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Tensions between Greece and Russia, with Macedonia in the background

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In recent weeks there has been a cooling in the traditionally friendly relations between Greece and Russia, as demonstrated by the following incidents: a sharp statement from the Greek foreign ministry on 18 July, in which it condemned attempts by Russia to interfere in its internal affairs, and criticised as arrogant a speech by a spokeswoman of the Russian foreign ministry that threatened Greece with unspecified 'consequences' and suggested that Athens was caving to pressure from the United States. This series of sharp statements came after Greece took the unprecedented decision to expel two Russian diplomats, and prohibited the entry into the country of two more. The diplomats had tried to give money to Greek local, nationalist and Orthodox activists in order to organise protests against the Greek-Macedonian agreement concluded this June, which is intended to end the dispute over the official name of the Republic of Macedonia, ongoing since the 1990s. In response to the statements by the representatives of the Greek government, the Russian foreign ministry announced the discontinuation of its preparations for the scheduled autumn visit by the head of Russia's MFA to Athens, and announced a parallel response of expelling Greek diplomats.

Commentary

- Russia's actions are aimed at sabotaging the agreement under which Skopje agreed to change the constitutional name of its country to the Republic of Northern Macedonia, and in return Athens pledged to stop blocking the start of EU and NATO accession negotiations with Macedonia. However, Athens has pointed out that its position is conditional and subject to the amendment of the constitution of the Republic of Macedonia. The long-term Greek-Macedonian compromise will be used to reduce tension in the region and assist Macedonia's integration with Western structures, thus reducing the influence of Russia in the Western Balkans.
- Moscow has also taken parallel actions against the Greek-Macedonian agreement in the Republic of Macedonia. According to the authorities in Skopje, a Russian-Greek businessman close to the Kremlin, Ivan Savvidi, handed over at least €300,000 to finance the activity of opponents to the changes to the Macedonian constitution, including the organisation of the riots that erupted in Macedonia after the signing of the agreement. The riot involved supporters of a football club belonging to Sergei Samsonenko, another

Russian businessman and an honorary consul of Russia.

- The unusual, harsh response by the Greek authorities is the result of a growing awareness of the dangers of Russian actions in the Balkans, as well as the need of Aleksis Tsipras's government to prove itself by adopting an assertive foreign policy stance in the context of the general elections planned for 2019. In addition Greece, in fear of the Turkish influence in the Western Balkans which has been rising in recent years, has shown greater support for extending the activity of the EU than for Russia, which has been cooperating with Ankara. It seems, however, that despite the current deterioration in relations between Moscow and Athens, there will not be a fundamental revision of Greece's policy towards Russia.
- Moscow is seeking to increase its influence in the Balkans, which it views as an area of rivalry with the West, by deepening instability and triggering conflicts. Probably Russia will continue this course, for example by supporting the negative campaign before the referendum on amendments to the Macedonian constitution, which is to take place in the autumn of this year.