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Putin Awards State Honor to Serbia's Embattled Kremlin Ally

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Mikhail Mettsel / TASS

Russian President Vladimir Putin has handed a prestigious state honor to Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, a key European Kremlin ally facing popular protests over free speech.

Vucic was a nationalist firebrand during the violent collapse of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, but later embraced pro-European values and set membership of the European Union as Serbia's strategic goal. He also maintains close ties with Russia and China.

The Kremlin said Monday it had awarded Vucic the Order of Alexander Nevsky "for his substantial personal contribution to the development of multilateral cooperation" with Russia.

Embed:

> Awarding Russian Order of St. Alexander Nevsky to Serbian President Vucic is strange. It devalues importance of distinction &sends wrong signal.Russia has no vital interests in Balkans &shd stay away from attempts by locals to manipulate outsiders. Yet,this seems too hard.
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> — Dmitri Trenin (@DmitriTrenin) January 7, 2019

Dmitri Trenin, the head of the Carnegie Moscow Center, called the decision "strange."

"It devalues importance of distinction &sends wrong signal," he wrote on Twitter. "Russia has no vital interests in the Balkans and stays away from attempts by locals to manipulate outsiders."

Putin awarded the honor at a time when his Serbian counterpart has faced weeks of protests. Thousands have marched through Belgrade's city center to protest against Vucic and his ruling party, demanding free press and end to attacks against journalists and opposition figures.

Vucic joins the president of Belarus, the head of Russia's Christian Orthodox Church and the first woman in space, among other figures, as recipients of the state honor.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

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