

The “Skripal case”, that is the poisoning of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian military officer, and his daughter Julia in Salisbury (UK) on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, has been followed by Greek newspapers on a daily basis and with numerous articles. To expand our understanding of how Greek newspapers reacted to the incident we chose to look more systematically at six (6) newspapers: **Dimokratia** (right wing- populist), **Proto Thema** (right-wing- populist), **Kathimerini** (centre-right) **To Vima** (centre-left), **Efimerida ton Sintakton** (left-wing), **Avgi** (Left-wing). The effort was made to cover most political orientations.

In total we gathered 193 articles (Dimokratia: 5, Proto Thema 45, Kathimerini 50, To Vima: 41, Efimerida ton Sintakton: 25, Avgi: 27). It is important to stress that this is the totality of articles that contain references to the “Skripal case” even if the subject of the articles is more general (i.e. relations between Russia and the West or the EU) and in some cases irrelevant (i.e. the decision of a Greek University to award Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, with an honorary doctorate).

### *A coverage dominated by news stories and reporting*

One of the most important findings of our study is that the coverage of the “Skripal case” is effectuated- in the vast majority of cases- via news stories (reporting). In effect, we found only 6 opinions dealing with the issue. This figure- which is certainly to be confirmed by a more thorough verification of all articles- implies a massive domination of news items that by definition present a mainly informative character, lacking the interpretative and argumentative character of the opinions and the commentaries. Furthermore, among these 193 articles we found for instance no editorials; and among the 6 opinions only 3 dealt exclusively with the “Skripal case”. By itself, such a finding could indicate a neutral disposition on behalf of Greek newspapers, in the sense that they did not want to risk any judgment or interpretation that would force them to take part in the more general discussion pertaining to the relations between Russia and the West (EU, UK, US, NATO).

Indeed, the most common characteristic of the news stories found in the Greek newspapers is the insistence on the factual aspects of the story (i.e. the allegations of the British government, the reactions of Russia, the investigation confirming the use of toxic substances, the reactions of key European States such as Germany and France, the reactions of NATO, the reactions of the US and, of latest, the culmination of the diplomatic crisis between the UK and Russia with the expulsion of numerous diplomats). In other words, rarely one finds in such texts a more detailed analysis of the general context of the relations between Russia and the West or even of similar precedents (i.e. the Litvinenko case). This is, of course, quite understandable since in most cases the news stories of the Greek newspapers are composed by the information provided by news agencies. In the six newspapers studied, the most common source has been the AMPE news agency (Athens-Macedonia News Agency, public entity. Other sources include Reuters, AFP and only in the case of Avgi (left-wing, affiliated with SYRIZA) the Russian Agency Sputnik, occasionally used by Avgi as a source when it comes to the reactions of Russia.

***The headlines used by the Greek newspapers and the emphasis given to the various aspects of the case.***

Indicative selection of titles (17-19 March 2018)

Newspaper	Headlines
Proto Thema	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “British Minister of foreign affairs: Moscow fools no one anymore!” (March 19)</li> <li>2. “Russia: The case of the poisoning of Skripal proved beneficial for Putin” (March 19)</li> <li>3. New scenario for the Skripal case: He was poisoned through the ventilation system of his BMW” (March 19)</li> <li>4. “UK: The main energy companies stay alerted for Russian cyber attacks” (March 18)</li> <li>5. “NATO secretary: “We have to improve the defense towards a more aggressive Russia” (March 18)</li> </ol>
Avgi	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. “Skripal case: The Russians claim that the neurotoxic agent came from a British lab” (March 18)</li> <li>2. “Russia: elections in the midst of a Cold-War climate” (March 18)</li> <li>3. “May on the Skripal case: We will prepare our next steps in conjunction with our partners” (March 18)</li> </ol>

	4. "Skripal case: Moscow will expel 23 British diplomats" (March 17)
To Vima	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "A Cold-War climate thanks to a toxic Putin" (March 18)</li> <li>2. "The UK accuses Russia that it stores quantities of the lethal Novichok" (March 18)</li> <li>3. "Moscow implies that London is responsible for the neurotoxic gas" (March 18)</li> <li>4. "Skripal case: The British Ambassador was summoned to the Russian ministry of foreign affairs" (March 18)</li> </ol>

This selection of titles confirms the variety of aspects that are highlighted by the newspapers in the same period. If we were to attempt a general appreciation of the themes that dominated the headlines, it would be important to refer to the notion of "Cold War" that has been used extensively both in the headlines as well as the text of the news stories. A second theme seems to be the diplomatic tension between the UK and Russia and a third one the allegations regarding the origins of the neurotoxic agent. Further research could indicate how many times the story is presented from the UK's standpoint or from Russia's standpoint. The same could be done with the various aspects of the story.

In terms of the general disposition of the news stories (mainly judging from the headlines), it is observable that in most cases one may refer to a neutral disposition, which is manifested by the use of a descriptive language emphasizing the factual aspects of the story. Perhaps, the only newspaper that adopts a clearly critical disposition towards Russia even in its news stories is To Vima (centre left). For instance, To Vima is the only newspaper which right from the beginning of the case gave the more general context of similar precedents and policies employed by Russia in the past (i.e. "The *unknown substance* that kills Russian spies", March 5, "The poisoning of the former Russian spy brings to mind the Litvinenko case", March 6, "The UK will investigate Russia's involvement in relation to another 14 deaths", March 13).

### ***The opinions published by the Greek newspapers***

As it was already mentioned, we found only 6 opinions or commentaries among the 193 articles pertaining to the Skripal case. The findings coming from the opinions confirm those from the news stories. To Vima (centre light) has been the newspaper

which adopted the most critical disposition towards Russia, followed by a much lesser extent by Kathimerini (centre right). The opinions of Avgi (left wing) and Efimerida ton Sintakton (left wing) present a very different interpretation of the case. Right from its first analysis on the matter To Vima adopted a very firm stance on Russia's responsibility: "It is a fact that the Russian secret services have reactivated the practice of executing traitors, just like it happened in 2006 in the case of Litvinenko who was poisoned with plutonium in the UK. (...) Whether the attack on Skripal was ordered by the Kremlin or not, it shows the new policy and sends a clear message to those Russian who cooperate or have cooperated with Western secret agencies: they will have to be scared to death" ("Have the unwritten rules of spying changed?" (9 March).

In another opinion, To Vima offers a more clear interpretation of the Russian motivation behind the attack on Skripal: "Why did the revenge take place now and not earlier? The timing of the poisoning of the "traitor" with a neurotoxic agent is a question. If the allegations of Britain are true, then one of the explanations is linked to the elections in Russia. Given the electoral campaign was very boring (Putin's victory was certain), the Skripal case came conveniently to feed the Cold-War instincts of an entire generation of Russians who grew up in that period and reinforce Putin's profile as a powerful and decisive leader" ("A Cold-War climate thanks to a toxic Putin", 18 March).

In the case of Kathimerini the only reference in relation to the Skripal case comes from an opinion dealing with the decision of a Greek University to award an honorary doctorate to Vladimir Putin: "What does it matter whether the authoritarian Russian leader imprisons every voice of opposition" What does it matter whether he sends agents in the UK to murder his opponents? The *giants of knowledge* in Greece honor him for his work! ("Interests and Stupidity", 16 March)

The opinion of Efimerida ton Sintakton exemplifies what can be called an approach of equal distance towards both the UK and Russia: "Who really benefits- cui bono- from the assassination attempt (...)? The rising tension, in this temporal and political context, is beneficial to both Theresa May, who appears to be very weakened by the chaotic handling of Brexit, and Vladimir Putin who manipulates the patriotic sentiment in order to alarm his voters against another "anti-Russian campaign" from

the West. It is also beneficial to Donald Trump who tries to end all suspicions that he colluded with Russia in order to win the presidential elections” (The British target Putin in a spy thriller”, (17 March).

In the case of Avgi, one notes the most favorable disposition towards Russia, in the sense that the opinion questions the validity of the evidence put forth by the UK in order to show Russia’s involvement: “For Western countries, the use of a Russian-made neuro toxic agent (Novichoc) is by itself enough in order to prove Russia’s guilt. The proofs put forth by London come from the analysis of testing facilities at Porton Down- a facility for biological and chemical weapons which for many decades operates in the same obscure conditions for which the West accuse Russia. The crisis broke out immediately, without a report by an independent organization like the Organization for the prohibition of chemical weapons, while London refused to respond to Russia’s quest for obtaining samples of the substance (“Russia: elections in the midst of a Cold War climate”, 18 March). In a manner similar to Efimerida ton Sintakton, the opinion of Avgi adopts the standpoint that the incident is used for political reasons by all parties involved (the US, the UK and Russia).

### ***Conclusions***

This study showed that in their vast majority, the Greek newspapers adopted a neutral stance towards the Skripal case. With the exception of To Vima (centre left) they did not want to take part in the debate of the wider context of relations between Russia and the West. It is striking that this disposition is horizontal in terms of the political orientation of newspapers. Evidently, further research will establish clear patterns of attitudes towards Russia which will help include the Skripal case in a wider interpretative context. However, the strong pro-Russian sentiment in the Greek public opinion seems to have influenced the Greek newspapers not to emphasize Russia’s involvement.