

DOI: 10.46340/eppd.2020.7.6.9

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RUSSIAN FACTOR IN THE DESINTEGRATION PROCESSES IN SOUTH EUROPE

The anti-European sentiments are rather strong in the entire Europe, but in the South European countries they could be particularly dangerous for the future of the European integration due to the economic problems of these countries and high popularity of the populist eurosceptical politicians. At the same time, the Russian influence is rather strong in the South European region. This article considers how Russia uses its good relations with the South European countries and its influence on the popular radical parties to encourage disintegration processes in this part of Europe. The author compares the scale of the Russian influence in all six South-European countries (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, and Portugal) and analyses whether the Russian factor can have negative affect on the European integration of these countries.

Keywords: South Europe, euroscepticism, European integration, Grexit, Italexit, Spaxit, Russian propaganda, Kremlin friendly countries.

South Europe is often considered as a weak link in the EU economy. Greece and Italy have the largest state debts which significantly harm the financial stability of the entire European Union. Spain was also one of the countries where the world economic and financial crisis of 2008 started, and it still remains one of the problematic economies in the EU.

The relatively weak economic positions of most countries of the South Europe cause a disappointment with EU's policy in these countries, and even their possible withdrawal from the euro zone and European Union is often discussed. After Great Britain started the process of its withdrawal from EU known as Brexit, similar terms arose regarding Italy and Greece, and threats of Grexit and Italexit are also considered as real.

Under these conditions of disappointment by EU, the sympathy to Russia tends to grow in most South European countries. Russia is actively using this situation and organizes propaganda against EU, NATO and anti-Russian sanctions over Ukraine. The criticism of the anti-Russian and pro-European policy of the Ukrainian governments is typical for many populist politicians and sometimes even governmental officials in most South European countries.

Thus, most South European countries have three common issues: all of them are facing economic problems, risks of withdrawal from EU or at least weakening ties with Brussels, and Russian anti-western propaganda. This article considers the Russian efforts to encourage disintegration processes in South European countries and to support political parties in these countries which promote withdrawal from EU and do not approve European integration.

For the purposes of this analysis, the South European countries are divided into groups and subgroups depending on the scale of the Russian influence in each of them. First, the countries which do not face the active Kremlin's efforts aimed at weakening their European integration policy are considered. Then the more Kremlin friendly countries are described.

The South European countries could be divided into two groups depending on the influence of the Russian factor in them. The first group includes Portugal and Malta, countries where the Russian influence is the weakest in South Europe. These two small countries are far away from Russia and are not highly interested in cooperation or confrontation with it, and for Kremlin they are also not very interesting taking into account their little influence in EU and NATO. The second group includes all other South European countries (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, and Spain) where the Russian influence on disintegration and other political processes is rather strong. Three of the South European countries (Cyprus, Greece, and Italy) are historically the most Kremlin friendly in Europe and experience the strong influence of the Russian propaganda. Spain is far less interested in relations with Russia because of geographical factors but Russian support of the Catalan separatists forced Spain to pay more attention to the Russian influence on the political processes in Europe.

Malta and Portugal

Thus, the first group of South European countries which are less interesting for Russian propaganda (Malta and Portugal) could be described very briefly. Both Malta and Portugal do not experience strong Russian propaganda and both of them do not face the strong disintegration processes and the risks of exit from the European Union. Moreover, Portugal played an important role in the history of the European integration. During Portugal's leadership in the EU's council, the Lisbon Treaty was signed in 2007¹, and this treaty became some kind of the Constitution for the European Union. Thus, Portugal remains a symbol of the European integration, and Russia was not successful in undermining the pro-European moods in this country.

Nevertheless, the Russian factor was also noticed even in Portugal. In 2016, the former Portuguese high ranking intelligence officer Frederico Carvalhão Gil was involved in the big Russian spy scandal. The Portuguese intelligence officer was arrested in Rome during his attempt to give the secret NATO documents to the officer from the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR in the Russian transcription)². Although Portugal does not play an important role in the world spy games, the arrested Mr. Carvalhão could deliver to the Russian SVR important and secret NATO documents³. However, this single case does not contradict the general rule: Portugal does not suffer too much from the active Russian efforts to destroy its relations with the EU institutions.

Unlike Malta and Portugal, other four South European countries (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, and Spain) experience the strong influence of the Russian propaganda aimed at encouraging their anti-EU moods. These four countries could be further divided into two subgroups. The first subgroup is represented by the Kremlin friendly countries (Cyprus, Greece, and Italy), and the second subgroup is represented by Spain which is not particularly interested in relations with Russia, but experiences the negative effects of the Russian propaganda.

Spain

Spain is the particular case among the South European countries. On the one hand, despite slight economic growth in 2018-2019, Spain experiences serious economic challenges⁴, like a persistently high unemployment rate, an unsustainable pension system, huge state budget deficit etc⁵. The COVID recession further strengthened these challenges, and in the second quarter of 2020 Spain's public debt reached 1,29 trillion euro, which is 110,1 % of national GDP⁶, and this is a dangerous amount (according to the EU documents, the national debt should not be higher than 60% of GDP⁷). Thus, like other South European countries (in particular, Italy and Greece), Spain faces severe economic problems.

On the other hand, unlike Italy and Greece, Spain strongly supports the EU integration and does not consider the exit from the European Union. The Russian propaganda is also not so influential in Spain like in Cyprus, Greece, and Italy. Only one political party in Spain advocates better relations with Russia⁸. This populist party of eurosceptics, "Podemos", is represented in Spain's parliament and has been considered as a

¹ Official Journal of the European Union (2007). *Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, signed at Lisbon, 13 December 2007* <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:C:2007:306:FULL&from=EN>> (2020, November, 16).

² Schindler, J. R. (2016). NATO's Big New Russian Spy Scandal. *Observer* <<http://observer.com/2016/05/natos-big-new-russian-spy-scandal/>> (2020, November, 16).

³ Kremlin Watch (2020). *Countries Compared: Portugal* <<https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/countries-compared-states/portugal/>> (2020, November, 16).

⁴ Matsumoto, R. Spain's Economic Challenges in 4 Charts. *Medium*. <<https://medium.com/@rikimatsumoto/spains-economic-challenges-in-4-charts-c661fa823ba6>> (2020, November, 16).

⁵ Chislett, W. (2019). The main economic challenges confronting Spain's next government. *Royal Institute Elcano*. <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ari74-2019-chislett-main-economic-challenges-confronting-spains-next-government> (2020, November, 16).

⁶ Countryeconomy.com (2020). *Spain public debt went up in second quarter* <<https://countryeconomy.com/national-debt/spain>> (2020, November, 16).

⁷ Valero, J. EU fiscal watchdog wants to scrap 'unrealistic' 60% debt limit. *EURACTIV.com*. <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/eu-fiscal-watchdog-wants-to-scrap-60-debt-limit/>> (2020, November, 16).

⁸ The Diplomat in Spain (2016). Podemos calls for Spain to have an "autonomous" relationship with Russia after Trump's victory. *Hediplomatinspain* <<https://thediplomatinspain.com/en/2016/11/podemos-calls-spain-autonomous-relationship-russia-trumps-victory/>> (2020, November, 16).

serious threat to the Spanish and European democracy. However, after this party formed a coalition together with the pro-European Socialist Party of Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez in January 2020, the formal eurosceptic radicals tend to turn to the political mainstream of supporting the European integration¹.

Another radical party of Spain, the right-wing "Vox", also criticizes the European Union and calls to seek more independence from Brussels, but it never called publicly to "Spaxit" (Spain's withdrawal from the European Union) although the party's supporters speculate on this topic². In addition, unlike many other European right-wingers, "Vox" is not connected with Kremlin, which supports its opponents – Catalan separatists³. Thus, Kremlin's anti-European propaganda in Spain is not very successful.

Spain, like any other South European country, does not have hostile relations with Kremlin, and the Russian threat is not seriously taken into account by the Spanish government⁴. Spain is far away from Russia, and therefore, the Islamic extremism and terrorism is considered by Spanish authorities as much more dangerous threat than the potential Russian expansion or Kremlin propaganda. Although Spain has never been Kremlin friendly like Greece or Cyprus, and Spain officially condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine and supported anti-Russian EU sanctions, but in general Madrid's position toward Moscow's policy was rather neutral than hostile⁵.

Nevertheless, the most recent Catalan attempts to proclaim independence in 2017 slightly changed Spain's position toward Russia. During the separatist demonstrations in Catalonia, it was revealed that the Russian propaganda tried to describe the peaceful protests like beginning of the bloody war⁶, and some Russian news agencies created a lot of fake news on this topic. The Russian propaganda tried to describe Catalonia like Spanish Donbas⁷ and used the separatist movement in this province to justify Kremlin's policy in the Eastern Ukraine⁸. As a result, Spain had to recognize at official level the Russian negative influence on the events in Catalonia, and speaking about the separatist movement in that province, Spain's Minister of Defense Maria Dolores de Cospedal stated that "many of the actions come from Russian territory"⁹.

Also Spain had another chance to confirm that despite its neutral approach to the Russian policy, Kremlin tried to harm the Spanish national interests. In 2017, the Russian hacker was arrested in Barcelona¹⁰. Moreover, according to the famous Spanish newspaper El País, three Russian spies worked in Catalonia's capital Barcelona during 2016-2017¹¹.

¹ Carreño, B. (2020). With once-radical Podemos tamed, Spain's new coalition is happy – for now. *Reuters* <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-spain-politics-analysis-iduskcn20i1fo>> (2020, November, 16).

² Winterburn, T. (2019). Brussels chaos: Spain follows Poland in shock threat to quit EU «No more humiliation!» *Euro Weekly*. <<https://www.euroweeklynews.com/2019/12/23/breaking-newspain-follows-poland-in-shock-threat-to-quit-eu/>> (2020, November, 16).

³ Стогней, А. (2019). В Испании в парламент впервые с 1979 года вернутся ультраправые. В связях с Кремлем их пока не обвиняют. *The Bell* <<https://thebell.io/v-ispanii-v-parlament-vpervye-s-1979-goda-vernutsya-ultrapravye-v-svyazih-s-kremlem-ih-poka-ne-obvinyayut>> (2020, November, 16).

⁴ Dunaev, A. (2018). Why Spain Doesn't Fear the "Russian Threat". *Moscow Carnegie Center*. <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75698>> (2020, November, 16).

⁵ Kremlin Watch Report (2017). *How do European democracies react to Russian aggression? Review of shifts in strategic & policy documents of EU28 following Russian aggression against Ukraine* <<https://www.evropskehodnoty.cz/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/How-do-European-democracies-react-to-Russian-aggression-1.pdf>> (2020, November, 16).

⁶ REGNUM (2019). Профессор МГИМО назвал события в Каталонии гражданской войной <<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2751145.html>> (2020, November, 16).

⁷ Новицкий, И. (2017). Донбасс – Каталония: параллели очевидны! *Politikus.ru*. <<https://politikus.ru/events/99853-donbass-kataloniya-paralleli-ochevidny.html>> (2020, November, 16).

⁸ Jones, S. (2017). Catalan independence: EU experts detect rise in pro-Kremlin false claims. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/13/catalan-independence-eu-experts-detect-rise-in-pro-kremlin-false-claims?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=kremlin_watch_briefing_russian_bots_and_promises&utm_term=2018-02-01> (2020, November, 16).

⁹ Deutsche Welle (2017). *Spain warns EU of Russian meddling in Catalan separatist movement* <<https://www.dw.com/en/spain-warns-eu-of-russian-meddling-in-catalan-separatist-movement/a-41363161>> (2020, November, 16).

¹⁰ BBC (2017). *Russian arrested in Spain 'over mass hacking'* <<http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-39553250>> (2020, November, 16).

¹¹ Lopez-Fonseca, O., Sahuquillo, M. R. (2019). Three suspected Russian spies traveled to Barcelona in 2016 and 2017. *El País*. <https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2019/12/27/inenglish/1577438583_199403.html> (2020, November, 16).

Under these conditions, Spain sent its military unit to the NATO forces in Latvia, where the NATO's presence was strengthened due to the Russian threat¹. This Spain's action can be considered as another prove that Spain was not Kremlin friendly. Following the Russian interference into the Catalan crisis, Spain joined other EU countries call for action on Russian propaganda².

Nevertheless, even despite the obvious facts of Russian interference into Catalan crisis, Spain continues to avoid tensions in its relations with Russia³, and the Russian analysts even consider Spain as a potential platform to increase the Russia's influence in Europe⁴.

Italy

Italy is another South European country where Russia's influence on the disintegration processes is rather strong. Several Italian parties are considered to be eurosceptical. In July 2020, "Italexit" party was registered by a famous Italian senator Gianluigi Paragone. The goal of this party is described in its name and the party's leader G.Paragone confirmed that his party will seek Italy's withdrawal from the European Union⁵. According to the polls, approximately 5 % of Italians would be ready to vote for this new party during the parliamentary election⁶ which means that "Italexit" has real chances to gain seats in the Italian parliament and strengthen the right-wing populist parties of the eurosceptics.

Other Italian eurosceptical parties do not proclaim withdrawal from EU as their primary goal although they often criticize the EU policy. The "Five stars movement" used to be a very radical and anti-European populist party⁷, but after this party formed a coalition and a government with a pro-European Democratic Party in September 2019, it tended to be more moderate⁸ and did not create obstacles for the pro-European policy of prime-minister Giuseppe Conte. However, after this party became more moderate, it also lost its popularity among voters, and only about 15% of Italians were ready to vote for this party in 2020⁹.

Another populist party "League" was also part of the coalition and government during 2018 – 2019, but in August 2019 it left coalition because its leader Matteo Salvini unsuccessfully tried to initiate the early parliamentary election¹⁰. This party remained rather radical despite being in the government but its leader Matteo Salvini proclaims himself a "euro-realist" rather than "euro-sceptic"¹¹ because according to his statement, his party wants to reform the European Union and not destroy it¹². Until 2020,

¹ Deni, J. R. (2017). Enhancing NATO's Forward Presence. *Carnegie Europe*. <<http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/68792>> (2020, November, 16).

² Rettman, A. (2017). Spain joins call for EU action on propaganda. *Euobserver*. <<https://euobserver.com/foreign/139843>> (2020, November, 16).

³ Kremlin Watch Report (2017). *How do European democracies react to Russian aggression. Review of shifts in strategic & policy documents of EU28 following Russian aggression against Ukraine* <<https://www.evropskehodnoty.cz/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/How-do-European-democracies-react-to-Russian-aggression-1.pdf>> (2020, November, 16).

⁴ Dunaev, A. (2018). Why Spain Doesn't Fear the "Russian Threat". *Moscow Carnegie Center*. <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75698>> (2020, November, 16).

⁵ Follain, J. (2020). Populist Senator Finds 'Italexit' Party to Quit EU. *Bloomberg*. <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-23/populist-senator-finds-italexit-party-to-quit-eu-ditch-euro>> (2020, November, 16).

⁶ Monaci, A. (2020). Sondaggi Italexit, Paragone ago della bilancia: con lui il Centrodestra vince. *Urban*. <<https://urbanpost.it/sondaggi-italexit-paragone-ago-della-bilancia/>> (2020, November, 16).

⁷ Franzosi, P., Marone, F., Salvati, E. (2015). Euroscepticism in the Italian Five Star Movement. *The International Spectator*, 50, 02, 109-124.

⁸ The Economist (2020). *Italy's populist Five Star Movement is becoming a more normal party* <<https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/08/20/italys-populist-five-star-movement-is-becoming-a-more-normal-party>> (2020, November, 16).

⁹ Demopolis (2020). *Peso e trend dei partiti: Barometro Politico dell'Istituto Demopolis* <<https://www.demopolis.it/?p=7681>> (2020, November, 16).

¹⁰ Tondo, L. (2019). Italy's new coalition sworn in as doubts cast over longevity. *The Guardian*. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/05/italys-coalition-enemies-open-way-matteo-salvini-return>> (2020, November, 16).

¹¹ Evans-Pritchard, A. (2019). Italy's Salvini throws in the towel on euroscepticism, following the lead of France's Le Pen. *The Telegraph*. <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2019/10/16/italys-salvini-throws-towel-euroscepticism-following-lead-frances/>> (2020, November, 16).

¹² Clarkson, A. (2019). Thought populists want to kill the EU? It's worse than that. They want to reform it in their image. *Politico*. <<https://www.politico.eu/article/populist-attitude-to-eu-matteo-salvini-far-right/>> (2020, November, 16).

Matteo Salvini never proclaimed withdrawal from the European Union as party's goal. However, the statements and positions of this populist politician could change very quickly, and in March 2020 Salvini stated that after victory over coronavirus, Italy might consider an option of withdrawal from the European Union "if necessary"¹.

Despite some loss of popularity during the pandemics and failure to win the regional elections in some provinces in early 2020², the "League" remains the most popular and influential right-wing populist party in the Italian politics. In addition, this party is one of the most active advocates of the Russia's policy in Italy. The party has an agreement about cooperation with Putin's party "United Russia"³. The leader of the "League" Matteo Salvini often visited Russia⁴, met with the Russian president⁵ and stated that sanctions should be lifted from Russia and relations with this country should be improved. Matteo Salvini also proclaimed such statements when he was a vice-prime-minister of the Italian government in 2018-2019⁶. Also, in 2019 during his work in the government, Salvini blamed the "nationalist Ukrainian group" in attempts to kill him⁷, and this provocative statement was actively supported by the Russian propaganda⁸ although the Italian forces did not find any evidence that somebody was trying to kill the Italian politician⁹. Thus, Matteo Salvini still remains an influential figure in the Italian politics that promotes the Russian interests and could potentially challenge the Italian pro-European policy.

Russia also tried to use the coronavirus pandemic to strengthen its influence in Italy. In March 2020, Italy suffered from epidemic, there were a lot of deaths and sick people, and Italy urgently needed assistance. However, the European Union postponed allocating costs to Italy due to disagreements among its members¹⁰. In April 2020, the EU finally agreed to allocate 500 billion euro of financial assistance for Italy and other EU countries which suffered from coronavirus¹¹, but until that time the eurosceptic sentiments significantly increased in Italy¹². Before EU assisted Italy, Russia sent the "humanitarian aid" to Italy delivering medicaments and sending medical doctors on military jets. The Russian propaganda stated that Italy should expect assistance from Moscow rather than from its western partners¹³. At that time, even the pro-European Italian prime-minister Giuseppe Conte made pro-Russian statements expressing thanks to Russia for its

¹ Daily Sabah (2020). *Beat the virus first, then say 'goodbye to EU' if necessary, Italy's Salvini says* <<https://www.dailysabah.com/world/europe/beat-the-virus-first-then-say-goodbye-to-eu-if-necessary-italys-salvini-says>> (2020, November, 16).

² THE LOCAL.it (2020). *Analysis: How Italy's far right was stalled by the coronavirus crisis*. <<https://www.thelocal.it/20200609/analysis-how-italys-far-right-was-stalled-by-the-coronavirus-crisis>> (2020, November, 16).

³ Desiderio, A. (2017). *Putin's Party Signs Cooperation Deal with Italy's Far-Right Lega Nord*. *The Daily Beast*. <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/cheats/2017/03/06/putin-s-party-signs-cooperation-deal-with-italy-s-far-right-lega-nord>> (2020, November, 16).

⁴ Johnson, M., Ghiglione, D. (2020). *Matteo Salvini praises Putin ahead of Russia trip*. *Financial Times*. <<https://www.ft.com/content/5b3fc72e-8348-11e8-96dd-fa565ec55929>> (2020, November, 16).

⁵ Kremlin.ru (2014). *Vladimir Putin had a number of bilateral meetings on the sidelines of the ASEM Summit*. <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46819>> (2020, November, 16).

⁶ France24 (2018). *Italy's Salvini calls for Russia sanctions to be lifted by year end* <<https://www.france24.com/en/20180716-italys-salvini-calls-russia-sanctions-be-lifted-year-end>> (2020, November, 16).

⁷ ANSA (2019). *Neo-Nazis wanted to kill me says Salvini. 'I got report Ukrainian group planning attempt on my life'* <https://www.ansa.it/english/news/general_news/2019/07/16/neo-nazis-wanted-to-kill-me-says-salvini_b4872913-fe62-4c3d-bc5a-b6db4ea39e40.html> (2020, November, 16).

⁸ Russia Today (2019). *Salvini says he flagged 'Ukrainian group's death threat,' leading to neo-Nazi missile bust*. <<https://www.rt.com/news/464311-salvini-ukrainian-nazis-plot/>> (2020, November, 16).

⁹ Echols, W. (2019) *RT Loses Plot on Italian Neo-Nazi Missile Bust*. *Polygraph.info*. <<https://www.polygraph.info/a/fact-check-neo-nazi-italy-missile/30063264.html>> (2020, November, 16).

¹⁰ Thompson, M. (2020). *The EU can't agree on how to help Italy and Spain pay for coronavirus relief*. *CNN Business*. <<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/27/economy/corona-bonds-eu/index.html>> (2020, November, 16).

¹¹ BBC News (2020). *Coronavirus pandemic: EU agrees €500 bn rescue package* <<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-52238932>> (2020, November, 16).

¹² Teodorescu, L. (2020). *Italy calling the EU as Euroscepticism rises in times of Coronavirus*. *Wilfried Martens Center for European Studies*. <<https://martenscentre.eu/blog/italy-calling-eu-euroscepticism-rises-times-coronavirus>> (2020, November, 16).

¹³ Hromadske International (2020). *Russia's Humanitarian Aid to Italy: How Kremlin Uses the Coronavirus Pandemic to Cover up Its Special Operation* <<https://en.hromadske.ua/posts/russias-humanitarian-aid-to-italy-how-kremlin-uses-the-coronavirus-pandemic-to-cover-up-its-special-operation>> (2020, November, 16).

assistance¹, although the famous Italian newspaper “La Stampa” strongly doubted that the Russian “humanitarian aid” was really helpful². Despite his pro-European policy and supporting EU and NATO initiatives, including those related to the war in Ukraine, the head of Italian government Giuseppe Conte expressed many times his willingness to maintain good relations with Russia, called to lift or ease anti-Russian sanctions and even stated that he had friendly relations with president Putin³.

Prior to sending the “assistance” to Italy, Russia was reportedly organizing hacker attacks on the Italian Foreign Affairs Ministry. The Ministry’s website did not work properly during several months in 2016-2017 due to the hacker attacks, and the Italian officials confirmed that they suspect Russia in organizing those attacks⁴. Nevertheless, even after that incident Italy avoided tensions in its relations with Russia and remains rather Kremlin friendly.

Cyprus

Cyprus is another Kremlin friendly country, perhaps even more connected with Russia than Italy. In 2011, Russia gave credit of 2,5 billion euro to Cyprus which was paid out in 2019 only⁵, and this was one of the reasons why Cyprus avoided any critics of the Russian actions in Ukraine. According to the experts’ estimates in 2013, there was about 30 billion dollars of Russian money in the Cypriot banks⁶. Cyprus remains the heaven for the Russian offshore funds. More than 40,000 Russians have the Cypriot citizenship, and for many Russian tourists Cyprus is a popular destination⁷. Cypriot officials proclaimed that the anti-Russian sanctions could “destroy” their economy⁸. Moscow is an important partner for Nicosia because Kremlin supports the territorial integrity of Cyprus and does not approve the Turkish occupation of the northern part of the island⁹. However, since the relations between Vladimir Putin and Turkish president Rejap Erdogan have improved, the Cypriots could have concerns about this issue¹⁰. Also some Cypriot journalists worried about possible suspicious activities of the Russian ambassador in Nicosia Stanislav Osadchiy who reportedly might hinder the Cyprus policy to build settlements although officially Moscow supports such activities of Nicosia¹¹.

¹ TASS (2020). *Italian PM Conte thanks Putin for Russia’s assistance to Italy in combating coronavirus*. <<https://tass.com/world/1154417>> (2020, November, 16).

² Iacoboni, J. (2020) Coronavirus, la telefonata Conte-Putin agita il governo: “Più che aiuti arrivano militari russi in Italia”. *La Stampa* <<https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/primo-piano/2020/03/25/news/coronavirus-la-telefonata-conte-putin-agita-il-governo-piu-che-aiuti-arrivano-militari-russi-in-italia-1.38633327>> (2020, November, 16).

³ Fonte, G., Ostroukh, A. (2019). Putin, visiting Italy, says wants Rome to help mend Moscow-EU ties. *Reuters*. <<https://br.reuters.com/article/us-italy-russia-putin-conte-idUSKCN1TZ1WL>> (2020, November, 16).

⁴ Saeed, S. (2017). Italian foreign ministry suspects Russia over hacking. *Politico*. <<https://www.politico.eu/article/italian-foreign-ministry-suspects-russia-over-hacking-russia-vladimir-putin/>> (2020, November, 16).

⁵ РБК (2019). *Минфин подтвердил закрытие долга Кипра перед Россией* <<https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5d6e3ff99a794774624b6def>> (2020, November, 16).

⁶ Young, E. (2019). Russian money in Cyprus: Why is there so much? *BBC News*. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-21831943>> (2020, November, 16).

⁷ Kremlin Watch (2020). *Countries Compared: Cyprus* <<https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/countries-compared-states/cyprus/>> (2020, November, 16).

⁸ Tasnim News Agency (2014). *Russian Sanctions Would Destroy Cyprus Economy: FM* <<https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2014/04/16/340426/russian-sanctions-would-destroy-cyprus-economy-fm>> (2020, November, 16).

⁹ Осадчий, С.В. (2020). Статья Посла России «Россия-Кипр: 60 лет сотрудничества», опубликованная в греко-кипрской газете «Филэфтерос» 18 августа. *Посольство Российской Федерации в Республике Кипр* <https://cyprus.mid.ru/press-relizy/-/asset_publisher/1gLrXJvAI84n/content/stat-a-posla-rossii-s-v-osadcego-rossia-kipr-60-let-sotrudnicstva-opublikovannaa-v-greko-kiprskej-gazete-filelefteros-18-avgusta-s-g-?inheritRedirect=false&redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fcyprus.mid.ru%3A443%2Fpress-relizy%3Fp_p_id%3D101_INSTANCE_1gLrXJvAI84n%26p_p_lifecycle%3D0%26p_p_state%3Dnormal%26p_p_mode%3Dview%26p_p_col_id%3Dcolumn-1%26p_p_col_count%3D1> (2020, November, 16).

¹⁰ Melakopides, C. (2019). Could Russia “Betray” Cyprus as Donald Trump Did the Kurds? *Russian International Affair Council*. <<https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytcs-and-comments/columns/european-policy/could-russia-betray-cyprus-as-donald-trump-did-the-kurds/>> (2020, November, 16).

¹¹ The New York Times (2017). *Cyprus Fears Russian Meddling in Its Settlement Talks* <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/05/world/europe/cyprus-fears-russian-meddling-in-its-settlement-talks.html?_r=0> (2020, November, 16).

Nevertheless, despite possible concerns¹, the Cyprus officials have never condemned or criticized Russia and keep maintaining good relations with Kremlin². This could be potentially dangerous for the European integration. The fact that Cyprus is not NATO member could be also potentially worrisome because Nicosia does not have strong military ties with its European partners and is interested in enhancing the Russian support rather than strengthening security cooperation with its western partners³. However, despite its pro-Russian position, Cyprus traditionally supports EU initiatives and unlike some other EU countries is not considered as a potential candidate to withdraw from the European Union⁴. At the same time, because of the Russian influence, relations between Cyprus and central EU institutions in Brussels are not ideal. Sometimes the European officials blame Nicosia of neglecting its duties under EU directives to combat money laundering⁵, but in fact, Cyprus could not effectively perform these duties because this would harm the interests of many influential Russian oligarchs who invested billions dollars into the Cypriot economy. But despite the fear to deteriorate relations with Russia, sometimes Cypriot authorities try to follow EU standards and strip the “golden passports” from some Russian citizens leaving them without the privileges of being EU citizens despite their huge investments into Cypriot economy like it happened in November 2019 when the Cypriot passports were revoked from 26 unnamed individuals (9 of them were reportedly Russian citizens)⁶. The practice to sell “golden passports” with the EU citizenship to potential criminals and corrupted officials, many of whom have a Russian origin, is also a source of tension between Nicosia and Brussels because according to Cyprus law it is enough to make a huge investment in its economy to get citizenship of the country, which also means to get ability to freely move, live and work in all the 27 EU member states⁷. Under EU pressure, Cyprus finally decided to cancel this “golden passports” program⁸ which could also mean potential reducing the number of new applicants of the Cyprus citizenship from Russia. Nevertheless, thousands of Russians, who have already obtained the “golden passports” before, will keep its legal status in Cyprus and exert influence on the Cypriot policy.

Greece

Greece used to be one of the most Kremlin friendly countries in South Europe. In addition, in this country, there are strong eurosceptical sentiments which are actively supported by the Russian propaganda. Maintaining good relations with Moscow is a historic tradition for Athens. During 2015-2019, when the radical left-wing coalition “SYRIZA” formed a government, the Greek-Russian relations particularly improved. The Russian propaganda works rather effectively in Greece, and this is proved by the recent polls according to which 66% of Greeks have positive view of Russia and approximately the same amount of people have a good opinion about the Russian president Vladimir Putin⁹. In 2016, shortly before the NATO summit, Greece concluded an arms deal with Russia, and this step was not in line with the NATO’s policy¹⁰.

¹ Stefanini, S. (2017). Cyprus fears Russia could wreck reunification. *Politico*.

<<https://www.politico.eu/article/cyprus-fears-russia-could-wreck-reunification/>> (2020, November, 16).

² Peel, M. (2020). Moscow on the Med: Cyprus and its Russians. *Financial Times*.

<<https://www.ft.com/content/67918012-9403-11ea-abcd-371e24b679ed>> (2020, November, 16).

³ Financial Mirror (2020). *Russia is a friend Cyprus can rely on* <<https://www.financialmirror.com/2020/09/19/russia-is-a-friend-cyprus-can-rely-on/>> (2020, November, 16).

⁴ Pryce, V. (2016). What does Brexit mean for Cyprus? The island needs a strong Europe for its future security and prosperity. *Prospect* <<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/what-does-brexit-mean-for-cyprus>> (2020, November, 16).

⁵ Euobserver (2017). *MEPs Demand Cyprus Open up over Russia Money Laundering*

<<https://euobserver.com/justice/139690>> (2020, November, 16).

⁶ BBC News (2019). Cyprus strips ‘golden’ passports from 26 investors. *BBC*

<<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50331697>> (2020, November, 16).

⁷ Nielsen, N. (2020). Cyprus risks EU legal threat over selling ‘Golden Passports’. *Euobserver*.

<<https://euobserver.com/justice/149741>> (2020, November, 16).

⁸ Euronews (2020). *Cyprus Cancels Controversial “Golden Passports” Programme*.

<<https://www.euronews.com/2020/10/14/cyprus-cancels-controversial-golden-passport-programme>>

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⁹ Kremlin Watch (2020). *Countries compared: Greece* <<https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/countries-compared-states/greece/>>

(2020, November, 16).

¹⁰ Coughlin, C. (2020). NATO’s united front under threat after Greece signs arms deal with Russia. *The Telegraph*

<<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/natos-united-front-under-threat-after-greece-signs-arms-deal-wit/>>

(2020, November, 16).

The economic problems of mid-2010s also forced the Greek government to strengthen ties with Russia hoping to receive a financial assistance from Kremlin. Greece has the biggest public debt among EU member states (181% of GDP¹) which is the source of economic problems not only for Greece, but also for the entire European Union. The EU policy to support banks rather than ordinary people during the financial crisis and lack of will to follow the guidelines of the EU financial discipline in Greece increase the eurosceptic sentiments in the Greek society, and this fact was used by the populist parties which ruled the country between 2015 and 2019. “Grexit” (a potential withdrawal of Greece from the European Union) was considered as a realistic option when the Brexit process began², and Russia tried to exploit this possible option of Grexit in its interests³.

Nevertheless, despite those worrisome trends, Greece remained in NATO and EU and tries to follow their policy. Greece finally found out that only the European Union can help to solve its financial problems, and Russia with its own economic problems caused by sanctions and other reasons, would not be able to save the Greek economy. The recent tensions between Greece and Turkey over the sea shelf in the Aegean Sea and occupied part of Cyprus can potentially strengthen Greece’s ties with its western partners because Russia due to its friendly relations with Turkey could not be considered as a reliable ally of Greece under current conditions⁴. Moreover, the Greek plans of gas output in Aegean Sea contradict the Russian interests⁵.

As a result, the Greek-Russian relations started to deteriorate even during the ruling of left-wing prime-minister Alexis Tsipras, who initially was considered as a pro-Russian eurosceptical politician. Tsipras signed the aforementioned arms deal with Russia in 2016. However, in 2018 the Tsipras government initiated the diplomatic scandal with Russia by sending out two Russian diplomats from Athens and blaming them of the interference into the Greek internal affairs⁶. The tensions between two countries rose because Greece accepted compromise on NATO’s membership of Macedonia, which was renamed as Northern Macedonia and in such a way a Greek concern over its name was removed. Russia unsuccessfully tried to convince Greece to further block Macedonia’s joining NATO⁷, but this time the Greek government did not follow the Russian recommendations aimed at weakening Euro-Atlantic and European solidarity.

The next Greek prime-minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who came to power in July 2019, conducts even more anti-Russian policy and strengthens Greek ties with the western partners.⁸ The religious conflict between the Greek Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church over recognizing the Orthodox Church of Ukraine also negatively affects the political relations between two countries and decreases the Russian influence on anti-European sentiments in Greece.⁹

Nevertheless, despite the recent trends of turning away from the friendly relations with Russia, Greece still remains a potential ally of Kremlin due to the long history of good relations and strong anti-European and pro-Russian sentiments in the Greek society. Greece has managed to turn out from one of the most Kremlin friendly countries in Europe into a reliable NATO ally in the Mediterranean but it remains to be seen how long the Greek government will be able to further continue such a policy despite the Russian propaganda.

¹ Trading Economics (2020). *Greece Government Debt to GDP* <<https://tradingeconomics.com/greece/government-debt-to-gdp>> (2020, November, 16).

² Apostolou, N. (2016). After Brexit, could there be Grexit? *Aljazeera* <<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/6/24/after-brexit-could-there-be-grexit>> (2020, November, 16).

³ Lukyanov, F. (2020). How will Russia benefit from a Grexit? *Financial Times*. <<https://www.ft.com/content/b3cfd6-f0c6-39a3-b0f3-65d8e3ce807e>> (2020, November, 16).

⁴ Greek City Times (2020). *Lavrov’s visit to Athens in late October: The “tango” of Greek-Russian relations* <<https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/10/03/lavrovs-visit-to-athens-in-late-october-the-tango-of-greek-russian-relations/>> (2020, November, 16).

⁵ Резчиков, А, Нечаев, А., Коваленко, Н. (2018). Греция показала свое истинное отношение к России. *Взгляд* <<https://vz.ru/politics/2018/7/11/556526.html>> (2020, November, 16).

⁶ Deutsche Welle (2018). *Greece to expel two Russian diplomats, ban two others – newspaper* <<https://www.dw.com/en/greece-to-expel-two-russian-diplomats-ban-two-others-newspaper/a-44628127>> (2020, November, 16).

⁷ Michalopoulos, S. (2018). US-Russia tensions escalate over Greece, Macedonia name deal. *EURACTIV.com* <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/us-russia-tensions-escalate-over-greece-macedonia-name-deal/>> (2020, November, 16).

⁸ Бавырин, Д. (2019). Греция переходит в лагерь противников России. *Взгляд* <<https://vz.ru/politics/2019/12/4/1011688.html>> (2020, November, 16).

⁹ Antonopoulos, P. (2019). New Chapter in Greek-Russian Relations. *BRICS Information Portal* <<http://infobrics.org/post/29662/>> (2020, November, 16).

Conclusion

Russia uses the economic vulnerability of most South European countries to strengthen its influence in them and encourage the eurosceptical sentiments. Currently Russia has the strongest political positions in such South European countries like Cyprus and Italy. Greece used to be even more Kremlin friendly country than Cyprus and Italy, but since 2018 the Greek-Russian relations worsened due to economic reasons (need for the EU financial assistance and Russia's inability to compensate it) and security factors (Greece's approval of Northern Macedonia's joining NATO, growing tensions with Turkey in Aegean Sea). Nevertheless, the Russian propaganda remains effective in Greece, where the anti-European and pro-Russian sentiments are still strong. In Spain, Russia tries to destabilize situation by propagandist support of the Catalan separatists, and despite these actions Moscow has managed to avoid serious tensions with the central government in Madrid and even considers Spain as a potential advocate of lifting economic sanctions from Russia. Portugal and Malta are not particularly interesting for Russia and do not face strong Russian influence.

In general, despite the economic problems and Brexit shock, the economic and political situation in South Europe has been more or less stabilized by 2020, and the probability of South European countries' withdrawal from the European Union (Grexit, Italexit, Spaxit etc.) seems to be rather low. Russia has pretty good relations with the South European countries but these countries follow the pro-European policy. Some officials like Italian prime-minister Giuseppe Conte call to lift the economic sanctions from Russia but their practical policy is not aimed at destroying the European solidarity. The radical pro-Russian and eurosceptic parties in Spain, Italy and Greece tend to become more moderate and more pro-European after they come to power. Russia's positions were significantly weakened in Greece, which used to have very good relations with Kremlin.

However, the COVID pandemic and global recession could be a strong game changer. Russia has already tried to use the pandemic to increase the pro-Russian and anti-European sentiments in Italy. Despite the Russian efforts, the situation seems to be under control by the national governments and EU central institutions in Brussels which allocated billions euro of economic assistance to the South European countries. Nevertheless, the further development of the pandemic is unpredictable, and the anti-European and pro-Russian sentiments may grow if the economic and health situation significantly worsens in South Europe. Under such conditions, countering the Russian propaganda could be recommended. The South European countries should pay more attention to their cyber and information security and consider the possibility of blocking some most propagandist Russian websites like Ukraine did. It appears that in the nearest future the negative effects of the Russian influence in South Europe would be effectively contained because during recent years the European Union has already demonstrated its ability to survive in such crises like economic recession, Brexit, migration waves, weakening ties with the United States and beginning of the pandemic. Thus, Europe has enough experience to effectively counter the Russian factors in South Europe, and the recent trends have already demonstrated some weakening of the Russian positions in this region.

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