



From Russia With Love?

Serbia's Lukewarm Reception
of Russian Aid and Its
Geopolitical Implications

Vuk Vuksanovic



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As the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic¹ reached the Balkans², Serbia³ has energetically taken its partnership with China⁴ to the next level. This happened as Belgrade embraced China’s “mask diplomacy” campaign⁵ of supplying medical equipment to the countries affected by the pandemic. However, while Russia has supplied aid to Serbia to combat the pandemic, it has not received the same attention from the Serbian leadership and public the way China did. The pandemic has shown that there is much less substance in the Serbo-Russian partnership than would be suggested by the shallow analysis of Orthodox and Slavic ties—and that Serbians are not “little Russians”⁶, as they are often purported to be.

First, this is because Russian power capabilities in the Balkans are limited. Second, while Serbia still relies on Russia and its UN Security Council (UNSC) veto in regards to the Kosovo dispute, the two countries have very different interests in this process. Third, Russia does not trust Serbia’s most powerful political figure, President Aleksandar Vučić. While the pandemic will end at one point, Serbia is slowly replacing Russia with China as its preferable go-to address in the rank of non-Western powers.

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Russia Gives but Does Not Get

In the beginning of April⁷, after Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić appealed to the Russian President Vladimir Putin for aid, the Russian Ministry of Defence sent 11 military planes carrying medical equipment, protective gear and Russian military physicians. The exact numbers⁸ were said to involve 16 units of military medical equipment including diagnosis and disinfection equipment, along with 87 army medics specialised in virology and epidemiology. (By comparison, Moscow had sent just 14 military planes of aid to Italy⁹, a nation which was a much more prominent victim of the coronavirus at the time—and nine times the size). The generosity was immediately heralded as a testament to the Serbo-Russian relationship, with President Vučić tweeting¹⁰, “Our friendship has been reaffirmed, and significant deliveries of aid are coming to Serbia. We thank Vladimir Putin and the Russian nation.” Vučić thanked Putin again in mid-May in a telephone conversation¹¹ held at the initiative of the Serbian side.

Just as well, the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre, based in Niš, Serbia donated¹² to the Serbian Ministry of Interior 3,000 caps, 600 visors, 200 goggles, 3,000 masks, 100 pieces of filter mask, 3,000 coats and 3,000 pairs of fittings. The politics of Russia’s aid—and Serbia’s reception—were immediately clear. In an interview to the Serbian press, Russia’s Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko¹³ slammed the West for its “cynical” misrepresentation of Russian aid while in another interview¹⁴ he reported that the Russian military specialists disinfected 160 facilities in 35 Serbian cities. However, even as the Russians made considerable progress with announcing their aid and demonstrating their success, Serbia did not return the favour with the usual platitudes that the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and the government-friendly media in Serbia tend to shower upon Russia

and Putin¹⁵. Indeed, when the aeroplanes carrying Russian military aid arrived, they were not greeted¹⁶ by Aleksandar Vučić, but by Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and the Minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin.

Vučić's absence was conspicuous. Not only because he has worked hard to build a personality cult¹⁷—and thus, one would expect, is inclined to demonstrate his centrality in the Serbo-Russian relationship—but also because of his enthusiasm towards Chinese aid. In recent weeks, Vučić could be seen greeting¹⁸ an aircraft carrying Chinese medical aid and kissing the Chinese flag¹⁹.

Although Russia, like China, has sought to heighten its profile and further its agenda during this pandemic, as disinformation reports²⁰ from the EU have made clear, there is no indication of success in the way of a new Russian strategic assertiveness in the region. Instead, the lack of Russian visibility during this pandemic has shown that the Serbo-Russian partnership is limited and not as strong as generally thought.

Russia in the Balkans

The primary reason for Russia's relative absence in Serbia during this pandemic is that Russian power capacities in the Balkans are limited in economic, military, and geographical terms. This leaves Russian influence in Serbia and the region reduced to three factors:²¹ energy, popularity among parts of the population (particularly in Serbia), and last but not least the Kosovo dispute.

Economically, Russia is not an irrelevant partner for Serbia, but it is still dwarfed by the EU in terms of trade flows. In 2019²² Serbia's trade with the EU composed 62% of Serbia's total trade, with exports accounting for 66.3% and imports accounting for 58.2%. By comparison, Serbia's trade with Russia and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) accounts for just 8% of Serbia's total trade, with exports totalling 5.4% and imports 9.4%. Even the free trade agreement²³ that Serbia signed with the EAEU in October 2019 was signed not on its economic merits but as part of the Serbian balancing act between Russia and the West. For years, the EU²⁴ has remained Serbia's biggest donor, lender and investor. This makes Russia a secondary economic partner except in the energy domain²⁵ where Serbia, like the rest of the region, is dependent on Russia for both oil and gas.

In the military domain, Russia is also not a decisive factor, despite Serbia being an observer²⁶ in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (PA CSTO). In 2019, Serbia conducted 13 military exercises²⁷ with NATO and four with Russia. Even the Slavic Shield²⁸, the joint Serbo-Russian exercises in 2019 where Russia demonstrated its famous S-400 air defence system and Pantsir missile battery, was not an indicator of blossoming bilateral military ties. For Serbia, this was just the way to maintain its stance of military neutrality and diplomatic balancing. In turn, Russia largely sees it as a way to provoke the West.

In August 2019²⁹, the Serbian Ministry of Defence published an overview of all military donations that Serbia received between

2008 and 2018. According to this data, the US was the largest military donor to Serbia, followed by China, Norway, Denmark and the UK. Russia was placed at a humble number nine. Although the Serbian Defence Ministry quickly came out with a statement to deny its document³⁰, claiming that Russia would be the biggest donor to Serbia if the document included *ongoing* transactions, this was discounted by some of the Serbian observers³¹ as “marketing” aimed at courting pro-Russian segments of the Serbian public. Indeed, many of the Russian military donations to Serbia contain inconsistencies largely unknown to the Serbian public. Even the handover of six MiG-29 fighter jets from Russia to Serbia in 2017 as part of an effort to upgrade Serbia’s outdated air force has a catch³², as the jets themselves were donated by Russia but Serbia still had to pay Russia around 185 million USD for their repair. Through its military procurements and exercises, Serbia tries to maintain a semblance of balance without tilting fully towards Moscow, buying Russia’s Pantsir air-defence systems, but also going to France³³ for Mistral, an infrared man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADS).

Geographically, Russia is too far away from Serbia’s borders, and Russia cannot project its military might in the Balkans. Serbia is perfectly aware that it is encircled by NATO member states, a reality even more obvious as Montenegro³⁴ joined NATO in 2017 and North Macedonia³⁵ in 2020. At the same time, in 2019³⁶ Serbia adopted the second cycle of the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), the highest level of cooperation a country that does not aspire for

membership can have with NATO based on Serbian membership in NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme. The Balkans remain outside the reach of Russian military might, except for the littoral countries of the Black Sea, such as Bulgaria, which is within maritime reach³⁷ of Russian military forces.

This leaves the mentioned energy dependency and soft power appeal among the few remaining pillars of Russian influence in Serbia. Russian popularity³⁸ in Serbia remains high, and Russian President Vladimir Putin remains the most popular foreign leader³⁹ followed by Chinese President Xi Jinping. A December 2019⁴⁰ survey showed that the majority of Serbs believed that Russia and China are the largest donors to Serbia, while in truth, it is the EU. For Serbian politicians⁴¹, balancing between Russia and the West is a way to avoid alienating pro-Russian voters and to try to win the votes of both pro-Western and pro-Russian Serbian citizens. A more striking example of this type of behaviour is Putin’s January 2019⁴² visit to Serbia when 120,000 people greeted him at the Orthodox Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade. However, it is important to note that pro-Russian sympathies within the Serbian public are the product⁴³ of the memories of the 1990s and the independence of Kosovo—not of deep, genuine Russophilia. While in the polls⁴⁴ Serbian citizens express solidarity with the Russian worldview, on “bread and butter” issues like employment, education and healthcare, they identify themselves with the Western world. Even Russian soft power has limits.

All Roads Lead to Kosovo

Apart from energy dependency and soft power, the backbone of the Serbo-Russian partnership is the issue of Kosovo, as nothing has tied Belgrade more to Moscow than Serbia's reliance on Russia's veto in the UNSC. However, the interests that guide Belgrade and Moscow on the Kosovo issue are very different.

Serbia is more than aware that its options on Kosovo are not great but that it has to engage in an ardent counter-secessionist policy to try to get a better deal on the Kosovo dispute. This deal from the standpoint of Serbian politicians implies some settlement where Serbia will not be perceived as the total loser of the dispute, and one that Serbian politicians hope will be able to sell to their people at home. In achieving this end, Serbia has relied on Russia. In the words of Milovan Drecun⁴⁵, who chairs the Serbian Assembly's Committee on Kosovo and Metohija (the Serbian name for the territory): "We need Russia to strengthen us with the Americans because when Russia puts its weight behind us, the Americans know that no solution can pass without its consent."

Russia, on the other hand, sees the Kosovo dispute as an opportunity to inject itself into Balkan geopolitics. By backing Serbia, Russia can use the issue⁴⁶ either as a bargaining chip with the West or to undermine what it perceives as a unilateral project of the US. In this hypothetical bargain, Russia could try to trade its cooperation on Kosovo for acquiescence on the status of Crimea or for the lifting of Western sanctions against Russia.

The differences between Serbia and Russia on Kosovo started to emerge in 2018 when President Vučić and Kosovo's President, Hashim Thaçi proposed a land swap⁴⁷ between the two sides as

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a solution to the Kosovo dispute. US President Donald Trump⁴⁸ gave his full support for the proposal, sending a letter to Vučić and Thaçi encouraging them to reach a final agreement and inviting them to celebrate it in the White House.

However, in October 2018⁴⁹ Vučić met with Putin in Moscow to try to secure Russian support for his new Kosovo policy—an effort which amounted to little more than shallow diplomatic platitudes. Russia did not like the idea of the Kosovo dispute being resolved without Russian participation and without the opportunity for Russia to engage in a great power trade-off. Unlike the US, Russia sees no use in resolving the Kosovo dispute if Russia is not consulted and if Russia is not offered something in return.

Moreover, Putin might in fact have a chance to reach the deal he desires. In October 2019⁵⁰ Donald Trump appointed Richard Grenell, US Ambassador to Germany and acting director of national intelligence (DNI), as special envoy for Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, showing Trump’s interest in the resolution of the dispute. This interest⁵¹ has been sparked by the EU’s inability to resolve the Kosovo dispute and Trump’s desire to score a foreign policy win ahead of the 2020 presidential elections. His fondness for Russia has been clear as well. When asked whether Russia could join Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, Grenell’s spokesman Dick Custin⁵² stated positively, “Everyone who can contribute ideas to help stability, peace and the prosperity of Serbia and Kosovo is welcome”. However, at present, it remains unclear whether the US is still backing the idea of a land swap. Naturally, as the COVID-19 pandemic now occupies so much attention in Washington’s domestic and foreign policy-making circles, the US might not be able to invest much effort into the Kosovo issue.

For Russia, Kosovo is a gift that keeps on giving. With the issue of Kosovo, Russia was able to cheaply gain a foothold in Serbia and the Balkans that it otherwise

would not have secured, and it got an opportunity to irritate the West at low risk. Russia also invokes the Kosovo precedent in the territorial conflicts in the post-Soviet space, as in the case of its annexation of Crimea⁵³ in 2014. Brokering a deal where the West could not would be an even bigger boon to Russia's strength and image in the region. For that reason, however, when it comes to negotiating the great power politics of the issue, Russia is likely to drag its feet on the dispute and refuse to make concessions to Washington unless Washington's exchange-offer is compelling. But if Belgrade is unable to win concessions from the US and Russia in that hypothetical bargain, the Serbian government would be in the most politically difficult position of having to explain to its citizens its failure to extract any meaningful benefit after twelve years of opposing Kosovo's independence.

How Much Does Moscow Trust Aleksandar Vučić?

Ultimately, despite the impressions one can get from official communication, there is not that much trust between Moscow and the most powerful man in Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. The coalition led by Vučić that has ruled Serbia since 2012 is composed of former associates of the Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević, and it has overseen a significant decline⁵⁴ in Serbian democracy. However, with Vučić proving cooperative on the Kosovo dispute and migrant crisis, and safeguarding some stability in the region, the West will continue to turn a blind eye⁵⁵ towards these anti-democratic trends.

Although Vučić plays the Russian card and makes emotional overtures towards Moscow, he is not a genuine Russophile. To be sure, there are those surrounding Vučić whose friendliness towards and preference for Russia are without question—such as the former president, Tomislav Nikolić, and the current foreign minister⁵⁶, Ivica Dačić.⁵⁷ However, unlike these two, Vučić merely uses pro-government media and tabloids to indulge⁵⁸ the pro-Russian sentiments of his constituents. In truth, Vučić knows that his ability to stay in power is more dependent on Western capitals. Moscow is aware of Vučić's political showmanship and has expressed its displeasure through provocative diplomatic gestures,⁵⁹ such as in 2017 when the Russian ambassador to Serbia gave a cheap tray as a gift to Vučić during the annual Russia Day celebration.

The mistrust was also present during Putin's theatrical visit to Belgrade in January 2019, as Putin cautiously avoided demonstrating any goodwill towards Vučić during his stay. When asked⁶⁰ by the Serbian press if he would address the Serbian public, Putin replied curtly that the plan of the visit did not involve speaking at any rallies. After much foot-dragging, however, and after pleas from his host, Putin did address the crowd with a simple "Thank you for your friendship" in Serbian and Russian. While this was seen as a "gift to Vučić,"⁶¹ given that the visit occurred when Vučić was facing massive anti-government demonstrations⁶², in truth it only served to show that the relationship between the two leaders is not particularly warm or sincere.

That this relationship is not as smooth as usually believed also became apparent in November 2019,⁶³ when a 2018 video appeared showing the officer of Russian military intelligence, the GRU, stationed in Russia's embassy in Belgrade, bribing a former Serbian military officer. In December 2019, Vučić visited Putin in Sochi where the two repaired the damage caused by the spy scandal. Vučić needed to do so as he still needs Russia on the Kosovo issue. Moreover, Vučić is aware that if Putin were to veto any deal that Serbia negotiates on Kosovo, it would be his political downfall⁶⁴ as the Serbian public would perceive that situation as indicating that the Russian leadership is more mindful of Serbia's national interests than the Serbian leaders themselves. Thus Putin and Vučić remain in this marriage of convenience.

Conclusion – Exit Moscow, Enter Beijing

Serbia will not turn its back on Russia, if for no other reason than because of the lingering Kosovo issue. However, the limitations and mistrust between Belgrade and Moscow, largely unknown to observers, remain. In Russia's place is China, with billboards in Belgrade reading "Thank you, brother Xi",⁶⁵ —not "Thank you, brother Putin". For Serbia, wanting to build leverage in its engagement with the West, China⁶⁶ is becoming a more appealing partner than Russia. The partnership with China is paying more dividends as well, with Serbia receiving⁶⁷ USD 4 billion in direct investments and slightly over USD 5 billion in loans and infrastructure projects from China. Russia will wait for the pandemic to pass and for the Kosovo issue to come back to the fore to make its next move in the Balkans, leaving Serbia to try to juggle once again between Russia and the West. However, in the following years, we might hear the name Xi Jinping being mentioned more frequently than the name Vladimir Putin in Belgrade. ■

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As the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic reached the Balkans, Serbia has energetically taken its partnership with China to the next level. This happened as Belgrade embraced China's "mask diplomacy" campaign of supplying medical equipment to the countries affected by the pandemic. However, while Russia has supplied aid to Serbia to combat the pandemic, it has not received the same attention from the Serbian leadership and public the way China did. Therefore, the pandemic has proven to be a potent 'revealer' and reminder of the lack of substance and depth of differences in the Serbo-Russian partnership.

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