

RUSSIA AS AN ALTERNATIVE SECURITY PROVIDER: THE GREEK PERSPECTIVE ON THE “UKRAINE CRISIS”

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Abstract. *The article explores the Greek policies with regards to the “Ukraine crisis” through security provider approach. As NATO and EU proved unable to address the entire range of Greece’s security concerns, Athens regularly sought for an alternative security provider, considering that Russia could assume this position after the dissolution of the USSR and provide support to Greek positions on Cyprus, relations with Turkey, Balkan politics, and energy security. This strategy required that Greece support stronger EU-Russia relations, which had direct influence the Greek vision of Ukraine’s place in regional integration processes. To illustrate how this security provider optics influenced Greece’s political choices with regards to the “Ukraine crisis”, policies of the pro-European coalition government of Antonis Samaras and then the “geopolitical turn” by a populist SYRIZA-ANEL coalition of Alexis Tsipras are analyzed.*

Keywords: *Ukraine, Russia, crisis, Greece, NATO, EU, security, Cyprus.*

Introduction

In mid-winter 2015 the remnants of the first Minsk ceasefire¹ were crumbling under the renewed Russian and separatist attacks in the East of Ukraine. On January 27, 2015, three days after an especially deadly attack on Mariupol, which took lives of 30 civilians and one soldier, the European Council issued a statement, which, *inter alia*, announced:

“We note evidence of continued and growing support given to the separatists by Russia, which underlines Russia’s responsibility. We urge Russia to condemn the separatists’ actions and to implement the Minsk agreements” (European Council, 2015).

In search of a solution, an urgent Council meeting took place on January 29, which centered on the possibility to deepen sanctions on Russia in view of breaking the ceasefire. However, the newly-sworn Greek SYRIZA-ANEL government² began with a double surprise. First, it expressed its post-factum disagreement over the Council statement condemning Russia and accused EU institutions of incorrect procedure. Second, as international media hailed the fact that Greece was forced to accept the prolongation of sanctions against Russia, Foreign Affairs Minister Nikos Kotzias gave a number of interviews, emphasizing his personal input in preventing the third wave of sanctions:

¹ The original Minsk Protocol, generally known as “Minsk 1” has been signed in Minsk, Belarus on September 5, 2014, and was supplemented on September 11 with Minsk Memorandum, clarifying ceasefire implementation details.

² The first SYRIZA-ANEL government has been formed after the premature election of January 25, 2015. As the “Coalition of the Radical Left SYRIZA” (36.34% of the votes, 149 seats in parliament) lacked 2 seats to form a government, it entered coalition with the radical right party “Independent Greeks” (4.75% and 13 seats). Anti-austerity politics and the pro-Russian turn in foreign policy cemented this otherwise unlikely union.

“I think that, thanks to the policy and tactics we followed, on the instructions of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, we were able – instead of being forced to use our veto – to pass our fundamental line: “We don’t want further sanctions against Russia.” Of course, the previous sanctions agreed on in the past will continue, but not this major wave of sanctions, and in this way we maintained European unity; Europe didn’t split over this issue, and there was also no rift against Russia. That is why we had the invitation from my colleague Mr. Lavrov to visit Moscow” (Interview on AMNA Web TV, 01 February 2015).

Such a strong pro-Russian gesture after an attack on a city, which is home to the bulk of Ukraine’s Greek minority³, may seem surprising, and surely it could not be mollified with a vague line in the Council resolution on the need to protect ethnic minorities in Ukraine. Which considerations substantiated such an unlikely policy choice?

The overtly pro-Russian stance of Athens should not be taken for granted, since there is enough of historical, cultural, and religious affinities not only between Greece and Russia, but between Greece and Ukraine as well. A common Orthodox heritage, a long history of Greek presence and cultural influences, and a considerable diaspora of Ukrainians in Greece could provide quite a solid basis⁴. Such a stance functions still on the level of perceptions it does not play any significant role. One could also easily assume that Greece, having experienced a few conflicts with more potent Turkey, most recently the partial occupation of Cyprus and sovereignty

³ According to the 2001 census, the Greek minority of Ukraine amounted to 91 000 people, more than 70% living in Mariupol region of the Donetsk oblast, very close to the “contact line”.

⁴ For a concise description in English of the historical/cultural links between Greece and Ukraine see Iannis Carras, ‘Ukraine and the Ukrainian Crisis as Viewed from Greece’, Institute of World Policy, May 13, 2016, available at <http://iwp.org.ua/eng/public/2054.html>

disputes in the Aegean area⁵, would display more sympathy towards Ukraine's problems concerning Russian annexation of Crimea and active military meddling in parts of Eastern Ukraine.

Nevertheless, not only Greek politicians but also expert circles and general public are largely induced to interpret the conflict and to accept Russian arguments. Throughout the "Ukraine crisis"⁶ Greece reluctantly takes sides with the larger EU states, while simultaneously lobbying in favor of removing sanctions and renewing dialogue with Russia. This suggests that similar experiences and historical links do not shape Greek political choices much. Considering the relatively low priority of bilateral relations with Ukraine, the Greek attitudes to the "Ukraine crisis" should be explained via a wider framework of the nature of its relationship with Russia.

While most researchers agree that no matter how intensive Greek-Russian relations are, and that they are almost sure to remain secondary compared Greece's ties with the EU, much ink has been spilled over the nature of current Greek-Russian relations. The range of opinions varies. Whereas some condemn Greece as a Russian "Trojan horse in the EU" (Leonard and Popescu 2007), others praise its strategy aiming to protect national interests, viewing it not as dissimilar to that of other larger EU states (Christou 2011, 2013). Furthermore, there is a clash of interpretations. Some scholars posit that in Greek-Russian relations "aspirations and sentiment have usually been put before pragmatism" (Filis 2017, p. 227), while others suggest that these relations are determined "by

⁵ While Greece recognizes only one Aegean dispute, the one on the continental shelf (for official Greek MFA position see <http://www.mfa.gr/en/issues-of-greek-turkish-relations/relevant-documents/delimitation-of-the-continental-shelf.html>), Turkey in addition raises issues of Aegean air space, demilitarization of Greek Eastern Aegean islands, and islets in the "grey zone" (for official Turkish MFA positions see <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/background-note-on-aegean-disputes.en.mfa>)

⁶ In Greek public discourse, the expressions "Ukrainian crisis" (ουκρανική κρίση) or "crisis in Ukraine" (κρίση στην Ουκρανία) are most widely used for describing the situation.

pragmatic and interest-based considerations and not by cultural or civilizational factors” (Tziampiris 2010, p. 89).

Putting this “values-interests” dichotomy aside for the moment, I would like to stress a security component which often remains underscored in the context of Greek-Russian relations. Specifically, in this article I will show that Greece’s position regarding the “Ukraine crisis” is mostly determined by Russia’s role as an alternative security provider (the primary one being EU/NATO), present both on the level of beliefs and perceptions as well as actual foreign policy decisions. This restricts considerably Greek political options in relations with post-Soviet states, provokes partial blindness on Russian aggression in Ukraine, and complicates choices within EU’s foreign policy on the matter.

In this light, the Greek example also illustrates the wider problem of the EU in its relationship with Russia – a gap in security perceptions between those member-states that do see the security threat from Russia’s challenge to international law and state sovereignty in Europe’s East, and those who put greater weight in the role of Russia as a security provider on a wide range of broadly defined security issues, from Middle Eastern conflicts to energy and economy.

The article begins with developing the argument on a combination of primary and alternative security providers in Greek security visions and practice since the dissolution of the USSR. It further explores the dynamics in Greece-EU-Russia triangle respecting security and its influence on the Greek vision of Ukraine’s place in European integration processes. Finally, to illustrate how security provider optics influences current political choices, I analyze and compare Greek policy with regards to the “Ukraine crisis” conducted first by the pro-European coalition government of Antonis Samaras and then by a populist SYRIZA-ANEL coalition of Aleksis Tsipras.

Greek double play on security providers in the 1990s-2000s

For Greece, an apparently easy answer to the security provider question – the country has been NATO member since 1953 – became rather problematic due to important fallout with Turkey in the 1970s. The partial occupation of Cyprus as well as the Aegean disputes revealed the inability of Western institutions, chiefly NATO, to settle the conflict between two nominal allies and address Greek security concerns. The gap between NATO's and Greek security perceptions became yawning and relations swiftly deteriorated. To the point, a statement that danger to Greece comes from the East, which is from Turkey, and not from the Soviet bloc in the North, had been formally inscribed in Greek military doctrine in the early 1980s, remaining in Greek strategic documents through the 1990s (Tsakonas and Tournikiotis 2003).

Tsakonas and Tournikiotis (2003) rightly note that as a smaller nation Greece seeks to combine internal and external balancing in its quest for security. While internal balancing meant high military expenditure (up to 5-6% of GDP in 1980s – early 1990s was allocated to defense, which contributed greatly to budget deficit), external balancing required another potent player to guarantee Greece's security and sovereignty. As during the Cold War the possibilities of overtures towards the USSR were quite limited, Greek politicians decided that European integration could be such a security provider and stressed the security dimension of the Greek membership in the European communities much more than economic benefits (Kiratli 2012).

Today, the idea of the EU as a security provider for Greece – with a special attention to the soft power of EU – has been theoretically

elaborated (Couloumbis 1994, Economides 2005, Kavakas 2000, Stavridis 2003). Still, these non-military and rather soft-power dimensions of EU security capacities create considerable gaps, which compound Greece's sense of insecurity, for Greek leadership has assessed its security threats primarily in hard security terms. And in this context the EU revealed to be of little help. Thus, in 1990s the rift not only with NATO, but also with EU widened for the number of reasons:

- A. Greece was frustrated at the position of Western European Union (an institutionalized predecessor of EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy) which showed no intention to provide security guarantees against Turkey.
- B. EU disavowed both the Greek reaction to the "Macedonian question", namely non-recognition of the Post-Yugoslav state unless it changed its name and symbols, and the introduction of Greek unilateral embargo.
- C. Neither EU nor NATO were helpful in resolving the 1996 Imia/Kardak crisis, around the sovereignty issue of a small islet in the Aegean Sea, which put Greece and Turkey on the brink of war.
- D. Greece clashed with both NATO and EU regarding the Yugoslavia wars.

While Tsakonas and Tournikiotis acknowledge and describe these important gaps between expectations and reality as to Greece's primary security providers, they stop short of discussing how Greece has tried to amend this gap. I argue that *in the external balancing dimension all these setbacks stimulated rapprochement with Russia, which attained the role of an alternative security provider*. This evolution remains largely overlooked and non-theorized, because this role of Russia has never been formalized or

acknowledged in any Greek strategic documents; furthermore, it developed unevenly in different spheres and in different periods of time including both hard and soft forms of security. In my definition, an *alternative security provider* is a state or an international organization, whose involvement into other state's security affairs is greatly limited due to systemic constraints, but it is occasionally used to counter-balance and compensate security challenges.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a democratizing Russia presented Greece a chance to boost its security agenda with the Russian help. The security focus explains why the interest in developing relations with Russia was shared by the full spectrum of Greek politicians and was not limited to ideological considerations. While a Socialist PASOK with an intransigent A. Papandreou mulled about new security options already in 1980, it was the conservative New Democracy government in 1990s which initiated quick rapprochement with Russia seeking to boost Greek deterrence capacity against Turkey, acquire new leverage in the Cyprus question, and survive the erupting Balkan crises. The two countries had compatible positions on Slobodan Milosevic, NATO bombings of Serbia and the Kosovo question, sharply contrasting with the mainstream in the EU and the US (Michas 2002). This solidified their cooperation to a point, where “[s]ome Greek strategists have tended to see Russia as a geostrategic counterweight to Turkey in the Balkans and have advocated that Greece develop closer ties to Russia” (Lesser 2001, p. 66).

Greece's deep embedment in Western institutions ensured that its relationship with Russia remained subordinated to the conditions of its EU membership. Still, this limited role also corresponded to Russia's interest, which was treating Greece as a bridge to build relations with the EU. Just after Greece and Russia signed a friendship and cooperation agreement in 1993, Greece held the Presidency of the EU in 1994, actively facilitating the

signing of the EU–Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). In return, Russia presented a plan on “Basic Principles for a Cyprus Settlement” advocating Greek-Cypriot arguments in April 1997, and provided Cyprus and Greece with military equipment⁷. Thus, Greece became one of the few NATO members who bought arms from Russia, which was helpful for both the external and internal balancing of Greece.

Still, these erratic unilateral actions of the 1990s brought little success to Greek foreign policy both in treating the Macedonian crisis and in attempts to contain Turkey. Therefore, in 1996 Simitis’ socialist government undertook the revolutionary initiative of the ‘europeanization’ of Greek foreign policy. This adopted “modernization strategy” meant greater involvement in EU politics and the alignment of the foreign policy with European principles in order to rid themselves of the black sheep image and become a first-rate EU member by joining the euro zone.

In the security dimension, it also meant trying to reconcile with Turkey and seeking resolution to bilateral problems on negotiations basis. This was substantiated with an innovative idea of removing the Turkish threat via the latter’s maximum engagement into the world of Western values and norms, something what Tsakonas calls a “socialization strategy” (Tsakonas 2010).

This socialization strategy moved beyond Turkey and in a way also stipulated further Europeanization of Greek relations with Russia. Moreover, this trend was hardly detrimental to Greco-Russian cooperation and even made it more orderly. Hence, the Greeks became very attentive to Russia’s interests in EU institutions as they intended to play a role in the framework of the EU-Russia “partnership for modernization”. It was

⁷ For Russian account of bilateral trade and military-technical cooperation in 1990s, see Sergei Kandaurov ‘Russian Arms Exports to Greece, Cyprus and Turkey’, Eksport vooruzheniy №2, 2001, available at <http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/2-2001/at/raegct/>

believed that Greece should be a bridge between Russia and EU, a role deemed natural due to its unique geographic position and cultural heritage (Chrystou 2011). A joint Russian-Greek Interaction Committee was henceforth established in October 2002 to advance strategies of cooperation between Russia and the European Union, especially in drafting of a new EU strategy toward Russia, promoting the PCA to new Eastern member-states and preparing the EU-Russia summit in the context of the Greek EU Council presidency in 2003 (Grigoriadis & Iordanidis 2014, INOSMI 2003). According to Filis,

“Greece managed [...] to establish a new platform for joint ventures through the extension of the Partnership Agreement of 1997 to the adoption of the four common economic spaces, which to date is the basis for Brussels–Moscow relations [...]. And this was under unfavorable conditions, given that the competent European commissioner was against any institutional deepening. It was for this reason that the Russian side expressed its gratitude to the Greek side [...]” (Filis 2017, p. 232).

Greece promoted Russian interests in EU institutions on issues ranging from EU involvement in the Eastern neighborhood, regulation of energy markets, to the EU policy on Belarus, the Black Sea region and Georgia (Leonard and Popescu 2007, p. 28). In return, Russia helped the EU accession of the Greek Cyprus by vetoing the UN Security Council resolution on imposing the adoption of the Annan Plan on reunification on Greek-Cypriots in 2004 (Grigoriadis & Iordanidis 2014, p. 7).

With the Karamanlis’ New Democracy administration reassuming power in 2004, Greek-Russian relations intensified even further, reaching a new stage, namely the introduction of energy security issues in strategic cooperation framework. To begin with, the agreements on the Burgas-

Alexandroupolis oil pipeline (2007) and later the South Stream natural gas pipeline (2009) were signed. Both projects aimed to undercut the Turkish Samsun-Ceyhan and Nabucco pipeline projects, which served Greek strategic objectives to become regional energy hub perfectly. It is instructive that these agreements were detrimental to the energy security of both the EU and Ukraine: designed specifically to undermine transit potential of the latter and increase energy dependence of the former. Next, although initially Greece welcomed energy projects that excluded Turkey altogether, the quick development of Russian-Turkish relations made them rethink the strategy: the new idea was not to deter, but preserve a “higher level of relations with Moscow compared to Ankara” (Grigoriadis & Iordanidis 2014, p. 11).

However, after the break of the Russian-Georgian in 2008, Karamanlis’ pro-Russian course encountered serious challenges and had to be re-balanced by the EU allegiance. As the journalist of the weekly *To Vima* wrote a day before the European Council was going to react to Russian aggression:

“The extraordinary EU summit called by President Nicolas Sarkozy tomorrow in Brussels certainly is one of the most difficult for Greece and certainly the most difficult for Mr. Karamanlis in more than four years of his premiership. The EU has, in a climate of general tension and fluidity, to decide on its relations with Russia, a country with which Greece has strategic ties and interests, which the Greek Prime Minister has recognized and promoted” (To Vima 2009, translated by the author).

Although the extremely mild reaction of EU and US to the Russian-Georgian war and subsequent “reset” helped to resolve the initial Greek dilemma, the Georgia crisis has additionally proven that the Greek strategy

of two security providers works best when there are cordial relations between EU and Russia (Grigoriadis and Iordanidis 2014, p. 2).

This interdependency made Athens particularly receptive to the Putin/Medvedev idea of removing dividing lines in Europe and creating an indivisible security space from Vancouver to Vladivostok, based on the OSCE. Thus, Russia, in aspiring to promote this vision of a new European security order, found an important ally during Greece's OSCE presidency in 2009. For this reason, the Greek Foreign affairs minister Dora Bakoyiannis noted that "Greece believes in the usefulness and feasibility of a broad dialogue on European security within the framework of the OSCE" (Bakoyiannis 2009). In 2009-2010, the Corfu process on the inclusive security environment in Europe, based on the enhanced role for OSCE, followed (with no tangible results).

Given the new role of Russia as an alternative security provider, post-Soviet states in general and Ukraine in particular remained largely second-rate partners to Athens. Ukraine's perspectives in the EU met at best a wall of disinterest (Wallace 2009): Greece focused on Cyprus during the 2004 Eastern enlargement and ignored the Orange Revolution's pro-European repercussions. Being more interested in Sarkozy's Union for Mediterranean project as well as in the European integration of the Balkan countries, and being aware of the Russian sensitiveness within its so-called 'near-abroad', Greece maintained a low profile in the discussions over the Eastern Partnership (EaP).

Experts are unanimous that there was virtually no debate as to the Eastern partnership, and Greece here followed the lead of the EU (PISM 2009, Christou 2011). In Greece, the feeble discussion on the EaP touched mostly upon prevention of conflicts mechanisms in the context of the 2008 Georgia war in Georgia, construction of the EU's global position to cooperate with the United States on an equal footing, or just another

instrument of EU influence on its Eastern neighbors, in addition to the ENP and the Black Sea Synergy (PISM 2009, pp. 31-32). Also, energy security issues were occasionally discussed (Karamanlis 2009). Even in this neutrality, the intention to not block or to veto anything was presented as positive trend by analysts (Christou 2011), underlining that Athens diligently followed Common Foreign and Security Policy priorities.

Greek sensitivity to Russia's interest in its "near abroad" made it cautious to the essence of the EaP: the position that the Eastern Partnership should have nothing to do with enlargement and should be balanced with other dimensions of the neighborhood policy remained mainstream for Greek foreign policy for years. As Prime Minister Karamanlis stated at the time:

"Firstly, the Eastern Partnership is intended to help these countries in getting closer to the European mainstream without providing them with accession perspectives. The enlargement process is a completely separate process. Secondly, the Eastern Partnership is a part of the European Neighborhood Policy. Maintaining balance within that policy is important and, for this, our aim is the complementary functioning of the Eastern Partnership with other initiatives of the ENP, namely the Black Sea Synergy and the Union for the Mediterranean" (Karamanlis 2009, translated by the author).

Up to this moment, the Greek MFA website states that in the context of Eastern Partnership "the cultivation of excessive expectations on the European perspective could be counterproductive" (Greek MFA, undated). In this regard, as to neighborhood policy priorities, Greece prefers to include post-Soviet states in the less ambitious neighborhood policy via the Black Sea Economic Cooperation or Black Sea Synergy (since 2007). This was also

the kind of neighborhood Greece promoted in bilateral relations with Ukraine. During his visit to Kyiv in 2011, Greek Foreign Minister Droutsas issued a statement that “Greece sees Ukraine as an invaluable partner in the Black Sea region” and read a lecture at the major Ukrainian university on “Enhancing Greek-Ukrainian co-operation in the wider Black Sea area” (Droutsas 2011)⁸.

In a nutshell, in the situation of a still-unresolved conflict with Turkey, Greek-Russian rapprochement led to the compartmentalization of Greek security providers’ tasks. While the EU provided a general security rules-based framework and made Cyprus’ membership real, Russia was at different points used to constrain Turkey, maintain a stronger stance in Cyprus-related negotiations, and ensure the energy independence of Greece.

This double-edged strategy worked best when Russia and EU were on terms of rapprochement and partnership, which was threatened in case of divergences between the two parties. Greece was following general trends in EU’s foreign policy, but promoted a more accommodating for Russia course in security, economy, and energy cooperation. Thus, Greece was eager to comply with Eastern Partnership as long as it did not entail any integration commitments to Ukraine and guaranteed same intensity of the cooperation to the southern dimension of the neighborhood. In addition, Greece was an early supporter of a new European security order based on OSCE and with participation of Russia. Still lack of interest to this idea from other EU states made this trend obsolete at a time.

⁸ A certain continuity in this regard became clear during the latest visit of Prime minister Alexis Tsipras in February 2017, who *inter alia* explained his engagement in the following terms “Greece is an active country, a member of the OSCE and BSEC. Thus, the situation in the Black Sea region concerns us, for this is the security of the European Union, security of the European region [...], see ‘President: Ukraine is grateful to Greece for the unwavering support’, <http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-vdyachna-greciyi-za-nezminnu-pidtrimku-prezident-39962>

Greek foreign policy in the wake of colliding crises

The Euromaidan⁹ and further Russian aggression in Ukraine occurred in a period, when Greece was living through a painful sovereign debt crisis, which influenced profoundly the country's domestic political landscape and foreign policy agenda¹⁰. Since the beginning of the crisis in 2009, Greece's influence within the EU and in the neighborhood, had been severely affected.

The dependence on the troika of creditors¹¹ and major European states increased dramatically and limited maneuverability of the country both in internal and foreign policy. Karamanlis' pro-Russian policy nearly crumbled, undermined both by political rivalry within New Democracy and the pro-Atlanticism of Papandreou's PASOK (Grigoriadis & Iordanidis 2014, p. 16). First the Burgas-Alexandroupolis and later the South Stream projects were cancelled, so that active Greek regional policy in the Balkans wound down. Discussions with Turkey and efforts to resolve the Cyprus problem

⁹ The "Euromaidan" was the original name of a wave of demonstrations and protest in Kyiv's central Independence Square (in Ukrainian «Майдан незалежності», Maidan Nezalezhnosti), beginning on November 21, 2013. The initial cause of the protest was Ukrainian government's decision to suspend the signing of an Association Agreement and Free Trade Agreement with the European Union, and develop closer ties to Russia instead. The scope of the protests gradually widened, amounting to calls for the resignation of President Yanukovich and his corrupt regime, as well as its nature evolved from peaceful protest to direct clashes with governmental forces. The climax of the protest was reached on February 18-19, 2014, when over a hundred of protesters were killed (known in Ukraine as the "Heavenly hundred"). A posteriori, another name for these events has become more common – the "Revolution of Dignity".

¹⁰ For detailed analysis of the Greek foreign policy in the crisis years see "Foreign Policy under Austerity: Greece's Return to Normality?" Ed. by Spyridon N. Litsas & Aristotle Tziampiris, Palgrave Macmillan UK.

¹¹ "Troika" is the informal common name for representatives of three institutions, responsible for solving the "Greek crisis" on the Western creditors side: the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The term is of Russian origin and of quite grim meaning. During Stalinist era, "troikas" were three-person CheKa- NKVD commissions authorized to conduct speedy investigations and serve extrajudicial punishment (killing or imprisonment) of the suspects.

did not make any progress, and Greece's role became minimal in the Middle East (Dokos 2012).

In the circumstances, the country kept a cautious and unambitious stance towards Ukraine and its European perspectives. When the Association Agreement (AA)¹² with Ukraine was negotiated in 2007-2011, Greece objected to including reference to article 49 of the Treaties in the Agreement, which would refer to the possibility of a future EU membership (UNIAN 2011), and only vague references on Ukraine's European future were agreed in the final text. An interministerial Memorandum of Cooperation on bringing Ukraine closer to the European Union, signed between the MFAs of two countries in 2009 and ratified in 2011, previewed only an exchange of thoughts, experience and trainings (Memorandum 2011). Remarkably, only the advent of a pro-Russian President, Viktor Yanukovich, led to intensified bilateral exchanges to an extent that the first state visit of Ukrainian president to Greece in twenty years of independence took place on October 6-7, 2011.

When protests over Yanukovich decision not to sign the AA broke out in November 2013, the Greek position remained in the traditional vein: a non-ambitious agenda for Eastern Partnership countries and attention to the Russian interests in the post-Soviet space. While in his speech at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit Prime Minister Samaras remarked "The EU's door must remain open to a possible signing of an agreement with Ukraine in the future", he also emphasized that the Eastern Partnership was

¹² Association Agreement between Ukraine and EU, in preparation since 2007, the up-to-date highest level of cooperation between EU and Ukraine, establishes political and economic association (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement) between the parties. President Yanukovich's refusal to sign the AA triggered Euromaidan protest movement, and AA signing has become the key priority of new Ukrainian government in 2014-2017. Despite numerous difficulties (political and economic provisions signed separately on different occasions, failure of tripartite EU-Russia-Ukraine commission, delays in ratification, provisional application of some chapters, and finally Netherlands referendum in April 2016, which threatened to bury the whole thing), the Association becomes fully functional since September 2017.

"a project for the integration of all and not the establishment of new divisive lines across the map of Europe" (Samaras 2013).

Presenting the priorities of the Greek EU Council presidency for the first half of 2014, Foreign Minister Evangelos Venizelos severely downplayed pro-European motives behind the Euromaidan protests and suggested that "before evaluating the Eastern Partnership, we evaluate and readjust our stance on the EU-Russia partnership." Venizelos noted:

"[T]he political dilemma of 'either with the EU or with Russia' did not bear fruit," because "the real dilemma facing Ukraine at the time of the Vilnius Summit Meeting was not the dilemma between a European course or a return to a close relationship with Russia, but the dilemma, in the face of the threat of fiscal collapse, of whether it would be saved by the IMF or by someone else." In this regard, he made the reminder that the day after the Vilnius Summit, the Russian government decided to buy €15 billion in Ukrainian bonds, saving Ukraine from a fiscal collapse, "with all what that means for international correlations in the region" (Venizelos' presentation of the Hellenic Presidency's priorities to the European Parliament, 2014).

Although neither Eastern Partnership nor Ukraine was among Greek priorities as Head of the Council in the first 6 months of 2014, Greece's ascension to this position happened exactly at the time of Russia's military aggression, Crimea's annexation, as well as the signing of the EU-Ukraine Association agreement. In the first days of March 2014, Foreign Minister Venizelos visited Ukraine, and throughout the rest of the year the Greek Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister supported sanctions, expressed support for the Ukraine's territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty, called for reassessment of the functionality of the UN Security

Council and the OSCE, supported diplomacy and dialogue, as well as a full implementation of the Minsk Agreements.

Thus, in this tumultuous period Greece was firmly aligned with the general European line. But overall, being politically weakened by the debt crisis and generally inactive in the region, Greece did not take significant initiatives in conflict management and resolution, and kept a rather low profile, concentrating on humanitarian issues, and helping wounded civilians and children from affected areas in Donetsk-Luhansk region. Simultaneously, with regards to Russia, Prime and Foreign Affairs Ministers supported maintaining open channels of communication and referred to the Corfu process stressing the need to avoid ‘reappearance of dividing lines in Europe’. With the unfolding of the refugee crisis in 2015, governmental speakers started to further emphasize the importance of Russia for coming to a solution in Syria and establishing security in the volatile Middle Eastern region; thus, they advocated a dialogue.

The reference to Russia as an imminent security threat had been virtually absent. Tellingly, in the White Paper of Greek Armed forces, prepared in 2014 and published in 2015, there is no word of any threat of Russia for Greece, but a creatively neutral comment to describe its aggressive policies: “Russia is on its way to re-establish its position as the second pole of the international power system, with an increasing influence on the European and Asian affairs and a continuous and particularly active military and economic policy (White Paper 2014, p. 19) and that “[o]f particular importance is also the smooth course and development of bilateral defense cooperation with the Russian Federation” (White Paper 2014, p. 86). Defining the threats to national security, the White Paper directly rejected presence of any security threats in the post-Soviet states, and concentrated on international terrorism, weapon trafficking, and migration in Mediterranean and Middle East:

“It is obvious that the everlasting instabilities in SE Europe and the former USSR, although they do linger to a certain extent, cannot be considered traditional and high-risk threats to our national defence and security. On the contrary, the developments in Northern Africa and the Middle East, the imperative to discover and exploit resources in the Eastern Mediterranean basin and the shaping of the regional system of energy transit, give rise to new forms of threats in the broader geographic environment. These threats do not belong to the traditional context of military disputes; they are, however, characterized as asymmetric, or even hybrid threats, and can have a disproportionate result in relation to the assets utilized” (White Paper 2014, p. 26).

The forced exposure of the government to the crisis and the direct implication of Russia induced the Greek expert community to conceptualize the events related to the country that has rarely been in the focus of the mainstream analysis before. Although some earlier reports (Tsakiris 2014a)¹³ turned out to be misleading both in analysis and recommendations, a better example of providing the Greek public with at least introductory knowledge was “Strategic Alphabet on the Crisis in Ukraine”, prepared by the director of a leading Greek think tank ELIAMEP, Thanos Dokos already in March 2014. This “Alphabet” vindicates a version of realist and security-centered logic, in which, surprisingly, the sovereign right of Ukraine to decide about its external policy priorities or alliances is virtually not considered. Probably this is why a data-sparse and bias-rich view of Ukraine as an artificial and deeply divided state is promoted, with

¹³ Interestingly, in his earlier paper, Tsakiris framed Euromaidan as an energy security issue for Greece, treating Ukraine as a source of insecurity and appeasing Russia as a source of European security, thus his main recommendation to Greek European Presidency in the first half of 2014 was to lobby for revival of South Stream Project to ensure Greek and European energy security with the help of Russia (Tsakiris 2014b).

the Euromaidan treated as a path to civil war, only averted by the interference of third parties.

Following this logic, Dokos suggests the need for the EU's "strategic agreement with Russia aimed at mutually beneficial consolidation of relations considering the interests of both sides and the balance of power, but also the principles on which the EU is built" (Dokos 2014, p. 8), and proposes a neutrality solution: "Russia could perhaps accept a 'neutral' Ukraine, but not its integration into the Western sphere of influence. A possible way out of the crisis could be the simultaneous promotion of relations with the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union (Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus), while offering considerable financial assistance from both the EU and Russia." (Dokos 2014, p. 14).

This modest and in many respects traditional position of the grand coalition government came under heavy criticism from the radical and populist opposition – the radical left SYRIZA, Communists (KKE), and radical sovereigntist right (Independent Greeks (ANEL). Regularly bashing the government on its servility to the West and its neglect of Russia, they developed an extremely ideologized, biased and violent discourse centered around the "fascist Kiev junta" and "genocide in the Ukraine's East", while denouncing "NATO warmongering and West's neocolonial bulimia" or "German imperialism". In addition to numerous articles, blogs and statements on the issue, radical Greek politicians were engaged in multiple activities on the international stage.

Suffice it to say, they supported referendums in Crimea and occupied regions in Donbas, sending their observers, and saluted the separatist offensive against governmental forces. They rejected sanctions and travelled to Moscow on several occasions to meet with sanctioned Putin's officials. Furthermore, they provided "no" votes in the European parliament on all Ukrainian and Eastern Partnership issues, starting with the

Association Agreement ratification etc. (Financial Times 2015, Michas 2015, Rettman 2014). The motivations have been diverse: from ideological and historical, up to direct links to Russians, directly implicated in conflict or its informational support (Coalson 2015; Papadopoulos 2015).

Although the Papandreou and Samaras governments did not significantly alter the traditional Greek policies concerning Russia, thus maintaining the delicate balancing between security providers in place, this strategy seemed no longer to work for the Greek populace. The reason behind this was the protracted and painful financial crisis, where the trust in EU as a prime security provider has further diminished, while both the popularity of old parties and the support for conventional strategies vanished. This boosted the popularity of various right and left wing radical parties. In this situation, Vladimir Putin's Russia seemed to be quite attractive in the eyes of a considerable part of Greek population. As Pew Research Center and Gallup surveys showed, the number of those having a positive view on Russia, its president and his political line was high and growing.

In September 2013, 63% of Greeks had a favorable view of Russia, most of all the countries in the survey (Pew Research Center 2013). In 2014 more than one in three Greeks (35%) approved of the Russian leadership, while fewer than one in four (23%) approved of that of the EU (Gallup 2015a). Six months later, a survey over favorability of EU showed 34% of Greeks in favor of the EU (33% in the previous year and 37 in 2012) (Pew Research Center 2014). Thus, when the SYRIZA-ANEL government emerged, it could depend upon popular support for a fundamental change in country's foreign policy.

To summarize, during the sovereign debt crisis, Greece adhered to the classic strategy of finding possibilities to cooperate with Russia within the existing EU structure. But the harsh "troika" policy and the protracted

nature of the debt crisis undermined the belief in the EU, including its security provision capacities. This provoked the arrival of a new government with alternative views not only on fiscal policies, but also on the relations with Russia and Ukraine.

Introducing a geopolitical approach into Greek foreign policy

The “new Greek left” certainly did not invent the idea of cooperation with Russia, but it tried to give it a more prominent role and more solid foundations. SYRIZA, a far-leftist organization, had roots in the bloody defeat of the left in the Greek civil war in 1949 and further suppression of leftist movements up into the 1970s. Antifascism, postcolonial critique and a certain pro-Soviet nostalgia took a prominent place in their political rhetoric and has had some translation into practical politics. In ways less typical of a leftist movement, SYRIZA also moved geopolitical thinking from its traditionally marginal status to the fore of Greek foreign policy.

The dominance of geopolitical over Marxist principles was indirectly confirmed by the unorthodox coalition of SYRIZA with the radical right party ANEL, for Russia-centered geopolitical visions and the rejection of austerity policies were the very few points common for them. Also, a prominent role in conceptualizing the geopolitical shift was played by the later foreign affairs minister, Nikos Kotzias, who in his book on the foreign policy of Greece in the 21st century underlined the need of developing Greece’s relations with the new centers of power – Russia, China, and India (Kotzias 2010). The theoretical elaborations of Kotzias resemble those of the Greek geopolitical thinker Dimitris Kitsikis who defines Greece – together with Turkey, Russia and Syria – as a part of so called Central Region, equal to the West and East. In an interesting coincidence, both

Kitsikis and Kotzias claim that Greek culture is so great that even Chinese accept it as peer (Kitsikis 2001, Kotzias 2010).

In 2014, while teaching courses on contemporary Russia¹⁴ and China at the Piraeus University, Kotzias defended Russian actions in Crimea and Ukraine as the understandable behavior of a superpower encircled by the US and destabilized by Germany. In his view, the latter was transforming weaker countries like Ukraine and Greece into "colonies of debt" to be dominated (Michas 2015). Kotzias at some point even recognized the legitimacy of the "Donetsk People's Republic" and dismissed the Ukrainian government as a neo-Nazi junta (Kotzias 2014, Michas 2015).

From the first days in office Kotzias in most of his public appearances invoked a "triangle of instability" shaped by Ukraine, Libya, and the Middle East, where Greece is the only stable pillar. This gloomy vision was used as leverage during the debt negotiations: presenting their country as the only stable part, from which emanated the strings of stability, they argued that to let it crumble would bring the catastrophe to the entire region.

While in office, Kotzias multiplied his public expressions on the topic and hardened his approach. While avoiding speaking of aggression, annexation or Ukraine's European future, he stated solidarity not with Ukraine but "with the societies of Ukraine" and defined the role of both Russia and Ukraine as "friends of Europe" (Interview on AMNA Web TV, 1 February 2015). He also stated that Russia is "... a major power that can and

¹⁴ In the framework of his course "Russian Society and Foreign policy" (where at one time Russian Eurasianist ideologist Aleksandr Dugin gave a lecture) a group of students conducted an opinion poll on Greeks' relation to Russia and wrote a report under his supervision. While the poll showed that younger respondents (18-35) were much less pro-Russian and more skeptical than older ones (55+), the interpretation in the report went as follows: "These data drive us to a conclusion that either younger generations lack sufficient information about Russia's history and culture, or they are unable to form an objective opinion on Russia because of propaganda and disinformation from the West". Report available online at <https://www.des.unipi.gr/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/%CE%94%CE%B7%CE%BC%CE%BF%CF%83%CE%BA%CF%8C%CF%80%CE%B7%CF%83%CE%B7-%CE%A1%CF%89%CF%83%CE%AF%CE%B1%CF%82.pdf>

always played, when possible, a peaceful role in Europe...” (Joint statement of Kotzias and Lavrov, 11 February 2015), reiterating his previous ideas that Russia was forced to do what it did by the Western politics. A few times he expressed his open support “of the democratization of a federal republic of Ukraine” (Joint statement of Kotzias and Lavrov, 11 February 2015) and speculated on how a referendum in Crimea should have been properly organized (Interview in the German magazine *Spiegel*, 9 February 2015). He regularly signaled his intention to abandon the discussion of Ukraine in EU institutions, to draw up a positive agenda with specific positive proposals toward Russia and to pay more attention to the South’s destabilization (Interview with the German television networks ARD and ZDF, 7 March 2015).

Finally, he shifted responsibility for the conflict and referred to his favorite topic: “Europe needs to decide whether it wants to incorporate Russia into its security architecture, or whether Russia is an enemy” (Interview in the German magazine *Spiegel*, 9 February 2015). While eagerly going to Russia on a few occasions, he only first visited Ukraine in February 2017 (although he was invited by the Ukrainian MFA Klimkin immediately after the 2015 election).

With this geopolitical thinking applied to the “Ukraine crisis”, the first bomb exploded as soon as SYRIZA formed a government, full of euro-skeptic and pro-Russian politicians – Kotzias himself, Panos Kammenos, Panayiotis Lafazanis, Nadia Valavani, Kostas Isychos, and others. On January 26, 2015, his first day as prime minister, Tsipras meet with the Russian ambassador to Greece. On January 27, he met the Chinese ambassador and protested an official EU statement condemning Russia for the violence in Eastern Ukraine. On January 28th energy minister Lafazanis declared, “We are against the embargo that has been imposed against Russia” and “We have no differences with Russia and the Russian people.” (Lafazanis 2015)

The apotheosis came on January 29, 2015 during a EU foreign ministers' meeting, where Greece did everything to water down the EU statement so as not to broaden Russian sanctions in the wake of Russian January aggression that, unrestrained, finished with the Second Minsk Package followed by the seizure of Debaltsevo. This was the strongest and most important pro-Russian initiative of the SYRIZA government with the direst consequences.

The SYRIZA government was also very vocal on the questions of unproductivity and need for removal of sanctions against Russia, both at the European level and during meetings with Russian counterparts. As the primary security provider, the EU was deemed responsible for its financial plight. Imposed sanctions were extremely badly perceived in Greek society, although their part was almost insignificant in the whole of country's economic problems (Zerkalo nedeli 2015, Moret et al. 2016). In August 2015 Gallup survey showed that 62% of Greeks were against sanctions against Russia (Gallup 2015 b). Despite intense lobbying, Greece has not been able to ease of Russian countersanctions.

But even more importantly and well beyond sanctions, the SYRIZA government seemed to hope that Russia could provide essential help in assuring economic and financial security of Greece. As *To Vima's* Pavlos Papadopoulos reported, since 2014, Tsipras and his close collaborators envisioned a plan for Russia to politically and financially assist Greece's exit from euro area and return to drachma. Or, alternatively, at least make this threat credible enough to convince Germans to write-off a significant part of the debt and thus deeply challenge the fundamentals of austerity politics (Papadopoulos 2015).

Another *To Vima* report stated that before the July 2015 referendum on memorandum, Tsipras had asked Putin for a \$10 billion loan so that Greece could transition back to the drachma. In return, Russia only floated

the idea of a \$5 billion advance on the construction of the Greek branch of the Turkish Stream. (To Vima 2015) Indeed, despite a series of visits of Greek politicians to Russia, neither loan to repay Greece's debt, nor financial aid to the exit from the eurozone and return to drachma followed. On July 8, European Union Council President Donald Tusk declared: "Seek help among your friends and not among your enemies, especially when they are unable to help you." (Concluding remarks 2015)

The July 5, 2015 referendum on the bailout conditions, proposed jointly by the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank on June 25, 2015 proved to be a watershed for SYRIZA. Although the Greek public voted against (61% against and 39% in favor), SYRIZA had no practical possibility to sweep the existing hierarchy of security providers and conduct an independent pro-Russian course and succumbed to demands of the creditors, the results of the vote notwithstanding.

After the September reelection and the dissolution of the most radical Left faction from SYRIZA, Cyprus and later Greece were among the last states which ratified Association Agreements with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, and returned to the usual policy of the delicate balancing. While presenting the documents for ratification, the deputy foreign minister stressed several times that these were ordinary documents which EU signs in numbers with different neighboring countries regularly. As a consequence, there was practically no discussion of the issue in the Greek parliament (Mardas 2015). Bilateral cooperation with Ukraine intensified slightly for a brief period, when a series of meetings of the Ukrainian ambassador and Greek diplomats and ministers followed in the autumn 2015.

Finally, in February 2017 Tsipras, Kotzias and Quick, who were vehemently critical of the Venizelos visit in March 2014, payed a short visit

to Kyiv, this time heatedly criticized by ever-more leftist opponents. Greece began to concentrate more on migration problems, the reunification of Cyprus, began once again to mull the need to create its own zone of influence in the Balkans, creating a union of Southern European states as opposed to the Northern while becoming a bridge this time between the Middle East and the EU. Radically pro-Russian deputies and ex-deputies, and some heads municipalities regularly visited Crimea or Russia-sponsored conferences and symposiums of radical European right and left without the further influence on country's policy or bilateral relations. With this relative moderation, the traditional stance on Greek-Russian relations came back into play, although Tsipras and Kotsias continued to stress that they were to conduct innovative multidimensional diplomacy.

Thus, the geopolitical turn in Greek foreign policy failed. The alternative security provider either did not want to or was unable to take the lead in country's security, in the critical moment, which, as the SYRIZA government dreamt, could be a revolution and watershed not only for Greece, but also for the whole Europe. Thus, turned even the most staunch and vocal Russia supporters turned into quite pro-European politicians in practice, adopting the reforms demanded by creditors. Instead, the development of the security links to Russia centered around its perceived decisive role in resolving Middle Eastern conflicts and refugee crisis and took usual form of lobbying in EU structures for dialogue and cooperation. In other words, the Russian role in Greek foreign and security policy remained supplementary (Mavraganis 2016).

Conclusions

As this study shows, Russia has been firmly established as a secondary security provider for Greece within the realist framework of deterring

Turkey in the 1990s, creating multilateral frameworks of cooperation and exercising pipeline diplomacy in 2000s, or following the geopolitical logic of realignment after 2015. However,, it managed to imbue this status of alternative security provider with new agenda when the Middle East and ISIS became major security issues for the Mediterranean region. Therefore, it is small wonder that Russia is rarely considered as a source of insecurity in Greece and enjoys high approval ratings in the population.

Still, it is essential that Russia has always been only a secondary security provider for Greece, covering areas unaddressed by EU or NATO, or getting some bargaining chip inside Western institutions. The constraints that keep Greece inside the system of Western institutions have been so strong, that even zealous, ideological affection of SYRIZA for a serious pro-Russian and anti-NATO course have been tamed and a short try of geopolitical realignment came to a very quick halt.

Thus, the only structural way to accommodate both primary and alternative security providers in a systematic way was the pervasive and long-lived idea of common European security architecture including Russia. The majority of post-Cold War Greek governments supported such encompassing mutual security projects and were keen on strengthening and enhancing them. It was also readily supported by the Russia itself. In its article, published in Greek paper *Kathimerini* on May 26, 2016, Russian president Putin underlined that:

“I am convinced that we should draw appropriate conclusions from the events in Ukraine and proceed to establishing, in the vast space stretching between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans, a zone of economic and humanitarian cooperation based on the architecture of equal and indivisible security” (Putin 2016).

Thus, given the longevity of the trend, any idea of “provoking” an additional security provider in its sphere of interest or redrawing alliances in contested zones is a notion that Greece is unlikely to support. Almost no political force in Greece supports Ukraine’s European integration, enforcement of the Eastern partnership or acknowledges membership perspectives for Ukraine. Ukraine could serve as another bridge, be a neutral country, an area of cooperation between EU and Russia, but no longer Greece has become totally comfortable with Russia playing a role of an informal veto player not only on NATO related issues but in the EU activity in the “near abroad”. Thus, until the common foreign, security and defence policy of the EU becomes indeed common and encompassing, removing any need for the countries to seek for external security providers and harmonizing member-states views on the main problems in the EU neighborhood, this tendency is likely to persist.

Notes

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