

Serbs Are Not “Little Russians”

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Contrary to conventional wisdom, Belgrade and Moscow are not natural allies. But Westerners who treat them as such are only driving them closer.

In Serbia, it makes no difference whether the discussion is among friends in a bar or on a talk show with the most distinguished social scientists: No matter their walk of life, Serbs are seemingly united in the belief that the West will never accept them. Even the most pro-European and pro-American Serbs sense that they will always be seen as “little Russians” due to the two countries’ shared ethnic and religious heritage. Feeling under suspicion because of their Slavic, Orthodox identity, Serbs believe that they have been pegged as Russia’s Balkan proxy—and are turning away from the West in response. This mutual miscomprehension is worrying, because increased ties between Russia and Serbia have been the cornerstone of Russia’s revived presence in the Balkans, and because the European Union and the West cannot stabilize the region without Serbia.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Part of the problem is that Western thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic all too often emphasize a supposed “traditional” alliance between Serbia and Russia. An April 2018 report, [“Do the Western Balkans Face a Coming Russian Storm?”](#) written by Mark Galeotti for the European Council on Foreign Relations, described Serbia as Russia’s potential “Trojan Horse” in the European Union. That same month, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Wesley Clark wrote an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* titled, “Don’t wait for the western Balkans to blow up again. The U.S. and the E.U. must act.” Clark made a reference to “pro-Russian” Serbs. There are real dangers in such a misreading—not least of which is that the notion of Serbia’s “alliance” with Russia could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Serbs are not innocent in this matter. In official statements [Serbian and Russian officials](#) often use the vocabulary of traditional allies. As Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic said in June during his visit to Russia: “Russia and Serbia are traditional friends and allies. . . .We will remain friends forever.” At [the celebration of the World War II victory](#) in Moscow on May 9, 2018, Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vucic, along with Benjamin Netanyahu, was one of only two foreign leaders to officially attend and stand at Russia’s President Vladimir Putin’s side. In June 2018 in Russia, Serbian armed forces took part in trilateral military exercises alongside their Russian and Belarus colleagues entitled “Slavic Brotherhood 2018.”

Nevertheless, it’s misleading to call Serbs and Russians allies. Behind the oversimplified moniker portraying Serbians as “little Russians” lies a more nuanced relationship that bears closer examination.

Histories of Serbian-Russian relations often trace their roots to imperial Russia’s support for the liberation of the Balkans from the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. Others argue that the modern relationship began with Russia’s alliance with Serbia in World War I. But this selective reading of history fails to appreciate the complex relationship between Serbia and the Great Powers.

As was the case with many Balkan nations, Serbia's national awakening in the 18th and 19th centuries was inspired by intellectuals who sought to modernize and Westernize their nation through the importation of European intellectual influence. Serbia's first constitution is a case in point—the Sretenje Constitution of 1835 was inspired by France and Belgium.

Nonetheless, history has many twists and turns. During the 19th century Western diplomatic thought on Serbia was divided between two camps. The first perceived Serbs as an extension of Russian interests that needed to be contained by preserving the Ottoman Empire, while the second thought that Serbia should be embraced and converted into a bulwark against Russian influence.

Serbia itself was a reflection of these interests. While the country tried to transform itself along European constitutional and cultural lines, it found itself frequently aligned with Russia. These tended to be for reasons of hardboiled realism rather than ideology. Russia was the only great power that actively sought the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. For Serbs, it was possible to apply the dictum that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” for many years.

Thus Serbs have reason to be grateful to Russia—the renewal of Serbian statehood in the 19th century would probably not have happened without Russian support. Yet relations were full of ambiguities. Serbs tried to secure Russian support without compromising their autonomy, while Russia was frequently frustrated by Serbian disobedience, as in the case of the Obrenovic dynasty, which frequently was not willing to coordinate its foreign policy with Russia. Moscow was particularly hesitant to support Belgrade out of fear it would be sucked into a great power conflict, as would eventually happen in 1914.

The 20th century has proved no less complicated. Serbia, both independently and as part of the newly formed Yugoslavia, proved that it was equally able to ally itself with Western powers as its interests dictated, as demonstrated by its alliances with the United States in the First World War and France during and after the war.

Between the two world wars, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, ruled by the Serbian Karadjordjevic dynasty and with an ethnic Serbian majority, was part of the Eastern European buffer against both Germany and the Soviet Union. The honeymoon that began with the Soviet liberation of Yugoslavia from Nazi occupation and the inception of a communist government in Yugoslavia was short-lived. In the Cold War era, the desire by Yugoslav communist strongman Josip Broz Tito for independence from Moscow led in 1948 to the famous Tito-Stalin split. George Kennan, the legendary father of containment, perceived a communist but independent Yugoslavia as a way to drive a wedge within the Soviet bloc.

During the Yugoslav Wars, Russia was frequently portrayed as a supporter of Milosevic's regime. This is inaccurate. Boris Yeltsin despised Milosevic for his support of the failed communist coup against Gorbachev, after which Yeltsin came to power. The NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 represented a turning point for Russian foreign policy, and not because of sympathies toward Serbia. For Moscow the intervention was a clear sign that it had lost its status as a great power, as it was ignored by NATO and bypassed in the UN Security Council.

Meanwhile, in the post-Milosevic era governments in Belgrade have been suspicious of Putin due to his studiously neutral stance during the anti-Milosevic revolution. Besides, Moscow did not show much interest in Belgrade; shortly before and after Milosevic's fall Russia's main interlocutor in the former Yugoslavia was Milo Djukanovic's regime in Montenegro. It would be wrong to argue that there has been a long-standing Belgrade-Moscow compact.

In this sense, Moscow's development of closer ties with Belgrade over the past decade should not be seen as the renewal of an old alliance but instead as the product of purely modern, Putin-era foreign policy. It is through this prism that the current relationship should be assessed.

One notable example has been Moscow's support for Serbia's sovereignty over Kosovo. This support suits Moscow's interests neatly. By backing Serbia on issues like Kosovo, the Kremlin believes that it gains support and influence in the Balkans cheaply. Without needing to invest significant effort or resources, Moscow can oppose the West in its own backyard—a “win-win” for Putin.

By backing Serbia, Russia is testing its own desire for a multipolar order, one based on a concert of great powers. At the core of this is an effort by Moscow to overturn the unipolar world order it perceived in the Balkans in the 1990s, and to reaffirm its status as a global great power—a status it feels has been wrongfully denied by the West. But by seeking to do this on the cheap, Russia has limited the extent of its ability to influence. Moscow has no military presence in the Balkans; Putin pulled Russian peacekeepers out of Bosnia and Kosovo in 2003. Surprisingly, Serbia has far more military exercises with NATO and Western countries than with Russia. The European Union outguns Russia economically in Serbia and, with the exception of the energy sector, is Serbia's largest investor and employer. The European Union is also the country's largest donor.

Given this, it would be reasonable to ask why Serbia feels the needs to juggle between Russia and the West. The answer is that Serbia has pursued this balancing act in the power vacuum that has existed since 2008, when the European Union and the U.S. government ceased paying close attention to the Balkans. The shock of the Euro crisis created an impulse in Serbian foreign policy for hedging and diversification of partnerships, as Serbia increasingly felt itself on the periphery of the Western world.

This power vacuum has been exacerbated by the migration crisis and Brexit. Both have raised very real questions of whether Serbia will actually join the European Union. Consequently, Serbia is accepting overtures from non-Western players—not only Russia, but also Turkey, China, and the UAE. Seeing only deadlock in its efforts to join the European Union, Serbia is ready to pit Western and non-Western actors against each other to see from whom it can extract better political and economic conditions.

Serbia's current balancing act between Russia and the West also has a source in Serbian domestic politics. According to public opinion polls 41 percent of Serbs perceive Russia as Serbia's greatest friend, with Putin still the most popular foreign leader in Serbia.

However, Russia's popularity is the result of a Serbian emotional backlash against Western policies in the 1990s and the independence of Kosovo. It is not the product of emotional ties from the past. Another reason why the Serbian

government has kept the Russian option open is so as not to alienate pro-Russian segments of the Serbian electorate. Serbia and the Balkans have seen a rise in illiberal political movements in recent years, with EU policymakers frequently turning a blind eye to these developments. As a result, the Serbian government keeps a Russian option alive as leverage over the West, and to avoid criticism for a downward trend in democracy and the rule of law, as the political scene remains dominated by a single man (Vucic) and freedom of the press continues to decline.

These domestic calculations have been further exacerbated by the underlying power that Kosovo holds in Serbian politics. For Serb nationalists it is regarded as integral for Serbian national identity, while for pro-Western Serbs the West's support for Kosovo's independence was a sign that Serbs are not actually embraced by the West. The Serbian political class is aware that it cannot move forward without progress toward resolving the long-standing Kosovo issue. But in order to save face with its constituents, the Serbian leadership has to come up with some settlement in which Serbia will not be perceived as the total loser of the Kosovo dispute. To that end, Serbia must have a great power backer in the negotiating process, and as Serbia lacks a patron in the West, Russia is useful in that role. As long as Kosovo remains in play and as long as Serbian leadership lacks a settlement acceptable to public opinion, Russia will have a high place in Serbian foreign policy considerations. The West should be cognizant of this as this it leaves a major door open for Russian overtures into Serbia and by extension the Balkans.

There are lessons to be drawn. Russia will continue its current policies for as long as it can, but it is aware that the Balkans will remain anchored to Europe. This means that there are limits on how far Russia will go. Meanwhile, there is no reason for Serbia not to treat Russia as a friendly country, but Belgrade should be aware that sooner or later it must decide what its long-term foreign policy priorities are. In doing so, Serbia's political leaders must make a point of explaining to their citizens that just because Serbia's interests are not always aligned with the West does not mean that they are identical to Russia's.

For their part, both the European Union and the United States need to be aware that close ties between Russia and Serbia are in large part the result of taking Serbia and the Balkans for granted. Serbs got a taste of this on July 9, 2018, when the Balkan leaders came to London for a summit intended to be hosted by British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, only to be stood up as Johnson dramatically resigned. Beyond avoiding such obvious slights, Western diplomats must understand that there is no ancient compact between Moscow and Belgrade, but that Serbian-Russian relations have evolved over time as the two countries' shared interests and cultural history have occasionally intersected. This simple recognition could be the beginning of a much-needed new approach from both Serbia and its interlocutors in the West, one that could stabilize and re-integrate the Balkans' most geographically central country.

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