

U.S. Leaks Show Serbia Power Play

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BELGRADE — Russia is playing on Serbia's mistaken belief that it is still a key player in the power dynamic with the West to draw the country's focus away from joining the EU and NATO, U.S. diplomats have concluded.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin will emphasize the bonds linking the two Orthodox Christian nations during a visit to Serbia on Wednesday, the eve of the 12th anniversary of the NATO bombing over Belgrade's policy toward Kosovo.

U.S. cables two years ago highlight concern about Russian diplomacy in the region around the same anniversary.

The "nostalgia for being courted by both Russia and the West remains a part of Serbia's yearning for self-importance and leads to a mistaken belief that it can chart an independent path while still committing to EU membership as a strategic objective," an embassy official wrote in May 2009.

Another embassy official was even more pointed in a confidential July 2009 cable: "Serbia continues to believe it has a bridging role to play between Russia and the EU, which is widely

scoffed at in European circles."

The comments are in a series of U.S. diplomatic cables leaked to WikiLeaks and obtained by Reuters that show continued aggressive jockeying for influence between Moscow and Washington in Europe two decades after the end of the Cold War.

Putin's visit on the eve of the anniversary of NATO bombing appears deliberately timed to remind Serbia of its past differences with the West.

"The Russians appear to be basking in their 'Serbia's Savior' role, using the 10th anniversary of the NATO intervention in Kosovo as an opportunity to raise their public profile in Serbia and cast the U.S. and other Western partners in a negative light," one cable concluded at about the same time two years ago. "This campaign resembles classic Soviet agitprop, vilifying the United States, while casting Russia as the fount of justice and international order. Stirring up Balkan unrest is a dangerous game, but current Russian behavior demonstrates that it's the game they clearly want to play."

"Serbs and Russians are profoundly ignorant of each other, the former from a lack of any real interaction throughout history, and the latter out of utter lack of interest; other than Serbia's periodic usefulness as a naive and willing Russian pawn in the Balkans," one official wrote in 2009. "The only 'winner' in this calculation is Russia, who will continue to play on Serbia's naivete and stubbornness, to keep itself a player in Balkan politics and to keep Serbia out of NATO."

The cables cast doubt on the wisdom of Serbia's 2009 sale of a 51 percent stake in its oil refiner NIS to Gazprom Neft for 400 million euros (\$547.3 million).

"Serbia's current partnership with Russia has resulted in support for Serbia's quixotic and resource-exhausting quest to 'keep' Kosovo, but at the price of practically donating to the Russians her oil giant NIS," one cable said in July 2009.

The comments make clear that Washington still wants to work closely with Belgrade and the administration of its President Boris Tadic, however.

"In spite of their misplaced and misunderstood sentimentality for Russia, Serbs crave American respect," one diplomat wrote in 2009 just after U.S. President Barack Obama took office.

"Though the Tadic administration has done scant little to deserve it, the incoming U.S. administration has an opportunity to give his 'pro-European' government an alternative to Russia."

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