

Serbian Leader Meets Putin at United Russia Convention

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Serbia is on a "long and uncertain" road to joining the European Union but will not give up its claim to Kosovo for the sake of membership, President-elect Tomislav Nikolic told President Vladimir Putin on Saturday.

It was Nikolic's first foreign trip since he was elected president May 20.

But his aides said the visit to Russia had been planned before his shock election victory, and Nikolic said his first official foreign visit after he is inaugurated president would be to Brussels on June 12.

The meeting with Nikolic was also Putin's first encounter with a foreign leader from outside the former Soviet Union since he returned to Russia's presidency May 7.

The pair spoke warmly of ties between their nations, which share mostly Slavic, Orthodox Christian culture, animus toward NATO and opposition to the independence of Kosovo.

"We see Serbia as our spiritual brothers," said Putin, who met Nikolic on the sidelines of a United Russia convention.

Nikolic told Putin that "Serbia is a partner of Russia in the Balkans" and said he would protect the interests of Serbia and Russia. But Nikolic also offered further assurance that he wants Serbia to join the EU.

"Serbia is on the road to the EU. It is a long and uncertain road. We will order our country according to the rules that exist in the EU," Nikolic told Putin.

He added that he has "not heard that there exists the condition that Serbia should recognize Kosovo. We cannot do that, even if it meant breaking off negotiations at that very moment."

Putin has sought to increase economic ties with Serbia. He told Nikolic that Russia was "ready" to provide an \$800 million infrastructure improvement loan that has long been under negotiation, but he did not say when it might be finalized.

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