras and Greece can expect little more than sympathy from Russia.

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