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Serbia Salutes Putin but Says Future Is With Europe

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Russian President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic during their official meeting at Serbia Palace building in Belgrade Oct. 16.

BELGRADE — Serbia feted Russia's Vladimir Putin with troops, tanks and fighter jets on Thursday to mark seven decades since the Red Army liberated Belgrade, balancing its ambitions of European integration with enduring reverence for a big-power ally deeply at odds with the West.

The display of military pomp, at a moment when the West says Russian troops are making war in Ukraine, laid bare the balancing act Serbia — a candidate for membership of the European Union — has been forced into by a crisis recalling the Cold War.

It demonstrated, too, Russia's influence in the Balkans, which like much of Eastern Europe is dependent on Russian gas.

Before thousands of onlookers, more than 3,000 soldiers marched in Belgrade's first military parade since 1985, when it was the capital of socialist Yugoslavia. Tanks rumbled behind them

and jets tore through the rainy skies above.

Putin looked on, having received Serbia's highest state decoration, the Order of the Republic of Serbia. Nazi-occupied Belgrade fell to the Red Army and Yugoslav partisans on Oct. 20, 1944, but the parade was held on Thursday, Oct. 16, to accommodate Putin, on his way to Milan for an EU-Asia summit set to be dominated by Ukraine and fears of a new European gas crisis.

But despite the red-carpet treatment and lofty talk of Slav brotherhood, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic said his country would not veer from a strategic shift west over the 15 years since it was at war with NATO over Kosovo.

"Serbia is on its European path, and we will not give up on that path," he told a joint news conference with Putin. Notably, Vucic spoke by phone on Wednesday evening with U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, though Washington's ambassador to Serbia declined an invitation to attend the parade.

Serbia, which began negotiations this year on joining the 28-nation EU, has refused to join the Western sanctions imposed on Russia for its backing of pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, despite EU pressure to align its foreign policy.

Belgrade still has time, however, with EU accession unlikely before 2020 at the earliest.

'Our Mother'

For the Serbian government, Putin's visit is popular with many voters, for whom fellow Orthodox Christian Russia is still Serbia's protector. For Putin, the parade will play well at home, with the Russian economy taking a hit from the sanctions.

Thousands turned out to watch, but not everyone shared in the brotherly love.

"Russia is our mother, and with or without Liberation Day, the Russian president deserves a parade," said 56-year-old carpenter Milorad Lazic.

But 29-year-old clerk Aleksandra Pasic said: "It's such a shame they moved Liberation Day four days, and this rain is divine punishment. This government demonstrates such servility toward Russia, which is our ally only when it suits it."

While Serbia pursues EU accession, Russia's United Nations veto remains the only thing standing in the way of Serbia's former Kosovo province joining the world body — a red line for Belgrade six years after the majority-Albanian territory declared independence with the support of the West.

"Serbia will not compromise its morals with any kind of bad behavior toward Russia," Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic told Putin after the leaders laid wreaths at a memorial to the 31,000 Soviet soldiers killed in the liberation of Belgrade.

Putin replied: "Russia, just as it was in the past, will always see Serbia as our closest ally."

The Russian leader brought with him a promise of $1 billion in investment in Serbia's oil

monopoly, majority Gazprom-owned NIS, and a call for Serbian exporters to make the most of new opportunities on the Russian market after Moscow banned Western food imports in a retaliatory step.

The EU has cautioned the Serbian government on the need for solidarity, at least, and not to stimulate exports to Russia.

"Those who are complicating economic life, they are complicating it for themselves," Putin said. "I have already said: It will be a pleasant time for Serbia to export."

He stressed again the importance of Russia's South Stream project to take Russian gas to Europe, but which has been blocked by EU legal complaints rooted in the Ukrainian crisis. Serbia had promised to begin construction of its leg in July, but has quietly held off at the behest of the EU.

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