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RUSSIAN-GREEK RELATIONS: MOSCOW'S PIVOT TO EASTERN EUROPE?

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The strategy of the Kremlin nowadays is set up on a framework that involves economic cooperation, mainly energy provisions through state-controlled giant Gazprom, and through the arms trade too, Russia being the second largest weapons exporter worldwide after the United States. This attempt by Russia to reinforce a theoretical Orthodox Christian alliance in the Balkans through Greece – a strategy which obviously conceals practical Realpolitik interests, as did the “Holy Alliance” of Tsar Alexander I of Russia in 1815 – aims to create an alternative to the Anglo-Saxon-led Western values, as well as to the European Union vision which is generally secular and untied from national historical traditions and Christianity. This strategy is not limited only to Greece, which however represents, potentially, the most significant fulcrum of it, since other Orthodox Balkan countries too – primarily Serbia (and Republika Srpska) but also Montenegro, Macedonia and Cyprus – have become new objects of contention between the Euro-Atlantic powers and the Russian Federation.

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The visit of Alexander Tsipras on April 8th to Moscow, has aroused considerable irritation in both Berlin and Brussels, the tension is synthesized in the concerned statements by the President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz, who has warned the Greek prime minister not to endanger the unity of the European Union during his visit to Moscow. The nature of the visit focused primarily on economic and commercial issues, in an attempt to revive the catastrophic economic conditions in which the Mediterranean country lies.

The meeting between the two leaders, however, did not reveal any news of the feared Russian financial rescue to Athens – which would seem an unrealistic option, given the uncertainty of the current Russian economy under economic sanctions and with current low oil prices – but, perhaps more relevant from a strategic long-term standpoint, there were talks of a possible Greek involvement in the new Russian gas pipeline project Turkish Stream – that is expected to be implemented by 2019 – born from the ashes of the previous South Stream project. In addition, the new pipeline that would transport natural gas to Europe via Turkey bypassing war-torn Ukrainian territory, includes among its supporters two other NATO member states, Erdogan’s Turkey and Orban’s Hungary. Turkey with its ambiguous stance towards the West in general, and Hungary notoriously accommodating Moscow on various international politics issues, for instance the opposition to EU sanctions against Russia. The overall approach of Tsipras intends to play on several fronts in an attempt to wrest more advantageous agreements in the EU, and to make his country more geopolitically independent from Brussels, not only through a strategic rapprochement with Moscow, but with China, too. China is indeed, rather than Russia, the potential economic power that might provide funds to struggling economies, even though so far there has been no indication at all that Beijing may be willing to offer anything close to a state bailout to Athens. That being said, Chinese - Greek cooperation has gradually increased, with huge private Chinese investments as seen for the Piraeus port.

The significance of the Greek premier’s journey to Moscow – actually goes beyond the results of the meeting and the economic and trade issues, as it involves hidden connections and synergies of a broader geopolitical spectrum, both towards the EU by Athens and from the Kremlin to the EU: a rapprochement, or a hypothetical future entry into the Russian sphere of influence by Athens, although theoretical for the time being, could have serious consequences in terms of European regional policy balance and particularly within the domestic NATO/EU front. It appears that the global game between the Euro-Atlantic sphere and the Eurasian one headed by the Russian Federation (and secondly by China) – which peaked with the quintessentially war by proxy in Ukraine – has moved

into the Mediterranean-Balkan area as well, where over Greece, the battle for the projections of influence and for the defense of the strategic interests of the two sides also involves other republics of the region that will be analyzed ahead. Within this strengthened Greek-Russian approach – boosted by the rise to power of Syriza – emerges a convergence of interests for both parties, geopolitical and negotiation purposes for Greece, and strategic and status purposes for Russia. The Kremlin's main interest is on the one hand to increase its international visibility and to reduce its relative isolation towards the West, on the other hand to attempt to further divide the internal cohesiveness of the Euro-Atlantic front. From the inception of his rule, Tsipras' executive has shown willingness to devote special care to the relation with Moscow.

Symbolically, the first diplomat to visit the government building in Athens after Syriza's victory was the Russian ambassador. Nonetheless, other key figures in the Greek government maintain close ties with the Kremlin. It is known for instance, the proximity of the Foreign Minister Kotzias to the theorist and philosopher Alexander Dugin, prominent figure of the Eurasian movement, as well as for the defense minister Panos Kammenos, who has traveled often to Moscow for visits of political character. There are two further aspects to keep in mind, in some ways intertwined: one is strategic, the other concerns cultural-identity ties. Greece is a fully framed state within the western politico-military hemisphere, as is a member both of the European Union, since 1981 (then EEC) as well as the Atlantic Alliance since 1952. By moving away, or even a change in Greece's political balance towards an anti-Atlantic direction, could draw serious implications for the cohesiveness of the European Union front, also on the very functioning of the alliance itself. In fact, as recalled by an American foreign policy's veteran such as Zbigniew Brezinski, the Alliance might remain "paralyzed" by a potential Greek veto on possible NATO responses to an hypothetical Russian military action offensive, since the alliance is bound to the principle of unanimity. On the cultural-identity standpoint instead, Greece is historically a pillar of European culture and identity, but it is also linked to Russia from a religious standpoint - united by the Orthodox faith although its population is not Slavic and secularly belonging to the Byzantine world, of which Moscow covets to be its historical heir. The symbolic aspect of Tsipras' visit to Russia is proved by the fact that the other troika that he met in Moscow, included in addition to Putin and Medvedev, also the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Kirill. Even though Tsipras himself didn't attend the World War II commemorations on 9 May in Moscow 2015 remembering Nazi capitulation to the Soviet Union, instead Greek president Pavlopoulos was sent as representative of the country. The celebrations, that featured the biggest military parade ever held in the Russian Federation, turned into a political playground. U.S. president Barack

Obama and many Western heads of state decided to snub the event - except German chancellor Angela Merkel who visited Moscow celebrations on May 10 and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's surprise visit to Sochi on May 12 - due to tensions over the Ukrainian crisis and to a wider political strain between the United States and its European NATO partners and the Russian Federation.

A revival of the 19th century Eastern Question

In the geopolitical context that affects the Balkans today, it is therefore possible to glimpse – with the obvious era differences and with the apparent absence of any sick man of Europe – an updated revival of the geopolitical framework of diplomatic, military and political issues concerning European territory controlled by the decaying Ottoman Empire mainly in the 19th, and early 20th century, historically known as the Eastern Question, where the main theater of political confrontation between the then-super powers were indeed the Balkans. The Russian Federation – as the Russian Empire at the turn of 18th and 19th century – in its role as heir of Byzantine tradition and protector of the Orthodox populace in the region, try nowadays to contend the sphere of regional influence no more at the hands of the Hapsburg Empire, Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire, but of the European Union, and indirectly the United States. Conversely, the heir of the Ottoman Empire of the time, at present Erdogan's Turkey, is no more a hostile player towards Moscow, as evidenced by the Turkish Stream project. Within the historical analogies with the past diplomatic and geopolitical intricacy of the Eastern Question, while Russia still portrays itself as the Christian-Orthodox defender in the area, there is a total absence of any power defending the interests of the Catholics, a role that back in history was embodied by the *fille aînée de l'Église*.

A further factor that reminds the similarity between the current geopolitical situation with the one of the Eastern Question, is the remake of one of the key event of the Eastern Question itself, that is the Crimean War: this time bloodless, and inserted within the larger Ukrainian crisis picture, which subsequently winded up with the annexation of the peninsula by the Russians. The strategy of the Kremlin nowadays is set up on a framework that involves economic cooperation, mainly energy provisions through state-controlled giant Gazprom, and through the arms trade too, Russia being the second largest weapons exporter worldwide after the United States. This attempt by Russia to reinforce a theoretical Orthodox Christian alliance in the Balkans through Greece – a strategy which obviously conceals practical Realpolitik interests, as did the “Holy Alliance” of Tsar Alexander I of Russia in 1815 – aims to create an alternative to the Anglo-Saxon-led Western values, as well as to the

European Union vision which is generally secular and untied from national historical traditions and Christianity. This strategy is not limited only to Greece, which however represents, potentially, the most significant fulcrum of it, since other Orthodox Balkan countries too – primarily Serbia (and Republika Srpska) but also Montenegro, Macedonia and Cyprus – have become new objects of contention between the Euro-Atlantic powers and the Russian Federation.

Serbia's difficult position between EU integration and traditional ties with Russia

Serbia, which has deep ethnical, religious and linguistic ties with Russia and which has historically embodied the Slavic/Byzantine bastion in the Balkan Peninsula, finds itself in a delicate geopolitical balance. Infact, on the one hand Belgrade is under pressure from Brussels with the potential entry in the EU - while a potential NATO membership seems for the moment less realistic - and on the other hand pressured by continuing with the traditional alliance with Moscow. The uneasy position of the Serbian government has increased in light of the Ukrainian conflict, where Belgrade has managed as much as possible to get by on a neutrality position, recognizing the territorial integrity of Ukraine, but at the same time refusing to apply economic sanctions against Moscow. The orientation of Prime Minister Vučić' foreign policy, however, was far from steady in terms of loyalty towards Moscow. Serbia has in fact started a sound process of integration towards the EU started with the agreements of Stabilization and Association back in 2005, with policies aimed at fighting corruption, modernizing the public administration and the judiciary sector, as well as cooperating with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia by hunting down and delivery of Serbian war criminals. Moreover, the prime minister of Serbia Vučić has been strongly criticized by the Kremlin for having requested the cooperation of the company headed by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair – reprimanded by the Russians as the man who bombed Serbia – to improve governance and organization of different areas of public management. Despite the fact that the path towards accession to the EU has already been long, taking into account the declaration of the European Commission President Juncker who said that there will be no new members for the next five years, it is likely that the road to a full European integration for Belgrade will be complex and long . Hence, in the next five years, it is conceivable that it will be easier for Serbia, not being yet part of the EU, to maintain a diplomatic and foreign policy line towards Moscow misaligned with respect to the block of 28 member countries.

Given these political dynamics, the axis with Moscow remains highly relevant. The importance of the historical ties, but primarily economic, trade, energy and military between Serbia and the Russian Federation, was confirmed in October 2014, when in the Serbian capital a massive military parade marking the anniversary of the 70 years after the liberation of the city from the Nazis was organized, marking at the same time the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War. The event, turned into a celebration of Russian-Serbian relations, with a hero's welcome given to Russian president Vladimir Putin. On top of that, the words of the President of Serbia Tomislav Nikolić during the meeting couldn't sound clearer: the only thing I love more than Serbia is Russia. Putin has indeed repeatedly pleaded the Serbs' reasons in Kosovo – which was self-proclaimed independent in 2008 – pushing for a partition plan with Serbia of the neo-republic. Militarily, Moscow has an agreement with Belgrade that allows Russian units to be based at Niš airport.

Moreover, Serbia as well is tied to Moscow due to a strong dependence on Russian gas supplies. Belgrade indeed could well be part of the proposed Russian Turkish Stream project, which as mentioned above, may involve in addition to Greece other European countries generally not so euro-enthusiastic, such as Hungary, Macedonia and perhaps Austria. Serbia's loyalty to the Kremlin, is further confirmed by the presence of Serbian president Nikolić on 9 May 2015 in Moscow, and Serbian troops too will be among foreign military units marching on the Red Square for Russia WW2 victory parade.

Within the Russian strategy to regain influence in the Balkan, restore its prestige and create dividing lines within the EU, three other republics are involved, although to a lesser extent, namely Montenegro, Macedonia and Cyprus.

Republika Srpska: Russia's pivot to Bosnia-Herzegovina

Over the last year Russia's influence went well beyond Serbia itself, reaching Bosnia-Herzegovina's Republika Srpska as well. The latter is one of the two highly autonomous entities of Bosnia Herzegovina – the other is the Muslim-Croat Federation, emblems of the weak legacy of the 1995 Dayton agreements – has had growing solid ties with the Russian Federation. The autonomous Serbian ethnic dominated entity harbors serious ambitions to turn itself into an independent state. Milorad Dodik, Republika Srpska's president, is close to Russia's president Putin, and has visited the Kremlin multiple times being received more as a president of a nation rather than one of an autonomous province. Dodik has hailed Crimea's independence referendum and annexation by Russia, hinting at the likelihood that his government entity in the future might adopt similar

measures in order to reach independence. Dodik, on invitation by Russian president Putin, has been amongst the few European politicians and heads of state attending the May 9 military parade in Moscow. Bosnia's accession to NATO membership still remains up in the air since many of the reforms required to enter the Alliance are still far to be met. The current instability and interethnic hostility that still exists in Bosnia is partly due to the fragile legacy of the 1995 Dayton agreements, which left a deeply divided country with a dysfunctional power structure. Over the last year, Russian diplomacy offensive in the region that has seen an increased attention towards Dodik's tiny autonomous entity, might be a game changer for Bosnia's future geopolitical dynamics. An overt signal of a renewed Russian attention towards the area came in November 2014, when the Russian Federation for the first time in 14 years, has abstained in the U.N. Security Council vote, declining to support the extension of a Western peacekeeping operation in Bosnia, initially led by NATO, and now by the EU.

Montenegro's relations with Russia, a weakened liaison.

A strengthened Euro-Atlantic perspective

The tiny coastal country of Montenegro shares with Russia centuries of cultural and religious proximity. The majority of the population is of Slavic ethnic – both Montenegrins and Serbs – and Orthodox Christians. Historical ties between the two Slavic countries are ancient: since the 17th century, Czarist Russia was the protector of the small Balkan nation, royal intermarriages between the two countries monarchies occurred and alliances between the two states were common, notably the one related to the 1904-1905 Russian – Japanese war in which Montenegrin volunteers were fighting on Russia's side. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian presence in Montenegro has grown greatly especially throughout the last decade. Moscow represents the leading country responsible for investment in Montenegro, especially after 2006, when the Serbian-Montenegro union was dissolved, marking the first year of Montenegrin independence. In fact, up until 2006 independence from Serbia-Montenegro, most businesses companies were state-owned. Russian money contributed tremendously also in the tourism sector, being an attraction for Russians for its Mediterranean climate, a related cultural background and most importantly a tax haven with extraordinary low 9 per cent income. Moreover, the two countries share a visa-free regime on travelers since 2008. Montenegro's deep connection with the Russian world has been so sound that in 2009 it was dubbed a "Russian colony" by neighboring Croatia's online press. In the last years, Russian growing presence in the country has gradually been cushioned by a changed governmental geopolitical orientation. In fact, under prime minister Milo Djukanovic' leadership – who made an official visit in

Washington in 2014 - gradually distanced from Moscow's influence and increased its support to NATO's regional security architecture for the entire Western Balkans area. Montenegro has begun its path towards the Alliance since its independence, by joining the Partnership for Peace in 2006, and has also supported NATO-led operations in Afghanistan. A similar path has been embraced by Podgorica when it comes to EU integration, the process of accession to the EU started even before its independence, back in 2005. Further signals indicating a will to distance from the Kremlin's sphere of influence emerged in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis, as Podgorica, unlike Belgrade, decided to apply anti-Russia sanctions which prompted deep disappointment as expressed by Russia's foreign ministry. Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic fulfillment though, still has various obstacles to face, given three main reasons.

Russia's solid economic and commercial presence in the country is not going to vanish anytime soon, approximately 40 per cent of the country's real estate is of Russian property. Political opposition parties are not as Euro-Atlantic oriented as the government is, and the leader of the Democratic Front asked for a referendum as a necessary democratic tool on whether to join NATO or not. Last but not least, NATO's dilemma of further enlarging into Eastern Europe with the reluctance of a number of Western nations arguing Montenegro's preparedness to comply with certain internal issues such as the rule of law and contrasting corruption, as well for the question of public support in the country for membership.

Evidently, in addition and more importantly, the Ukrainian crisis has flared a significant rethinking of the debate on European security.

Indeed, during the last NATO summit in Cardiff, former Secretary General Rasmussen ruled out any invitation to Podgorica to join the alliance in 2014 postponing it only theoretically, to 2015.

Macedonia's relations with the Russian Federation and the Euro-Atlantic integration

The Republic of Macedonia traditionally held close relations with Russia since the times of the Eastern Question, when the country was fighting its way to independence against a decaying Ottoman Empire during its twilight years. The Russian Federation was the first power to recognize Macedonian independence after the breakup of Yugoslavia. The two countries generally held friendly bilateral relations, shrouded in a mutual religious and cultural bound, as the majority of Macedonians – despite having the fifth largest Muslim minority in Europe, of Albanian origins – are of Orthodox Christian faith and of Slavic ethnic. Skopje, despite being a reliable partner for the Atlantic Alliance, has maintained close relations with Moscow also from a military standpoint: Russia represents one of the

largest suppliers of weapons to Macedonia. Echoing this revival of a Slavic-Orthodox affinity, concerning matters of internal instability derived from the presence of Albanian armed groups, Moscow has consistently proposed itself as an ally in the fight against Islamic terrorism. Military, security and counter-terror issues will remain a constant topic in the country as highlighted by a recent surge of interethnic violence ended with 8 Macedonian police enforcers and more than 10 allegedly Kosovar gunmen killed in a firefight in the Albanian-populated Macedonian town of Kumanovo. Nevertheless, it's with the Atlantic Alliance that Skopje has hitherto had its major military involvement, with Essential Harvest, Allied Harmony and Amber Fox operations from 2001 to 2003, and most significantly assisting NATO ISAF mission in Afghanistan, well above its weight in terms of military contribution sending over 7000 soldiers to Kabul. Despite proving to be a reliable new partner for the Atlantic Alliance, Macedonia has yet to be admitted to NATO, mainly because of its never ending issue with Greece over its constitutional name, however there is more than that. As occurred with Montenegro, the reluctance by certain NATO and EU countries to further irritate and alienate Moscow – mindful of the Ukrainian crisis and its aftermaths – has contributed to the protracted postponement of Macedonia to join NATO. All of these elements, if not discouraging, surely might make the country's current Euro-Atlantic integration spirit waver. In fact, Skopje has managed to keep a foot in both camps, as shown by the fact that Macedonia's president Gjorge Ivanov was amongst the few Western heads of state that attended May 9 2015 Russian military parade in Moscow.

EU member state Cyprus as a Russian Federation's foothold on European soil

Lastly, the strategic Mediterranean island of Cyprus – dependent and closely linked to Athens – is another asset that the Kremlin used in an attempt to increase its network in South Eastern Europe and scratch the European Union cohesion. Cyprus, whose vast majority in the Greek part of the island is of Greek orthodox faith, maintains solid relationships with the Russian Federation, while being a member of the European Union. With Cyprus, the Kremlin has channeled its action into a financial-economic sphere on the one hand with a Russian loan for €2.5 bn to Nicosia as well as with a potential involvement in the Turkish Stream project, and on the other hand in the military sector. In fact, through February 2015 bilateral agreements, the Russians have gained a foothold on EU's soil, with the concession from Nicosia to moor their warships in the port of Limassol, and potentially, Russians could even use the Paphos military airbase in the south of the country.

Conclusions

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Euro-Atlantic integration has so far managed to prevail and to maintain stability in the Balkan-Mediterranean area by co-opting the majority of its nations. With Moscow relentlessly manoeuvring to restore its presence in the Balkans during an international and geopolitical situation which is undergoing a gradual change in the direction of a multipolar system, Brussels should definitely not underestimate this evolution and make it a top priority in its agenda to restore its strategic and political influence in these historical and cultural European peripheral areas.