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Serbian President Stages Lavish Reception for Putin, Presents Puppy

By Reuters

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Vladimir Putin and Aleksandar Vucic / Kremlin.ru

Serbia's pro-Western President Aleksandar Vucic staged a lavish welcome for Vladimir Putin on Thursday — even presenting the visiting Russian leader with a puppy — in what critics called a bid to deflect attention from weeks of anti-government protests.

Tens of thousands of people all over Serbia were bussed in to Belgrade to greet Putin in front of the Saint Sava Church in the evening. They waved Russian and Serbian flags and held banners reading "Thank you President Putin" in Serbian and in Russian. Russian songs were played on loudspeakers.

Serbia has been performing a delicate balancing act between its ambition to join its biggest trading partner the European Union, and its historical ties with Russia, which shares its Orthodox Christian faith and backed it diplomatically during a 1999 NATO bombing campaign.

Displaying his close relationship with Putin is particularly important for Vucic, a former ultranationalist who abruptly switched sides to become a leading advocate of closer relations with the EU but who still relies on rightwing support.

Vucic has faced weeks of protests against his rule by supporters of both the liberal and nationalist camps. Demonstrating his warm ties with Russia could help him counter accusations of selling out Serbia's interests to the West.

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"It very important for us to have friends in the world and Putin and Russia are the most important," said Stefan, a 25-year old from the southern town of Novi Pazar who came to Belgrade for the event and declined to give his surname.

Putin promised to invest $1.4 billion in gas transport infrastructure in Serbia, which now buys all its natural gas from Russia via a pipeline over Ukraine, and hopes to be hooked up to the TurkStream gas pipeline being built from Russia to Turkey across the Black Sea.

"Putin go away"

Although today Russia is only Serbia's fifth largest trading partner, Serbs have looked to fellow Orthodox Christian Russia as a patron and ally throughout centuries of history in a Balkan region also home to Catholics and Muslims.

Putin said Moscow will fully support Serbia in finding solutions for unresolved issues with its former province Kosovo, which declared independence in 2008.

Serbia withdrew its troops from Kosovo after the 1999 bombing campaign by NATO, which accused Belgrade of carrying out abuses during a campaign against ethnic Albanian insurgents. Belgrade has not recognized Kosovo's independence but has accepted the EU requirement that it normalize relations in practice with the former province in order to join the bloc.

During the visit Putin presented to Vucic Russia's Order of Alexander Nevsky, making him the only state leader outside of the former Soviet Union to have received the medal. Vucic presented Putin a Yugoslavian Shepherd puppy named Pasha.

A big screen showing joint press conference was put up in the city's main square. Main streets were closed off as crowds headed towards the Saint Sava Church to meet Putin. A police officer said some 1,300 buses had arrived in Belgrade.

But some in Serbia see the Putin visit as a popularity stunt for Vucic to undermine the protests. In Vojvodina, north of Belgrade, posters with Putin pictures were put up overnight, reading "Putin Go Away" in English.

Several civil society organizations also signed a letter protesting against the glorification of the Russian leader.

"Accompanied by extensive media coverage, Putin’s visit further damages the already

corroded democratic institutions, rights and freedoms of the citizens of Serbia," the letter said.

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