

# Tsipras in Berlin: Germany and Greece pledge “cooperation” in imposing austerity

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Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras made his first official trip to Germany yesterday. As is customary for such visits, Tsipras was received with full military honors in Berlin. Together with Chancellor Angela Merkel, he reviewed an honor guard from the *Bundeswehr* (Armed Forces). Subsequently, the two held a joint press conference, followed by an evening dinner.

An uninformed observer of the ceremony would have had difficulty ascertaining that before Tsipras’s arrival there had been a serious conflict between the German government and the regime in Athens headed by Syriza. Tsipras’ inaugural visit took place in a seemingly normal, almost friendly atmosphere. At a joint press conference on Monday evening, both leaders struck a conciliatory note and invoked the spirit of mutual cooperation.

Tsipras stressed that just like his social democratic and conservative predecessors, he was ready to continue the austerity measures in close cooperation with the EU and the German government. “We need to better understand ourselves,” said Tsipras. “There is no other way to overcome the existing difficulties than dialogue.” His government would adhere to all existing contracts and make the necessary structural reforms. The joint meeting with Merkel could prove “fruitful.”

For her part, Merkel stressed the need for “sincere collaboration” in the “spirit of cooperation.” Both countries are part of the European Union and NATO, and thus have a major responsibility for “establishing peace in Europe” and its future. The Greek prime minister was “very welcome” in Berlin.

Ahead of the meeting, many German politicians and media commentators who had sharply criticized the Greek government in recent days had already begun to tone down their verbal assaults. Even *Bild*, the

newspaper that in recent months has led the witch-hunt against Greece and “the Greeks,” ran a headline, “Welcome to Germany, Herr Tsipras!” and listed 50 reasons why “we like Greece.”

Over the weekend, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his Greek counterpart Nikos Kotzias also emphasized the cooperation between Germany and Greece. “We must not allow the undoubtedly large and difficult issues that we must resolve together in Europe erode the strong foundation of German-Greek relations,” Steinmeier said after a dinner with Kotzias at the foreign ministry.

Kotzias emphasized in comments to *Deutsche Welle*, “There is a long-term friendship and common interests. The most important thing is that we better understand each other, that we break down the stereotypes that exist on both sides.”

There are two main reasons for the ostentatious show of cooperation between Berlin and Athens. First, Syriza has completely capitulated to the European Union and the German government over the past several weeks, making clear that it will not only continue the austerity measures dictated by the “troika” (European Union, International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank) but will intensify them.

At a high level meeting with European Union political heavyweights last Thursday in Brussels, Tsipras personally pledged to enforce all cuts as agreed and promised a new austerity list. According to media reports, the list being prepared contains far-reaching attacks on the working class.

*Spiegel Online* wrote that “the hated privatization programme of the previous government, which Tsipras’s government had stopped, will be resumed.” Among other things, it provides for the Frankfurt airport operator Fraport to take over 14 regional Greek

airports as previously agreed. However, at other important transport facilities, including the Port of Thessaloniki, the Greek government would “only” sell up to a 49 percent share.

At the same time, Syriza wants to raise the retirement age and introduce retirement at 67, following the German model. In the future, only those who have worked for at least 40 years will be able to receive a pension at 62. For anyone retiring earlier, there will be sharp cuts in pensions.

In addition, and jointly developed with the OECD, there will be a “tool kit” for structural reforms, a synonym for further liberalization of the Greek economy and labor market. Officially, Syriza wants to break up monopolies and fight corruption in public procurement. In plain English, this means creating better conditions for international financial capital to exploit Greek workers and the resources of the country.

The second reason for the rediscovered German-Greek “friendship” is of a geopolitical nature. Brussels, Washington, Berlin and Athens are of the opinion that a Grexit (Greek exit from the euro) must be avoided at all costs.

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* early last week, the president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, invoked EU unity and the alliance with the United States. “We must prevent a Greek departure. It would certainly be a catastrophe. ... We now need to focus and understand that it’s not just about money but about a geopolitical context.”

He asked, “Can you imagine Europe without Greece? With the crisis in Libya, the fragile situation in the Balkans, Moldova, Transnistria, Cyprus. And then a dramatic Greek departure too?” Then he warned, “The consequences for Europe would not only be financial. A withdrawal of Greece would be the most dramatic chapter in the history of the European Union.”

Last week, the head of the European Department at the US State Department, Victoria Nuland, travelled to Greece to push for an agreement between Athens and the troika. According to a report by the *Deutsche Presse Agentur*, Washington wanted a “quick solution,” since Greece’s exit from the euro could have “serious consequences for the southeastern flank of NATO.”

Nuland is one of the hawks of US foreign policy who want to increase pressure on Russia militarily in the

Ukraine crisis. They regard the unity of the EU and NATO under American leadership as a precondition for this.

Despite German-American tensions regarding the type of joint action against Russia, at least for the time being the German ruling class is generally of the opinion that a Grexit must be prevented.

While Tsipras and Merkel met in Berlin, and invoked European unity, during a brief visit in Slovakia Steinmeier warned, “We have had a much too long discussion about a Greek exit from the euro. Now we need to talk seriously again.” He warned that a failure of the Greek bailout would be felt by “the whole world,” and would undermine the “credibility” of the EU.

The German bourgeoisie is increasingly openly pursuing the aim of uniting the continent under its leadership. Only last Friday at a meeting in Brussels of the transatlantic think tank German Marshall Fund, Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen supported the establishment of a European army.

Despite Tsipras’s subservience, the international financial markets are keeping up the economic pressure on Greece in order to ensure the unity of the EU on an extremely reactionary militarist and anti-working class basis. For example, citing internal calculations of the EU Commission, the Sunday edition of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported that the Greek government only has sufficient liquidity to pay salaries and to meet the claims of creditors in the financial markets until April 8. Tsipras only had a “good two weeks to coordinate a complete list of reforms with donors,” the newspaper declared.



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