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# A Spoiler in the Balkans? Russia and the Final Resolution of the Kosovo Conflict

Maxim Samorukov

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## Introduction

The biggest point of contention in the Balkans is back on Europe's front burner. For decades, Serbia was mired in a conflict with Kosovo, its breakaway province that unilaterally declared independence in 2008 after violent ethnic clashes and international intervention in the late 1990s. Last year, a protracted diplomatic effort to end the conflict was unexpectedly boosted when then U.S. national security adviser John Bolton announced that U.S. President Donald Trump's administration was ready to consider changes to the Serbia-Kosovo border as part of a settlement.<sup>1</sup> The Serbian government welcomed the idea, giving rise to hopes that a negotiated solution to the Balkan conflict is now potentially within reach.

Still, any final settlement is very much an uphill battle. Many Kosovar leaders are not enthusiastic about the proposed border correction, which would entail swapping areas in northern Kosovo populated mainly by ethnic Serbs for Serbian municipalities dominated by ethnic Albanians. Germany and other members of the European Union (EU) have disapproved strongly, arguing that redrawing boundaries may open a Pandora's box, with unpredictable ripple effects.<sup>2</sup> On top of all that, it is increasingly clear that Russia, which has long held great sway over the region, may not actually want the conflict resolved at all.

So long as Serbia does not formally recognize Kosovo's independence, it must rely on Russia's veto power in the United Nations (UN) Security Council to prevent full international recognition of what it regards as a breakaway province. That dependency gives Russia a nontrivial degree of influence, both in the region and within Serbia itself. The Kremlin fears that ending the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo will diminish Russia's stature in Serbia and severely undermine its clout in the Balkans.

Moscow is well-positioned to derail the resolution process. Russian President Vladimir Putin enjoys unchecked popularity across most of Serbian society, and the Russian political and national security establishment maintains close ties with its counterparts among Serbia's political and security elites, who tend to strongly oppose any compromise with Kosovo. From all appearances, Moscow also hopes to use its influence over the Kosovo issue as leverage in its acrimonious relationship with the West.

## The Myth of Slavic Brotherhood

The conflict in Kosovo played a pivotal role in cementing today's close ties between Russia and Serbia. This phase in their relationship dates back to the late 1990s. During the Soviet era, the

Kremlin's relations with socialist Yugoslavia were decidedly frosty, after Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito split with Joseph Stalin in 1948. Rather than join either of the major Moscow-led alliances—the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance or the Warsaw Pact—Yugoslavia was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement. Immediately after the Soviet collapse in 1991, Russia inherited little influence in the region, unlike in neighboring Bulgaria or broader Central Europe.

That distance endured during the early 1990s as Yugoslavia broke apart, with Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia), Croatia, Macedonia (now North Macedonia), and Slovenia seceding from the federal republic. The Kremlin, preoccupied with severe domestic difficulties, opted to tread quite carefully in the Balkans. Moscow reluctantly cooperated with the West to end the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, with Russian diplomats and military personnel under the direction of then president Boris Yeltsin actively contributing to peacekeeping and mediation efforts led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).<sup>3</sup> Things deteriorated dramatically in 1999, when Washington bypassed the UN Security Council and launched an extensive NATO bombing campaign against Serbian president Slobodan Milošević's regime to stop the ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians.

Russian foreign policy hardened over the second half of the 1990s, as the U.S.-Russian relationship became increasingly vexed by disagreements over the Balkans and the first round of NATO enlargement in Central Europe.<sup>4</sup> The Kremlin reacted fiercely to NATO's bombing campaign against Serbia. Then prime minister Yevgeny Primakov, a longtime advocate for a more independent Russian foreign policy,<sup>5</sup> was en route to Washington for an official visit when the bombing started and turned his plane around. Throughout the campaign, the Kremlin voiced its support for Milošević, while mass rallies besieged the U.S. embassy in Moscow. After Milošević capitulated, Russia upped the ante by trying to deploy its own peacekeeping contingent to Kosovo without coordinating with NATO. When the first wave of Russian peacekeepers dashed to the Pristina airport from Bosnia, the ensuing standoff pushed Russian and NATO forces to the brink of direct military confrontation for the first time since the end of the Cold War.<sup>6</sup>

According to one of the operation's masterminds, General Leonid Ivashov, the plan was to deploy additional troops and to set up a sector for Russian peacekeepers in the areas of Kosovo dominated by ethnic Serbs.<sup>7</sup> However, the effort was ill-conceived and lacked coordination within the Russian leadership. The troops at the airport soon found their supplies blocked by NATO forces, while the Kremlin had to decide whether to torpedo its relationship with Washington over Kosovo. The Russian leadership quickly backtracked and agreed, reluctantly, to serve in a NATO-led peacekeeping operation.

Nevertheless, the myth of an eternal Serbian-Russian friendship was born. Serb and Russian political elites bonded over their shared grudges against the United States and NATO. The two countries soon

revived a century-old narrative of Slavic brotherhood, bringing their political relationship unprecedentedly close.

When Kosovo declared independence in 2008, Moscow intervened to minimize the consequences for Serbia. Russian diplomats leveraged their authority in the UN Security Council and worked with parts of the international community to prevent full recognition of Kosovo. Serbia repaid the Kremlin with economic and political access and benefits. Russia's state-controlled Gazprom Neft, an oil subsidiary of Gazprom, acquired 51 percent of Serbia's oil and gas monopoly, the Petroleum Industry of Serbia (NIS), which soon became one of the most profitable companies in the country.<sup>8</sup> In the meantime, Serb politicians of all stripes sought to highlight their fondness for Russia. Nationalist and pro-Western figures alike touted the benefits of cooperation with Russia as a means of demonstrating to their voters that they were prepared to stand up to pressure from the West.

In reality, meaningful economic cooperation between the two countries failed to materialize—the energy sector deal proved to be the exception, not the rule. Yet the Serb political elite compensated for Russia's support with vocal praise, high-level visits, and favorable media coverage. As a result, a quasi-religious cult of Russia and Putin emerged in Serbia. According to public opinion data, a majority of Serbs see Russia as the country's main ally.<sup>9</sup> They also believe, mistakenly, that Russia is the main source of financial assistance and that Russia's military capabilities are superior to NATO's.<sup>10</sup> For many years, Putin has been the most popular foreign leader in Serbia, trusted by about 57 percent of respondents as of early 2019, which is comparable to the rating of current Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić.<sup>11</sup>

Frustrated with their own ruling elites, many Serbs view Russia as a more reliable defender of Serbian national interests. This assessment applies first and foremost to the sensitive issue of Kosovo. Any Serbian leader that would make meaningful concessions on Kosovo is rightfully worried about the potential loss of popular support. And if Moscow were to denounce such concessions, it would only contribute to significant public outcry. The Vučić government is stuck in a trap of its own making: It simply can't afford to be less committed to Kosovo than Russia is. And that, in turn, means that the Kremlin can effectively veto any solution to the conflict that it does not approve of.

## Patriotic Leverage

In the eyes of the Kremlin, Russia has very little to gain and, potentially, everything to lose if the Kosovo conflict is resolved. Full recognition of Kosovo would end Serbia's dependence on Russia's continued international backing. If no longer constrained by the Kosovo issue, Serbia could accelerate its push for EU accession and deepen cooperation with NATO. These twin issues, not

Kosovo, are increasingly higher priorities for most of Serbia's political and economic elites. Progress on either front is likely to depend on whether Serbia aligns itself more consistently with EU and NATO policies toward Russia. That conceivably could include introducing visas for Russian nationals, joining EU sanctions against Russia, and scrapping a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union—a Moscow-dominated economic alliance of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia.

The Kremlin would not need to exert much effort to sabotage a negotiated settlement: just issuing a public statement can make an outsized difference in a relationship as Serbia's with Kosovo. In 2011, when Kosovar officials were trying to establish control over their Serb-dominated northern border, Serb politicians witnessed the potential impact of Russian pronouncements. Then Russian ambassador Aleksandr Konuzin gave an emotional speech at the Belgrade Security Forum,<sup>12</sup> expressing his outrage that other participants at the event had failed to mention Kosovo's ambitions. "Not a single question from this audience," Konuzin said. "Are there Serbs in this room?" This loaded question won him praise from Serbian nationalists and a special place in the hearts of the Serbian people. Afterward, the office of Boris Tadić, Serbia's president at the time, criticized Konuzin for meddling in Serbia's internal affairs when the ambassador reiterated his criticism at an opposition rally.<sup>13</sup> Just months later, Tadić lost his bid for reelection.

Russia's presence in Kosovo has been negligible following the withdrawal of its Kosovo Force contingent in 2003.<sup>14</sup> There currently is no official contact between the two countries. Still, Russian officials pass up few opportunities to reiterate their views on new developments in the region. The message stays the same: Russia is the most reliable guarantor of Serbia's territorial integrity. The West destabilizes the region by supporting Kosovo's independence.

Moscow also accuses Kosovar Albanians of a raft of wrongdoings, such as aspiring to form a union with Albania and create so-called Greater Albania, threatening neighboring states with plans to establish a Kosovo army,<sup>15</sup> and turning the country into a base for international terrorism.<sup>16</sup> Serbian-language media outlets eagerly disseminate official Russian statements on Kosovo, generating buzz in a society that harbors deep resentments over NATO's 1999 bombing campaign. In this way, Russia fuels its popularity among the Serbian public while forcing Serbia's leadership, anxious about its approval ratings, to take a similarly intransigent stance.

At the same time, Vučić is eager for his country to join the EU, even if it means making major concessions on Kosovo. Vučić's nationalist opponents, who portray him as too amenable to Western pressure, increasingly use pro-Russia slogans and symbols. A right-wing party called Dveri, which earned 5 percent of the vote in the 2016 parliamentary elections,<sup>17</sup> has played a highly visible role in the anti-Vučić rallies that began in December 2018. The street demonstrations lasted for over six

months and were the largest protests in Serbia since the fall of Milošević in 2000. The demonstrations attracted a broad cross-section of Vučić's opponents, bringing tens of thousands of people from various political and civic groups onto the streets of Belgrade and other major cities every week. The protesters focused primarily on Vučić's authoritarian governing methods, but many also slammed his reported readiness to compromise on Kosovo.<sup>18</sup>

In January 2019, the leader of Dveri, Boško Obradović, addressed Putin in a widely circulated open letter. Obradović urged the Russian president to withdraw his support for the current Serbian government on the grounds that it was prepared to betray Serbia by recognizing Kosovo's independence.<sup>19</sup> Another member of the Serbian parliament, Slaviša Ristić, a leading figure in the Kosovar Serb community, published a similar letter warning Putin of the Serbian leadership's treacherous intentions.<sup>20</sup> But the letters got only cursory coverage in the Russian media and failed to elicit any reaction from the Kremlin.

Another pro-Russian organization taking part in the anti-Vučić protests was the Military Union of Serbia, which comprises veterans and serving members of the Serbian armed forces.<sup>21</sup> Its main focus is campaigning for better salaries, retirement benefits, and terms of employment for the military, but the military union is hardly apolitical. Its leadership and many rank-and-file members harbor a radical nationalist outlook and strong pro-Russian sentiments.

Both Dveri and the Military Union of Serbia have direct ties to the Kremlin. Their representatives are frequently hosted in Moscow by the State Duma and the Foreign Ministry. Dveri has a formal cooperation agreement with the ruling party, United Russia,<sup>22</sup> while the military union works jointly with Russian veterans' organizations.<sup>23</sup> As of this writing, there is no hard evidence that Russian officials have played any role in coordinating these groups' anti-Vučić or anti-Kosovo positions. Yet, according to Carnegie's Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, "Moscow's greatest success [throughout the Balkans] seems to be taking advantage of lingering local grievances toward the West, by cultivating conservative Orthodox constituencies and finding common ground with far-right nationalist groups."<sup>24</sup>

Moscow's ties to the Serbian Orthodox Church may also prove relevant as the Kosovo diplomatic gambit unfolds. In November 2018, the Serbian church's Holy Assembly of Bishops reiterated its staunch opposition to any concessions on the status of Kosovo, voicing particular concern about the safety of Serbian sacred sites in the area.<sup>25</sup> Russia's repeated calls for better international protection for the Orthodox heritage sites in Kosovo has helped cement the affinity between the Kremlin and the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The Russian Orthodox Church also enjoys special authority in Serbia. During the NATO bombings in 1999, then Moscow patriarch Alexy II went to Belgrade to support the Serbs (as did Kirill, the current patriarch of Moscow).<sup>26</sup> What's more, Russia helped complete the construction of the Church of Saint Sava, the largest Orthodox cathedral in Serbia. The Russian Orthodox Church supports the remaining Orthodox communities in Kosovo,<sup>27</sup> and the Moscow Patriarchate often hosts Serbian political leaders during their visits to Russia.<sup>28</sup>

These historically strong ties have been bolstered by a simmering conflict between the Moscow and Constantinople Patriarchates, after the latter granted independence to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which had previously answered to Russia. Serbian Patriarch Irinej, who faces a similar problem with the Montenegrin and Macedonian Orthodox Churches, threw his weight behind Moscow in the dispute.<sup>29</sup> Patriarch Kirill responded by reiterating his support for the spiritual unity of Kosovo and Serbia and by equating the pressure on Orthodox Serbs in Kosovo to the difficulties of the pro-Russian Orthodox in Ukraine.<sup>30</sup>

After the 2008 Georgian war and early in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, the Russian Orthodox Church took a more conciliatory stance than the Kremlin did, so as to try to preserve amicable relations with Orthodox leaders in Tbilisi and Kiev. In the Kosovo dispute, however, the Moscow Patriarchate will likely stick to supporting the Serbian Orthodox Church, seeing it as a main ally in the escalating rivalry between Moscow and Constantinople for supremacy in the Orthodox world.

## Placating the Kremlin

Vučić and his administration are worried that, thanks to Russia's enormous popularity with both Serbia's elites and the public at large, they no longer control Serbian patriotism as a political tool to drive society. At the same time, they cannot face weaning themselves off their own frequent reliance on Russia to validate their political decisions. Born out of radical nationalist circles in the 1990s, Vučić and his closest associates rose to power in the early 2010s by denouncing their liberal predecessors as unpatriotic Western stooges. But his government has continued a largely pro-Western foreign policy, even as it frequently borrows tactics from the playbook of illiberal regimes like Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary. The Vučić government uses pro-Russian gestures to gloss over the chasm between its nationalist slogans and actions on the world stage. Any attempt to disengage from the Kremlin risks alienating its core nationalist constituency.

While the Serbian leadership is reluctant to distance itself from Russia, it increasingly seeks to share responsibility for potential concessions on Kosovo with the Kremlin. Vučić has repeatedly, albeit somewhat perfunctorily, called for Russia to join the Serbia-Kosovo talks.<sup>31</sup> Serbian Foreign Minister

Ivica Dačić claims that Putin is aware of and supports the idea of settling the conflict through a land swap.<sup>32</sup> Serbian leaders have held numerous meetings with their Russian counterparts, eager to demonstrate that they are mindful of Russia's opinion. Since August 2018, when the United States announced it would accept border corrections as part of the solution, Vučić has met with Putin three times.<sup>33</sup> There have been four meetings between Dačić and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during the same time span.<sup>34</sup>

Yet Moscow is in no hurry to support the Serbian leadership. On the one hand, the Kremlin promises to back any solution acceptable to Serbia; on the other hand, it stipulates that any deal with Kosovo must be based on UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which established the UN presence in the area.<sup>35</sup> Resolution 1244 never mentions independence for Kosovo.<sup>36</sup> According to the Kremlin, recognition of Kosovo is so detrimental to Serbia's national interests that the country should never accept it.

The Serbian government nevertheless sees changes to the border as the best possible way out of the Kosovo stalemate, and Belgrade has been trying to get Russia to express support for the idea, as the United States and some EU officials have already done.<sup>37</sup> Vučić is reportedly trying to sell the Kremlin on the notion that a Kosovo settlement might facilitate a new Russia-U.S. rapprochement. There are no signs, however, that Russia will buy these overoptimistic promises. Rather, the Kremlin expects the West to come up with a more tangible offer on Kosovo that will include other foreign policy perks.

## A Toxic Reputation

For more than two decades, the Kremlin has primarily viewed the Kosovo dispute as part and parcel of its complicated relations with the West. Initial Russian opposition to Kosovo's independence was driven by fear that the West might try to push for similar status for Russia's numerous autonomous republics. After most Western countries recognized Kosovo's independence in February 2008, the Kremlin decided to turn the tables, citing Kosovo as a precedent to justify its recognition of two Georgian breakaway provinces, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in August 2008.<sup>38</sup> Russia made a similar, and equally unsuccessful, case to support its annexation of Crimea in 2014.<sup>39</sup>

As of this writing, Moscow has been quite negative about the prospects for a successful outcome to the Serbia-Kosovo talks, insisting that the EU is incapable of mediating the conflict effectively.<sup>40</sup> Russian officials eagerly point out that some states have withdrawn their recognition of Kosovo (around a dozen small states in Africa and Oceania) and claim this is proof that the Kosovo statehood project has failed and should be abandoned.<sup>41</sup>

The Kremlin would be happy to see the West admit defeat in Kosovo and invite Russia to join the peacemaking efforts. This is unlikely to happen. In recent years, Russia has become known as a troublemaker in the Balkans for fueling interethnic strife in North Macedonia and Bosnia. The overall collapse of trust between the Kremlin and the West has complicated matters, and there is little prospect of returning to business as usual any time soon. That reality makes Russia too toxic and unreliable for EU or U.S. leaders to consider direct Russian participation in mediating the Kosovo dispute.

Moscow is wary that the talks may gain new momentum after early elections brought a new government to power in Pristina and after Washington appointed Matthew Palmer and Richard Grenell as U.S. special envoys to the Western Balkans and for Serbia-Kosovo negotiations, respectively.<sup>42</sup> The Kremlin has also stepped up its activities in the region. It appointed Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, the Russian Foreign Ministry's leading expert on the Western Balkans, as the new ambassador to Belgrade and, after many years of talks, finally persuaded Serbia to sign a free trade agreement with the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union. The agreement does not change much in terms of economics, as Serbia already has bilateral free trade agreements with Russia and two other EEU members, Belarus and Kazakhstan, but it carries considerable symbolic significance.<sup>43</sup>

Still, Russia's attempts to discourage Serbia from seeking a compromise will not necessarily translate into real efforts to sabotage a deal if one is reached. The Kremlin understands that Vučić treats ties with Russia primarily as leverage in his dealings with the West. Moscow is annoyed that Vučić appears ready to make major concessions on Kosovo for the sake of bringing Serbia closer to the EU. But years of elaborated contact mean Russia is willing to tolerate Vučić's duplicity rather than support his opposition—the thinking being that the devil you know is better than the devil you don't.

The Kremlin also considers the Serbian leader a fairly reliable partner in carrying out Russia's main project in the wider Balkans: the construction of the TurkStream gas pipeline.<sup>44</sup> The pipeline's second leg crosses the Black Sea, comes ashore in Turkey, and is to pass through Bulgaria and Serbia to Hungary and Austria. Frustrated by numerous delays, Russia is likely to prioritize this project over general geopolitical considerations—especially now, as the Balkans are increasingly relegated to the periphery of Russian foreign policy.

On top of that, Montenegro's accession to NATO and the reconciliation between Greece and North Macedonia have demonstrated that although Russia is happy to meddle in high-profile negotiations, it quickly loses interest once an agreement has been sealed. The Serbia-Kosovo settlement has all the markings of developing in the same manner. If matters come to a head, Russia will most likely back down from directly challenging the West over Serbia and Kosovo.

Despite frequent demonstrations of solidarity, the rift between Russia and Serbia is growing. The Kremlin has become more distrustful of Vučić and suspects that his genuine priorities are pro-Western. For his part, the Serbian president is frustrated that Putin has widely eclipsed him as Serbia's greatest patriot. Vučić, quite understandably, is afraid that the Kremlin could expose him to a nationalist backlash if he makes too many concessions on Kosovo. Yet most Serbian nationalists are affiliated with the state apparatus in some way, and their loyalty is divided between Putin and Vučić. The two leaders have little appetite to find out who would come out on top in the event of a clash. If Serbia and Kosovo are able to overcome numerous other obstacles and finally reach an agreement, Vučić will likely do his best to help Russia save face, allowing the Kremlin to grudgingly absorb yet another major policy setback in the Balkans.

## About the Author

**Maxim Samorukov** is a fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center and deputy editor of Carnegie.ru.

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