The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Diaspora in Serbia Shaken By Election Protests, Fears of Moscow's Influence

By Camilla Bell-Davies

December 27, 2023



Opposition supporters march at a protest in Belgrade. **Andrej Isakovic / AFP**

BELGRADE, Serbia — The Serbian government this week thanked Russia's intelligence services for exposing plans for protests in Belgrade against the country's controversial election results.

The news has sent a shiver down the spines of thousands of anti-Putin Russians who have moved to Serbia since the invasion of Ukraine — and now fear their adopted country is increasingly falling under Moscow's influence.

"It made me think: Do I need to pack my bags and go somewhere else?" said Sergei, an IT professional from Moscow who fled to Belgrade to escape the Kremlin's September 2022 mobilization.

Sergei said he was initially grateful that he was able to enter Serbia, which maintains friendly ties with Russia, as he cannot afford a European Union visa and is blocked from many countries.

“Serbia is the only place where it’s okay to have a Russian passport, open a bank account, rent a flat and live normally. It allowed us to feel human,” said Sergei, who withheld his last name for security reasons.

Now, however, he is looking for a tech job in the EU, highlighting the dilemma faced by many others.

“We can feel Serbia is turning into Russia and it’s scary,” he said.

Anti-government protests erupted after Serbia’s Dec. 17 elections, which saw President Aleksandar Vucic's populist ruling party claim a resounding victory and were denounced by opposition and EU monitors for widespread harassment and vote rigging.

Thousands took to the streets of Belgrade to protest against the “stolen” victory, including some members of the Russian diaspora who worry that Serbia is sliding into autocracy under Vucic.

The Dec. 25 protests ended with a group of men throwing stones and trying to force entry into the National Assembly building, though protesters claimed they were likely planted by the government to justify police intervention.

Thirty-eight protesters were detained, some of whom were badly beaten by police, and remain in custody.

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“Protests will continue every day ... Vucic and his regime are going back to their old radical, violent, pro-Russian ways. This should worry everyone,” Borko Stefanovic, an opposition MP and former deputy speaker of parliament, told the Financial Times.

After the violence subsided, Prime Minister Ana Brnabic thanked the Russian security services for tipping Belgrade off to the protests in advance, giving Serbian police time to organize a response.

“This probably won’t be very popular with those from the West, but I feel it is very important to stand up for Serbia and thank the Russian security services,” Brnabic told Serbian television.

The pro-Kremlin Telegram channel RuSerbia warned the Russian diaspora to stay away from the protests, saying: “This is not your fight.”

However, Russians living in Serbia say they are increasingly feeling the hand of the Serbian government and the long arm of Moscow. The diaspora, exceeding 300,000, is largely made of individuals opposed to the war and Putin — though many simply came for business.

Before the Serbian elections, reports of anti-war Russians being harassed, pressured and interrogated became more widespread.

This summer, Serbia deported four members of the anti-war Russian Democratic Society, an NGO that fundraises for Ukrainians and jailed dissidents in Russia, labeling them "a threat to Serbian national security." One was Yevgeny Irzhansky, expelled for organizing concerts featuring anti-Putin artists.

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The deportations were the work of former security minister Aleksandar Vulin, who is often seen in Moscow. Activists fear he, as well as Russian diplomats in Serbia who were expelled from EU countries for security reasons, pressure local politicians to do their bidding.

Ahead of election day, right-wing groups supporting Vucic's election campaign painted a giant Russian flag emblazoned with "Glory and strength," a favorite propaganda slogan of the Kremlin, in the middle of Belgrade's main pedestrian street.

The same far-right group targets the Russian diaspora, posting memes that encourage violence against perceived "liberal traitors" on Telegram channels.

Russian anti-war activist Ilya Zernov, 20, was badly beaten by residents of his apartment block — and, allegedly, right-wing politician Misa Vacic — for defacing a mural dedicated to fighters from Russia's Wagner mercenary group.

Russian state-backed media outlets such as Sputnik and RT enjoy popularity in Serbia, amplifying pro-Kremlin and right-wing narratives. Serbian volunteers have allegedly gone to fight for the Russian army in Ukraine.

And Serbian businesses are increasingly trading with Russia, with rakia, a local tipple, surfacing in shops in Moscow. In return, Russian groceries have been flooding Serbian shelves in the past months, adding to an export market that has already seen Serbia become almost completely reliant on Russia's state-owned gas giant Gazprom.

Overall, Serbian support for Putin remains substantial, with 61% indicating unchanged support and 22% reporting an increase since the war, according to polls by the Henry Jackson Society's Balkan analyst Dr. Helena Ivanov.

Even in the largely pro-EU opposition protest crowd swarming in Belgrade, many Serbs said they were fine to keep friendly ties with Putin due to the historic "Slavic Orthodox brotherhood" the two nations share.

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However, the large Russian antiwar diaspora, combined with reports of Russian intelligence's alleged involvement in Serbia's elections and collaboration with the government against

protesters, is changing some Serbs' rose-colored views of Moscow.

"The more Russia supports Vucic, the fewer people who are protesting will support Russia," said a Russian-Serbian activist who has lived in Belgrade for 20 years and who requested anonymity for safety reasons.

"Because this election has shown that it's not a good thing to be friends with Russia, which stands for dictatorships and lack of freedom — Russia stands against Serbian interests. Now Serbs can finally feel what we've been fighting against all this time," she said.

Pro-European opposition parties protesting with the Serbia Against Violence coalition say they would align their foreign policy with the EU and possibly sanction Russia if they were in government, but that they would protect Russians already living here.

The Russian emigre community poses "a humanitarian issue for Serbia," said opposition Democratic Party leader Zoran Lutovac. He warned that Vucic's government will become less and less tolerant of those who are outspoken critics of Putin.

Despite rising fears of Moscow's interference, some Russian emigres describe how they quietly continue working with Serbian acquaintances.

"We all know a local — whether it be a landlord or cafe owner — who imbibes pro-Kremlin propaganda, and whose mind we try to change a bit," said Katya, a mother of two from St. Petersburg.

"For example, my son's history teacher talks uncritically about the glory of Russia. I try to tell him it's not what he thinks, usually by talking about relatable domestic issues like poor healthcare. It's not always easy, but I see they start having doubts. They say, 'Okay, maybe you do know better if you lived there'."

Though anti-war Russians in Serbia said they worry about what the future will bring for this country, they said the protests have actually given them hope.

"In Russia, it's impossible to imagine such protests happening," said the anonymous female activist. "It's good that Serbian people are fighting for democracy and rights and that the Serbian opposition seemed to be stronger than before. Compared to the situation with Russia, we see much more freedom."

Until Sergei finds a way to get to the EU, he said he will still attend events and music nights put on by Russians in Serbia, some explicitly criticizing the war.

"There's a real sense of community among the diaspora, so I started feeling more free to discuss what we could change in our country," he said. "We had to make spaces and events to not forget our own language and cultural identity, and remember that it has nothing to do with Putin's government."

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