

Is rupture in Russia-Greece ti



NIKOS KONSTANDARAS

For centuries, even when Athens was a bastion of the West during the Cold War, Greece and Russia have seen themselves as natural allies. Both are Christian Orthodox nations; even as a NATO member, Greece tried to maintain channels of communication with the Soviet Union. Yet a sudden dispute over alleged Russian meddling in Greek affairs has escalated rapidly. This could have long-term consequences for Greek-Russian ties and for the Western Balkans.

This month, Athens informed Moscow that it was expelling two Russian diplomats and refusing entry to two others. Among the accusations: the four were trying stoke opposition to a recent agreement signed by Greece and a northern neighbour, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, ending a 27-year dispute over the latter's name.

Ratification by both countries would open the way for a renamed Republic of North Macedonia to join NATO and the European Union. Greek opponents of the deal object to their neighbors' use of "Macedonia" in any form, saying this implies claims on the Greek province of the same name; Macedonian nationalists object to adding a qualifier to their country's name.

It is easy to see how Russia, which is opposed to Macedonia joining NATO, could be tempted to exploit this volatile mix to encourage hard-liners on both sides. Macedonia's prime minister, Zoran Zaev, claimed in an interview with Buzz-Feed News that Greek businessmen "sympathetic to the Russian cause" paid large sums of money to foes of the deal in his country to commit acts of violence before a referendum on the agreement is held.

The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a stern protest to the Greek ambassador over the expulsions and has threatened to respond further. On July 18, a ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, declared that Greece was acting under pressure from its allies and warned that "such actions do not remain without consequences."

The Greek government reacted angrily. The Foreign Ministry in Athens declared these statements "a characteristic example of disrespect for a third country and a lack of understanding of today's world, in which states, regardless of their size, are independent and can exercise an independent, multidimensional and democratic foreign policy." It added, "In any case, the Russian authorities themselves are very well aware of what their people do."

A few days earlier, a State Department spokeswoman, Heather Nauert, tweeted: "We support Greece defending its sovereignty. Russia must end its destabilizing behavior." In Moscow's view, this alignment between Athens and Washington confirmed its suspicions of collu-

sion.

Until now, Russian officials had been full of praise for Greece. In 2015, Foreign Minister Sergey V Lavrov noted Greece's opposition to sanctions against Russia. "We appreciate the stance of the Greek government, which understands the complete counterproductivity of attempts to speak this language with Russia," he said after a meeting in Moscow with his Greek counterpart, Nikos Kotzias. On July 20, the Russian Ambassador in Athens, Andrey Maslov, tweeted: "The past years were a time of an unprecedented boom in Russian-Greek relations." But, he added, "The actions of the Greek side ... have become a disappointment for us."

The Greek move was unexpected. Not only has Athens has always been careful in its dealings with Moscow, but this sudden rupture was executed by what is considered to be the most pro-Russian government Greece has had - a government that in March refused to join its Western allies in expelling Russian diplomats in retaliation for Moscow's alleged involvement in the poisoning of a former Russian double agent and his daughter in Britain.

The coalition government is dominated by the radical-left Syriza party, which opposed international sanctions imposed on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. Its leader, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, visited Moscow for support in 2015, while threatening the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and other creditors that Greece would walk away from its



Tsipras and Putin once enjoyed a one-to-one working relationship.

Greeks and Russians have long seen themselves as natural allies. That changed this month

dependent Greece bailout commitments. The junior coalition partner, Independent Greece nationalist party.

CIVILIAN'S TRIBUNE

On a growth path



With the addition of 12 new routes, no doubt Bahrain International Airport will emerge one of the best airports in the region. Established as early as in 1927, in fact the first airport in the Arabian Gulf, Bahrain International Airport (BIA) has been a significant aviation hub. However, due to various reasons it could not rise to the levels of Dubai or Istanbul airports.

What makes it special is the airport's strategic location in the heart of the Gulf. Until now, BIA has served as an ideal gateway linking East and West.

Apart from the increase in the passenger numbers, the growth in cargo traffic also hints at the future economic potentials.

Abdulla Hameed



TIM BALE

Prime Minister Theresa May's Conservative government in Britain is in turmoil. But the resignations that have rocked it in recent days - even that of Boris Johnson, who was until recently her obsessively ambitious foreign secretary - risk blinding us to a simple truth: The big reason May's party is in so much trouble over Brexit is that it is determined at all costs to end "the free movement of people" that, even for those European countries outside the European Union, is a condition of belonging to the bloc's single market.

Why are Britain's Conservatives so set on that course, despite the fact that access to that market is vital to the prosperity of the country they govern? Because promising to "take back control" of their country's borders gradually became the party's default response to a challenge that so many of Europe's center-right parties have been trying to deal with for a decade or more.

The rise of anti-immigrant nationalist insurgencies claiming to represent "the people" against a corrupt and uncaring political establishment has deep economic, political, social and cultural roots. Yet the reaction of the Continent's mainstream conservative, market-liberal and Christian democratic parties can be boiled down to four fairly shallow, and equally ineffective, approaches. Only if the center-right fully faces up to the fact that they are all dead ends can it begin to come up with better, more creative and probably more combative ways to deal with the challenge it's facing.

The first approach is to try to ignore the populist radical right - and even treat it as some kind of pariah. That's essentially what the Christian Democratic Union of Germany and the Moderates in Sweden did for years. In the end, it hasn't worked.

The far-right, anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany took a remarkable 13 per cent of the vote in last year's federal election. The party's rising popularity has so spooked Chancellor Angela Merkel's junior partner, Bavaria's Christian Social Union, that its leader, Horst Seehofer, recently came perilously close to resigning in protest of her sup-

posed failure to act on the matter - a resignation that might easily have brought down her government.

Meanwhile, the fact that the Sweden Democrats originated in that country's white supremacist underground didn't prevent them from gaining 13pc in the 2014 general election. Many predict they will do even better this year, even in the wake of attempts by the Swedish government to strengthen border controls.

The second approach taken by the center-right is to toughen its stance on migration and multiculturalism, promising to make life more difficult both for those who want to come to the country and for those who've already made it. Countries where the center-right has tried this include the France, the Netherlands, Denmark - and Britain.

Again, though, the results haven't exactly been impressive: The far-right National Front made it into the runoff in the 2017 French presidential election. The equally extreme Dutch Party for Freedom hasn't gone away. The Danish People's Party became Denmark's second-biggest party when it took 21% of the vote in the 2015 general election - at which point it resumed a role it had



May at a local school in

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Gaining the whole w

Just look around Europe: It's clear that ac