

Putin-Mitsotakis Meeting in Sochi Clarified Misconceptions in Russian-Greek Relations

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*Russian **President Vladimir Putin** welcomed Greek **Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis** to the Black Sea city of Sochi on Wednesday to not only enjoy a pleasant and sunny December day, but to also discuss the Cyprus issue, Greek-Turkish tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and the prospects for cooperation in energy, tourism, trade, cultural exchanges and a host of other sectors.*

The meeting comes as both countries are facing different pressures but are in a position to assist each other. The meeting between the two leaders comes at a time when propaganda is being disseminated that Russia is preparing to invade Ukraine. Moscow wants to strengthen relations with individual NATO members like Greece to ensure a consensus is not achieved within the bloc to support Ukraine’s aggression. On the other hand, Greece is still reeling from a decade long economic crisis and faces renewed pressures from the COVID-19 pandemic and high energy prices. Therefore, in this time of mutual crisis, the two leaders sought to meet.

Greek-Russian relations suffered in 2018 following the expulsion of Russian diplomats on unproven claims of meddling in Greece’s domestic affairs and attempting to undermine the Prespa Agreement that Athens reached with Skopje to conclude the Macedonia name issue. However, the course of Greek-Russian relations was quickly put on the correct path following the 2019 Greek legislative election victory of the New Democracy Party and the ousting of SYRIZA from power.

Since then, the New Democracy Party has consolidated Greece’s military relations with the US, but for now not at the expense of its relations with Moscow. In fact, under the current government, Greece entered a military alliance with the United Arab Emirates, its first official non-NATO military ally with the exception of Cyprus. Greece has also consolidated strong military and strategic ties with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and India, whilst also not joining the Western demonization campaign against China. In this way, Greek foreign policy has been guided towards so-called “strategic autonomy” which allows Athens to not only

strengthen ties with its western allies, but also maintain cordial ties with Moscow and establish new ties with eastern countries.

None-the-less, huge misconceptions exist on both sides. Greeks for example increasingly believe that Russia is allied with Turkey against Greece. Although undoubtedly Russia's supply of the S-400 missile defense system and the construction of nuclear power plants in Turkey is a major cause of frustration and concern for Athens, believing that Moscow and Ankara are in an alliance misses the nuances of their relationship - one of tactical convenience and not of strategic alliance.

Russia and Turkey cannot become true strategic allies as little trust exists and Ankara is adamant on its neo-Ottoman/pan-Turanist project that also aims to challenge Russia's traditional sphere of influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In this way, Russia keeps a balance with Greece as it understands that Turkey wants to control half of the Black Sea, the Bosphorus and Dardanelle Straits, and half of the Aegean Sea that is controlled by Greece. Such a hypothetical eventuality would be a huge geopolitical disaster for Russia.

Moscow's expanding relations with Ankara, even in the face of the latter openly declaring its support for Kiev diplomatically and militarily, does not point to an emerging alliance with Turkey, but rather an opportunity for Russian businesses to gain economic advantages whilst simultaneously causing divisions within NATO. Athens understands it cannot complain about Russia's relations with Turkey when itself is an EU member with sanctions against the country.

Despite this though, misconceptions also exist in the Kremlin about Greece, often to the frustration of many Greeks. Take for example Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, who on the eve of the Putin-Mitsotakis meeting spoke with Greek broadcaster ANT1 to not only say that this is a "historic" event, but give his personal assessment that Greek-Russian relations are 6 on a scale of 10, while ranking Russian-Turkish relations at a 7.

Although it is well-established that Peskov is part of the pro-Turkish faction of the Kremlin, having previously worked at the Soviet Embassy in Turkey, consistently shows disinterest in Russia-hostile pan-Turkic projects and was demonstratively indifferent to the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, Greeks were irked that he ranked Moscow's relations with Turkey more positively despite Greece having never killed Russian soldiers in Syria, having never killed a Russian Ambassador (like the 2016 Andrei Karlov case), sold weapons to Ukraine that target Donbass civilians or encroached on Russia's traditional sphere of influence. This of course is Peskov's own assessment, but it does point to competing ideologies in the Kremlin, as well as misconceptions, especially the one that Greece is fully compliant to Washington, as Peskov in the past has alluded to.

Rather, Putin and Mitsotakis made important steps towards the improvement of Greek-Russian relations during their Wednesday meeting. The two leaders discussed future prospects of bilateral relations and stressed the close and historical ties between the two countries and peoples. In addition, the Joint Action Plan for 2022-2024 was adopted, which will identify key axes of bilateral cooperation for the coming years.

"Our relations are a continuous path and have a future," Mitsotakis pointed out from Sochi, while Greek diplomatic sources said that the impact of the talks will be seen in the near future.

For his part, Putin described the meeting as “comprehensive and effective,” noting that Greek-Russian relations are strengthening significantly and highlighted that in the first nine months of 2021, bilateral trade increased by 56%.

For Putin, he hopes to strengthen relations with Greece in all sectors in the hope that the Mediterranean country will remain in the EU-NATO faction that seeks normalization with Russia and non-interference in Ukraine. At the same time, Mitsotakis hopes to secure cheap gas and to attract more Russian companies to invest in Greece as the country finally recovers from a brutal economic depression. Although in the short to medium term the geopolitical convergence of Greece and Russia will not match, the Putin-Mitsotakis meeting demonstrates two mature leaders that can navigate through complex differences and challenges to strengthen relations in sectors where their interest does converge. More importantly perhaps, Russian and Greek misconceptions of each other were clarified, and with such clarification, progress in relationship building can be steered in a positive direction.

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