

Russian Influence in Greece

22 04 2018

“I’m so happy to hear the Russian language being spoken at the National University of Athens. Yesterday I informed President Putin about today’s event. I’m convinced that occasions like this one today will help improve relations between Russia and Greece. Ioannis Kapodistrias spoke Russian fluently. So it would be such a shame to cut this thread that stretches back to that time and to not let it stretch out into the future. We are working constantly to spread the Russian language even further”. (Kapodistrias founded the university and was the first governor of Greece after the War of Independence against Ottoman rule, 1821-1828).

These are the words of Ivan Savvidis in 2016, at a special event held at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens to mark the launch of a collaboration between Mr Savvidis’ Charity Foundation and the leading Greek university. The four-year deal provides 60,000 euros a year to cover the salaries and expenses of lecturers and professors deemed experts in Russian language and culture. Mr Savvidis made a similar deal with the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki, where he funds two posts: one to teach Russian and the other for extended studies of the history and culture of Pontus, a region on the southern coast of the Black Sea, located in the eastern Black Sea region of modern-day Turkey, Anatolia. Historically speaking, Pontus is of special significance for modern Greece as Greek culture flourished there for centuries until ethnic cleansing by the neo-Turkish movement at the start of the 20th century. Pontic Greeks were purged, along with Assyrians, Armenians and other Christian minorities. It is estimated that about 500,000 Pontic Greeks were killed. There was also a considerable resistance movement by Pontic Greeks and a large exodus of refugees, especially towards northern Greece and Thessaloniki. Also, Mr Savvidis traces his roots back to Pontus. Traditionally, Pontic Greeks had a strong attachment to Russia. They are still characterized by strong nationalist and anti-Turkish sentiments, and the majority of them are strong adherents of the Greek Orthodox Church. Lastly, Pontic Greeks had (and still have, although to a limited extent nowadays) a dialect of their own, and Mr Savvidis spoke exclusively Pontic Greek until the age of seven.

The event at the University of Athens took place during a year (2016) of commemorations of the historic and cultural relationship between Greece and Russia. Government and education agencies supported events like this, as well as special conferences and other activities. In 2015 the Department of Slavic Languages (which was later renamed the Department of Russian Language, Literature and Slavic Studies) was under threat of closure because the Greek government wasn’t providing enough funds. Mr Savvidis came to the rescue, as chairman of the Federation of Greek Communities in Russia.

Mr Savvidis’ involvement in Greece’s higher education institutions was combined with his deep involvement in football and the media: currently, Mr Savvidis is the owner of F. C. PAOK, the Panhellenic Athletic Club of Constantinople, founded in 1926 in Thessaloniki by Greek refugees from Anatolia after the end of the Greek-Turkish War (1919-1922), which ended with Greece’s defeat. PAOK is the most popular football club in northern Greece and especially in Thessaloniki. There is a high level of corruption in Greek football. For many it is no coincidence that PAOK may this year win the national championship for the first time in over 30 years: since Mr Savvidis is the owner (he also came to the rescue of PAOK and paid off all of its debts) and since he has strong affiliations with the present Greek government, it is only

natural that he should be “rewarded” with the championship. Also, Mr Savvidis’ dynamic entry into Greek public life was combined with his involvement in the Greek media. Outlets currently under his control back the coalition government between the radical left SYRIZA and the populist far-right ANEL, which was formed after the national election in January 2015.

Mr Savvidis’ is now a household name, but for many in Greece he is also somewhat of an enigma. No one knows where this millionaire with roots in Russia and strong affiliations with President Putin himself came from. The truth is, however, that Mr Savvidis was not born on Russian soil, while his relationship with Putin has not always been plain sailing.

Ivan Savvidis was born 27 March 1959 in the village of Santa, in Tsalka, a remote region of southern Georgia, when it was part of the former Soviet Union. This was an area where Greeks lived and Mr Savvidis was the eighth child of a Greek family of workers. His upbringing combined hardboiled Soviet ideals with religious beliefs. Many Greeks at that time conducted Orthodox Church worship in private.

His family moved to Rostov, on the northeast coast of the Black Sea, and after school, young Ivan was drafted into the Soviet army. He was discharged in 1980, worked for a while in a state tobacco factory, and in 1984 went to study at the department of accountancy of the Rostov Institute of National Economy, where he obtained his degree in 1988. He won a position at the same state tobacco factory, where he soon rose to the position of deputy manager. During that time he married Kyriaki and had two sons, George and Nick. His son’s wedding on 11 June 2016 took place in the Holy Spirit Temple in the Prohoma area of Thessaloniki. This particular church is an exact copy of the church in Ivan Savvidis’ birth place in Georgia and it was built in Prohoma courtesy of Mr Savvidis, in memory of his parents.

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the privatization of many state enterprises, and the company where Mr Savvidis worked was one of them. In 1993, he was appointed general manager and became a member of the board of trustees. That year, the firm was renamed CJSC Donskoy Tabak, and Mr Savvidis remained at its helm for around 10 years. Today, his wife is officially its main owner, and the firm is considered to be the biggest tobacco company in Russia.

That was only the beginning. Mr Savvidis has been involved in a series of different businesses. In 2013, Forbes magazine put his Agrocom company 152nd on a list of the 200 biggest Russian firms, while also ranking him as the 30th richest person in Russia. Savvidis founded Agrocom in 2004: it’s a conglomeration of more than 40 different firms, employing around 17,000 people and with an annual turnover of about 1.3 billion euros. These firms produce goods in the fields of tobacco, food processing, agriculture, retail and theme park construction. Forbes magazine estimated his fortune in 2013 at 9.4 billion rubles (about 237 million dollars). It’s widely believed that this amount has increased considerably since his successful investments in markets close to Russia such as Abkhazia, Georgia, Southern Ossetia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, his business endeavors have reached far beyond countries and areas of Russian influence, into Belgium, the Palestinian territories, Paraguay and Nigeria. It is clear that he has become an increasingly powerful player in international business, considering that in 2015 alone his group of firms paid 562.7 million euros in taxes.

During the same period, Mr Savvidis became involved in football. Between 2002 and 2005 he served as the chairman of F. C. Rostov, paying off all its debts (about 10 million dollars).

In 1999, Mr Savvidis was honoured by the Russian Federation with a medal for services to the motherland, while in 2003 he was awarded the Medal of Honor. He has also received praise from the Russian president, the head of the Russian church and the local government of Rostov.

His involvement with politics started in 1998, when he was elected a member of the legislative council of Rostov region, and again in 2003. That same year he was also elected a member of the lower house of the Russian parliament, the State Duma. He was reelected in 2007, this time as a member of Vladimir Putin's United Russia party. He served as a member of the Committee for International Affairs, in charge of relations with the Greek Parliament.

The first time that Mr Savvidis appeared in Greek public life was in 2005, when he presented the then Greek president, Mr Karolos Papoulias, with a traditional Pontic sword at a special event at the Greek embassy in Moscow. Leading up to that, however, he had been instrumental in charity work with local Greek Pontic communities in northern Greece. On 26 February 2013, he was officially granted Greek nationality, stating as his official place of residence a suburb of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, where many Pontic Greeks moved during the 1920s. At this time, Mr Savvidis took over the management of the historic Macedonia Palace hotel in Thessaloniki with a 99-year lease, paying a monthly rent of 95,000 euros. In March he bought 82% of the tobacco firm SEKAP, which is based in the town of Xanthi, in northeastern Greece. This last purchase was a particularly fraught one for Mr Savvidis, as his opponents were Turkish businessmen who wanted to take control of the company. For Mr Savvidis, success in this deal was akin to a sacred mission. Mr Savvidis also went on to become the owner of several historical buildings in Thessaloniki, one of which was the former Club of Pontic Greeks (Efxinos Lesxi).

His interest in higher education, language and culture as a potential bridge between Russia and Greece started when he announced he would be granting scholarships and offering the possibility of careers at his companies. The real starting point was marked by the founding of a department of Russian language and another one focusing on Greek Pontic culture at the University of Thessaloniki. The money for this came from the Ivan Savvidis Charity Foundation and the project was launched at a big event in 2016. In his speech, Mr Savvidis claimed that graduates of this department could have high hopes of being hired by his firms. Alongside formal lectures and essays, students would be encouraged to participate in exchange programs designed to promote Russian arts and culture. A major conference was announced in 2016, organized jointly by the Department of Russian Language at Thessaloniki and the Southern Federal University of Rostov-Upon-Don. The subject was "Greece-Russia: Language as a channel of communication and intercultural contacts".

Before the funding of Russian and Pontic studies, Mr Savvidis went on to become the man in charge at FC PAOK on 10 August 2012. In fact, this was the second time that Mr Savvidis had attempted to take control of PAOK. He had tried previously in 2006, when the club's fans had welcomed him as if he were some kind of messiah (the club was in a dire financial situation). Mr Savvidis asked the eminent Greek lawyer Alexandros Likourezos to carry out a thorough check of the club's finances. Mr Likourezos is a highly successful lawyer and a well-known public figure in Greece. He is involved in politics and is a former MP

of the conservative New Democracy party. His name is strongly connected with the Dictio 21 (Network 21) movement, an ultranationalist group which espouses Greece's Orthodox Christian tradition. The group supports causes like the recognition of the massacre of the Pontic Greeks as genocide and has strong anti-Western tendencies. In 1999, Mr Likourezos sued NATO, along with thousands of Greeks (among them the famous composer Mikis Theodorakis), over the bombing campaign in the former Yugoslavia at the international court in the Hague.

In 2006, Mr Likourezos advised Mr Savvidis against buying PAOK as its finances were in a state of disarray. Mr Savvidis followed his advice but refused to give up on PAOK, claiming that "God will lead me to PAOK". So he came back for another attempt when he judged that the time was right. The choice of this particular football club is, perhaps, no coincidence: PAOK, whose team colours are black and white, was founded by immigrants and refugees from Anatolia, many of whom were Pontic Greeks. Its main symbol is the Byzantine double headed eagle and the name "Constantinople" is mentioned in its title (Greeks insist to this day on calling Istanbul by its old Byzantine name). Its base is Thessaloniki and, most of all, it is the most popular football club in the whole of northern Greece. Its fans are notorious for their fanaticism. Mr Savvidis immediately paid 21 million euros to rescue PAOK from financial collapse, but much more funding followed in subsequent years. "PAOK's debts are my debts", he said, and paid them all off, which helped elevate PAOK to a powerful position in Greek football, where the two dominant clubs come from Athens and Piraeus (Panathinaikos and Olympiakos). Usually, the owners of these two clubs control the referees and the Greek Football Federation with constant efforts behind the scenes (what in Greece is called "Paranga", "The Hut", where all decisions are made away from the public eye) and usually they have strong connections with whoever is in government. This year, PAOK is heading for the championship, not only because Mr Savvidis is closely connected to the present government, but also because he has reinforced PAOK with many players.

The main reason that many Greeks (who have a tendency to believe in conspiracies) feel that PAOK will win this year is that, since 2017, Mr Savvidis has gained considerable power in Greece by becoming a media mogul. That year, his firm Dimera acquired all the newspapers belonging to the Pegasus group, as well as the E TV channel. Ever since he took control, his newspapers have supported the government of SYRIZA-ANEL.

For many, Mr Savvidis is some kind of "agent" sent by Putin himself. Mr Savvidis has responded to this accusation by saying: "I do not think that I kept my identity secret. What connects me with Greece is not my business with Russia but the fact that I am a descendant of Byzantine Greeks. I am Pontic and, you have to believe me, I am more Greek than all of you".

At the time of writing, the events of Sunday 11 March 2018 are still reverberating in Greece: Ivan Savvidis strode on to the pitch of the Tuba football stadium in Thessaloniki, home ground of PAOK FC, accompanied by his bodyguards (one of whom is an active member of the Greek police). Mr Savvidis literally invaded the pitch carrying a pistol, which was clearly visible in a holster strapped to his right side. His aim was to persuade his team to withdraw from the game against the other competitor for the title this year, AEK

(also a club founded by Greeks back in 1924 but in Athens) in protest at what he saw as unfair treatment by the referee.

The irony here is that, very late the previous night, the Greek sport governing bodies had made a rather controversial decision: they had reversed penalties against PAOK (the docking of 3 points, as well as making the club play the critical game with AEK behind closed doors) due to violent incidents in Tuba involving PAOK fans during a match with Olympiakos FC. When PAOK's goal against AEK was ruled offside by the referee, Mr Savvidis made his now famous appearance in the field. The game was stopped completely, chaos followed, and a few minutes later the referee's decision was also reversed - this time from within the changing rooms. It remains to be seen what the Greek sports ruling bodies decide to do with PAOK FC after all this. According to Greek football laws, PAOK is in serious danger of being demoted from the Greek premiership. At the time this was going on, FIFA delegates had arrived in Athens to discuss the possibility of banning all Greek clubs from European games due to fan violence.

Photos of the armed and furious chairman of PAOK FC were seen around the world and precipitated heated debate in Greek political circles, as well as causing embarrassment in the Greek PM's office. PM Alexis Tsipras was quoted saying "I do not give a damn about the political cost, I want this situation to be over". For some, this meant a break in the strong ties between SYRIZA and Mr Savvidis. But so far, nothing like that seems to have happened: Mr Savvidis disappeared from public view for several days after the incident, issuing only a written statement in which he apologized for his behavior. The only thing that the government has done so far was to postpone all matches in the Greek championship without further explanation. No one knows when and if this season's Greek championship will start again. Also, some commentators argued that Mr Tsipras' quote was intentionally leaked by his office for PR purposes.

So far, nothing indicates a true and serious break between the present Greek government and Mr Savvidis. A serious question remains: why was Mr Savvidis not arrested after stepping on to the pitch with a firearm strapped to his side? Why did the Greek police stand passively watching? One explanation is that Greek police officers feared the worst if they simply did their job due to the heated atmosphere inside Tuba stadium. However, the non-arrest of Mr Savvidis is being interpreted in Greece as a natural outcome of the well-known relationship between Mr Savvidis and the government.

The day after the incident at Tuba stadium, New Democracy's vice-chairman, Mr Adonis Georgiadis, stated on TV that "someone who obviously breaks the law seems to enjoy some sort of favoured treatment", and he questioned "what influence does Ivan Savvidis hold over Mr Tsipras? Situations like this are reminiscent of countries in Latin America, like Colombia, as well as Russia". On the other hand, a former New Democracy official and MP, Mr Panagiotis Psomiadis (also a Pontic Greek), stated publicly: "Since you do not respect the Pontic (meaning Ivan Savvidis), then you must fear him". Mr Psomiadis was expelled from New Democracy for espousing populist, radical far-right ideas.

For many, this incident, though an extreme case of public behavior, is not out of character with Mr Savvidis' prior involvement in Greek public life and political affairs in general. Long before SYRIZA's ascent into power, Mr Savvidis had made public political statements. He had characterized former Greek PM George Papandreou (2009-2011), who first handled the economic crisis that erupted at the beginning of 2010, as a "non-patriot". The reason was that Mr Papandreou had refused to accept a loan on very good

terms that Russia had offered to Greece and, in fact, Mr Savvidis implied that he himself, personally, had played a key role in arranging a meeting between Mr Papandreou and Vladimir Putin.

The relationship between Mr Savvidis and President Putin has been a subject of speculation for quite some time now. The general feeling in Greece, but also in international circles, is that Ivan Savvidis is “Putin’s man” in Greece. It must be noted though that this relationship has not always been smooth. For instance, one of the major causes of problems in this relationship was Mr Savvidis’ public criticism of Russian PM Dmitry Medvedev, especially in relation to Medvedev’s decision to sell a stake in Rostov’s existing airport to a company planning to build a new airport. Savvidis’ business group, which held 51% of the old airport’s shares, disagreed with the construction of a new airport, feeling that this would threaten their business interests in the area. It is said that the friction between Mr Savvidis and Putin ended when they met and Savvidis “informed” Putin about the situation.

The more powerful Ivan Savvidis seems to become in Greece, the more he will attract Putin’s support, and in this respect, his involvement with the Greek media has to be viewed as a means to achieve further power and popular support. As mentioned above, the big break came last year when Mr Savvidis’ firm Dimera acquired all the newspapers belonging to the Pegasus group and E TV. This deal was complicated because TV channels like Mega had high levels of debt. It was owned mainly by Pegasus, but a stake also belonged to the Vardinoyannis, a famous and powerful Greek family of shipowners. Eventually, Mega stopped broadcasting, on 14 March 2018. Another problem occurred in the same period, when it was announced that Dimera would no longer be publishing Pegasus’ major newspaper Ethnos.

Mr Savvidis visited the offices of E to talk to the staff and was greeted like a saviour. After Mr Savvidis had talked to his new employees, he then met Mr Panos Kamenos, leader of the populist far-right party ANEL, with which SYRIZA has formed a government. Mr Kamenos heads the Ministry of National Defense. Their meeting took place away from the press and TV cameras in the office of E’s executive director. This was viewed as unprecedented even by the low standards of Greek politics, and as such it became the subject of aggressive criticism by the political opposition.

Some political commentators, as well as members of the New Democracy party, have stated that the major political scandal in regard to the relationship between Mr Savvidis and SYRIZA has to do with the tobacco firm SEKAP. SEKAP was fined 37.5 million euros for tax evasion and for tobacco smuggling. This case involved Mr Nikos Pappas, the PM’s right-hand man in SYRIZA (and, many believe, the person who does all the dirty work in the background). He is the minister for digital policy, telecommunications and media and was reportedly the main driving force behind the idea for a coalition between SYRIZA and ANEL in early 2015.

In early 2017, Greek courts upheld the fines against SEKAP. In the meantime, however, the firm was acquired by Savvidis. On 28 April 2017, the government passed special legislation in parliament that wrote off the 37.5 million fine in order to allow the firm’s survival and the development of its investments. An interesting note: any charges against Mr Pappas, as well as other associates, were dropped, according to the lawyer who handled the case in court, Mr Alexandros Likourezos, the same person who had handled Savvidis’ business with PAOK FC in 2012. It goes without saying that New Democracy insisted that this

particular legislation had been passed in favour of Mr Savvidis' interests, and some of its most senior members claimed that Mr Savvidis bought his TV channels with the money he saved due to this controversial legislative act.

Particularly after the incident at Tuba stadium, Ivan Savvidis has attracted the attention of international media. Germany's Spiegel magazine published report recently in which it was clearly stated that Tsipras and Savvidis owe each other quite a lot. Spiegel also mentions previous statements by Savvidis in which he compared Tsipras with Putin (at the same time saying that New Democracy's leader, Mr Kyriakos Mitsotakis, would never become prime minister of Greece).

However, Spiegel also cautioned that one should not overestimate Russian influence in Greece, because "a German company has bought all of Greece's airports, a Chinese company bought Pireus' port, while Greek railways (in which the Russians had shown considerable interest) has been taken over by Italians". Spiegel also reminds its readers that dubious businessmen were involved in the world of Greek football long before the emergence of Savvidis.

Savvidis had attracted international interest long before the recent incident in Thessaloniki. Stern magazine had published a special feature on its website in which it stated that although Greece is suffering due to the acute economic crisis and is heavily dependent on European financial support, there are many circles in Greece which favour support from Russia and Putin himself. Their idea is based on long-standing anti-western and anti-European sentiment, as well as on the notion that what happened in Greece after 2010, with the so-called "Memorandum", was an act of betrayal by the European Union (and the IMF, but above all, Germany) and the concealed aim was that Greece would become a state literally enslaved to German banks. This populist idea found many supporters, and in the first months of the SYRIZA-ANEL government (from January to September 2015), the main political line was to make a clean break with the EU, especially by the then minister of finance, the infamous Mr Yanis Varoufakis. There was talk about buying cheap oil from Venezuela, and of course about extensive Russian financial support, both of which would allow Greece to separate from the European Union.

This is not the case anymore; it seems that SYRIZA has compromised in its dealings with the EU, following more of a "realpolitik" line and abandoning radical leftist attitudes (the party in fact split in September 2015 as its deeper "red" members abandoned it).

Having said that, SYRIZA has been playing along with Savvidis in an attempt to establish a new status quo within the country. The fact that Savvidis may be promoting Russian interests in Greece is beside the point as long as he serves SYRIZA's political and economic interests. In any case, the mentality of the politics of oligarchy that characterizes Russia is quite convenient and familiar to SYRIZA. Its leaders and members were hardboiled communists in the past and they generally hold a deep distrust of parliamentary democracy and of the standard institutional procedures followed by liberal democracies.

The case of Savvidis also has a cultural aspect which is of equal, if not even greater, importance. As he himself has stated, "Greece's deliverance rests on the Christian Orthodox world, and in this part of the world Russia is the richest country of all". Statements like this strike at a soft spot with Greeks both from

the right and the left of the spectrum who feel that international centres, such as Brussels, Berlin and Washington, are the “root of all evil” for Greece's misfortunes.

This attitude has a long history that goes all the way to the aftermath of the Greek War of Independence in the 1820s, when the modern Greek state was founded: the first actual political parties in Greece were in fact called “English”, “French”, “Russian” and each of those promoted the relevant country's influence in the newly formed Greek state. The fact that Western powers played a vital role in the success of the War of Independence and in the successive years, with financial and military support, along with the myth of Greece's ancient past (“the cradle of democracy” and so forth), were considered essential in keeping Greece in line with the West.

During the 20th Century, Greece's relationship with France, Great Britain and, above all, with the US, formed the country's character as a state, especially after Greece became a member of the European Economic Community in 1980. On the other hand, the Byzantine past and the heavy influence of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which brings with it a preference for small communities and family ties, have also played a very important role in this split identity: the irony is that Greece acquired a strong parliamentary tradition from as far back as the 19th century, but at the same time, Greeks remained highly suspicious towards state institutions, putting all their trust in the idea of the family. After the economic crisis, this sort of existential split again came to the surface, and one may say that Ivan Savvidis represents this other pole: the Eastern and specifically anti-Western mindset, in an age when, in terms of international politics, Putin's Russia is emerging as a superpower which poses a threat to the West and its values.

As a concluding note, the latest development so far in regard to the aftermath of the Tuba stadium incidents was announced via Twitter by one of Savvidis' sons. The tweet says: “We're off to Russia. A message to all our enemies” and is accompanied by an emoticon depicting a bear. Masturbating.

Note: the Department of History, Archaeology and Management of Cultural Resources of the University of the Peloponnese (based in the town of Kalamata) decided to name Putin an honorary professor. It is not clear why, or who played the major role in this decision. What we do know is that there was such a fierce reaction by journalists and the social media that the decision was reversed. It was said that a Greek institution would be honouring a “semi-dictator”.

In December 2017 the Democritus University of Thrace did award Putin a gold medal “for his significant contribution to peripheral stability and well-being”. In 2001, the University of Athens had named Putin an honorary professor.