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Escaping the Kremlin's Embrace: Why Serbia Has Tired of Russian Support

Russian support leaves Belgrade no room for maneuver at the Kosovo negotiations.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent visit to Belgrade — his first in more than four years — was eagerly anticipated by Serbian politicians. Despite the visit being described there as monumental, no agreement that could be described as monumental came out of it. In reality, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has little choice but to praise his Russian benefactor in public, while trying to convince the Kremlin behind closed doors to give Belgrade at least a little wiggle room on the most important Serbian foreign policy issue: recognition of Kosovo.

The Kosovo conflict seemed endless, but many events of the past eighteen months have made its resolution more possible than even the bravest optimists dared to dream just a short time

ago. First, Brussels finally named a possible date for Serbia to join the European Union: 2025, signaling that the country's accession is quite realistic, provided Belgrade complies with certain conditions, the main one of which is resolving the Kosovo conflict.

Second, the Western Balkans have again attracted the attention of European and Atlantic structures. Montenegro joined NATO, and Western pressure helped to more or less resolve the dispute between Greece and Macedonia over the name of the latter. Even Bosnia, still paralyzed by ethnic strife, came closer to joining the alliance: NATO approved the action plan for its possible accession. In addition, negotiations on Albania joining the EU are slated to begin this summer.

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In the eleven years since Kosovo declared independence in 2008, Serbian leaders have forced themselves into a very difficult, somewhat schizophrenic relationship with Moscow, which can now essentially veto any Kosovo peace proposal, thereby signing a political death sentence for the Serbian leadership.

Deeply indignant that the West recognized Kosovar independence without even the slightest concessions to Serbia, Serbian politicians of every stripe sought solace in Russia. To demonstrate to voters that they were not just going to silently suffer the humiliation inflicted by the West, Serbian leaders developed ostentatiously friendly relations with Moscow, praising all the benefits of Russian-Serbian cooperation. Concerned with presenting themselves as true patriots inside the country, they didn't really consider the cost of this friendship in the long run.

The years of uncontrollable praise have resulted in an almost religious cult of Russia and Putin in Serbia. Putin has been named the most popular foreign leader there for many years, enjoying about 80 percent of popular support: an unattainable figure for any Serbian politician. The Russian president is second only to the late Yugoslav leader Marshal Tito in terms of the number of honorary citizen titles bestowed on him by Serbian cities.

Of course, Putin's popularity bothers President Vučić, but he can't give up the Putin popularity drug just like that. For the past few months, the Serbian opposition has staged protests in Belgrade, demanding that the government stop pressuring the media, investigate political killings and beatings, and hold free elections. Now, armed with Putin's presence, Vučić can portray protesters as marginal elements and himself as a real world-level politician who enjoys both domestic and international support.

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The only problem is that these foreign policy gains translate into serious domestic limitations for Vučić. A significant number of Serbs are convinced that Russia and Putin are far more reliable defenders of Serbian interests than their own president. So if, inspired by the prospects of joining the EU, Vučić indeed dares to recognize Kosovo without Russia's approval, the Kremlin will easily be able to destroy him as a politician. It can simply declare that as a true ally of the Serbian people rather than the sellout political elite, Russia will

continue to defend Serbia's territorial integrity by refusing to recognize Kosovo.

Vučić understands this risk perfectly, and came to Moscow in the fall to find out how Russia would react to a possible Kosovo deal. Apparently, he left disappointed. Moscow has no reason to support the ultimate conflict resolution in Kosovo because it would gain nothing from this move, but stands to lose its influence in the region.

At this time, Russia is Serbia's key ally because it can guarantee that Kosovo can't join the UN and other international organizations. But as soon as Belgrade recognizes Kosovar independence (whatever the terms), the Serbs will immediately lose the need for a Russian veto in the UN Security Council. Only oil, gas, and historical ties would remain as the basis for a special relationship. Those are all well and good, but other Eastern European countries have all those things in their relations with Russia, and that doesn't make Moscow their key ally.

Why should Russia help the Kosovo conflict resolution? To allow Serbia to join the EU and impose sanctions on Russia? To oblige Russians to obtain visas when visiting Serbia? To have Serbia sever its bilateral trade agreement with Russia for the sake of the EU? To permit the Serbs to deepen their cooperation with NATO and become part of the West? All these outcomes are undesirable for Russia, and to prevent them, it simply needs to continue its policy of refusing to recognize Kosovo.

To an outside observer, Russia's passive sabotage of the Kosovo conflict resolution looks like all-out support of Serbia. Assurances that Russia will never abandon Serbia, will protect it from Western pressure, and do everything possible to preserve its territorial integrity come across as gestures of unswerving friendship toward the Serbs.

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In reality, the Serbian leadership doesn't know how to rid itself of this support, which leaves Belgrade no room for maneuver at the Kosovo negotiations. Serbian leaders can't come across as being less patriotic than the Kremlin. The Kremlin knows that, and makes public statements that force the Serbs to take the most unyielding positions.

Officially, Moscow states that it will recognize any decision on Kosovo that satisfies Belgrade, adding that this decision must be formulated on the basis of UN Resolution 1244. But that resolution says nothing about the prospects of an independent Kosovo; it allows only for autonomy and self-government inside Serbia. The resolution was adopted twenty years ago, but today everyone understands that no one needs Kosovo's return to Serbia, especially the Serbs themselves. But this is a local issue, while Russia is far more concerned with its own confrontation with the West. It uses Kosovo as an important argument for the West's failure to resolve conflicts unilaterally, even in Europe.

However lavishly Putin was received in Belgrade, it is hard to imagine what Vučić can offer the Russian president to induce the Kremlin to accept the resolution of the Kosovo conflict. It is Washington, not Vučić, that should make an offer here. Vučić, meanwhile, is left with a choice between political suicide or maintaining a somewhat nonsensical but quite comfortable status quo, not knowing how to escape the suffocating embrace of his closest ally.

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