
RUSSIA ACCUSED OF TRYING TO UNDERMINE MACEDONIA NAME DEAL

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In the past month, Russia has been accused on several occasions of trying to undermine the agreement reached between Macedonia and Greece in June about changing the former countrys name to the Republic of North Macedonia. The signing of the agreement is seen as removing the main obstacle for Macedonias NATO (and eventual EU) membership.

The first instances of Russias interference became clear on 11 July, when Greek government decided to expel two Russian diplomats, including the Russian Embassy official Victor Yakovlev, and ban the entry into Greece of two more, accusing them of illegal acts against Greeces national security.

According to Khatimerini, the diplomats were accused of meddling in Greeces domestic affairs. Through monetary rewards, characterised as bribery, they were trying to influence municipalities, metropolitans in the Greek Orthodox hierarchy, and to gain influence in Mount Athos.

Additional details of the supposed plan were reported by Euronews. Bribes for local officials were allegedly being offered in exchange for backing street protests against Greece-Macedonia agreement. Money was also offered to cultural associations, right-wing groups and Orthodox church, to play into nationalist sentiments which oppose any mention of Macedonia in a countrys name, even with the North coming before it.

Apart from the diplomats, the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society was also involved in numerous coordinated efforts to expand Russian influence and provoke opposition to the agreement, the site further claims. Everything was a part of Russias initiative to halt NATOs continuing expansion in the Balkans.

After Moscows initial reaction, in which United States were accused of being behind the expulsion of diplomats, Athens reportedly opened all channels of communication with Russia in order to defuse tensions with country it has traditionally shared strong ties.

In the meantime, accusations against Russia started coming from Macedonia as well. As Prime Minister Zoran Zaev stated for BuzzFeed News, his government has received information about Greek businessmen sympathetic to the Russian cause who are paying Macedonians between \$13,000 and \$21,000 to cause violence ahead of 30 September referendum, Balkan Insight reports. On that day, citizens of Macedonia are supposed to vote on whether to accept or reject the deal with Greece. Prime Minister Zaev did not go further into details.

Finally, on 6 August, Russia opted for diplomatic retaliation, expelling two Greek diplomats: the

Commercial Attaché and the director of the press office of the Greek embassy in Moscow. Additionally, the director of Greek Foreign Ministrys political office was also banned from entering the country.

According to EURACTIV, Greek diplomatic sources said Russias decision was asymmetric considering that Athens had evidence and reasons to expel the two Russian diplomats. On 10 August, Greek Foreign Ministry also released a statement, saying that Russia seems to be unable to understand the countrys principled position about good neighbourly relations.

We want to remind our Russian friends that no country in the world would tolerate attempts to a) bribe state officials, b) undermine its foreign policy, and c) interfere in its internal affairs. Greece took measures only after documenting tangible incriminating evidence. Moreover, Greece never interfered or attempted to interfere in Russias internal affairs, the statement reads.

On the same day, European Commission also condemned Russias actions in Greece. Disrespect for other countries sovereignty and interference in their domestic affairs is unacceptable. The EU has always been clear about this and recognises the challenge, as also evidenced by recent discussions in the European Council, said Commissions spokesman Carlos Martin.

As referendum in Macedonia nears, Athens has vouched to respond to Russias actions appropriately and proportionally.

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