



The Utility of Russian-Serbian Relations to Moscow

OE Watch Commentary: A recent visit by Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu to Serbia revealed not only the continuation of longstanding ties between Moscow and Belgrade, but the contemporary efficacy of this relationship, within several disparate frameworks, for Moscow. As noted in the revealing title of the second accompanying source, Serbian foreign policy seems to portray a need for satisfying several external influences – complicated further by the intricacies of resolving the question of Kosovo – which may also reflect the dynamics between the ruling Serbian coalition and those in the (Serbian Radical Party – led) opposition. Notwithstanding its ostensible multipronged international engagement, Belgrade’s underlying relationship with Russia is significant – and manifests itself in a myriad of forms, to include military cooperation, societal views of history, and regional politics.



Russian President Vladimir Putin with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, JAN 2019.

Source: Kremlin.ru, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/59690>, CC BY 4.0

Regarding military armaments, Serbia has acquired (at times, free of charge) Russian-built equipment. Noticeably missing in the first accompanying article’s listing of weapon systems, however, is any allusion to the more sensitive (and potentially destabilizing) first shipment of Pantsir-S1 air defense systems, which arrived within a week of Shoigu’s visit. Serbia’s purchase of this advanced system, announced in fall 2019, took place despite possible US sanctions.

Apropos societal views on history, the image of Shoigu visiting Serbia soon after the 20-year anniversary of NATO operations was clearly symbolic; the first accompanying article recalls Shoigu’s leadership of Russia’s humanitarian aid operation as then-Russian Minister for Emergency Situations. Not surprisingly, his visit included a formal call at a Serbian exhibition, dedicated to this aforementioned anniversary. Moreover, in a not subtle linkage to another common view, the first reference notes Shoigu’s visit to a WW II memorial, honoring a monument to Soviet soldiers who liberated Belgrade. (The continued presence and diplomatic emphasis on the WW II / Soviet memorial in Serbia is in stark contrast to, for example, the ongoing diplomatic drama occurring between Czechia and Russia over a Czech decision to take down the statue of Soviet Marshal Konev – the liberator of Czechoslovakia.)

Politically, Serbia’s warmer relations with NATO, as alluded to in the second accompanying reference, likely do not inspire great trepidation in Moscow; Serbian President Vučić, as noted in the first reference, does not intend for Serbia to join the Alliance. Of greater import and utility to Russia is Serbia’s vocal aspirations to join the European Union (EU). As the EU still maintains sanctions against Russia (extended through mid-September 2020) for the destabilization of Ukraine, Moscow will continue to leverage both individual political relationships – as well as the general European dependence on Russian natural gas and oil – in order to chip away at Brussels’ ability to concretely impose any form of punitive measures. In Belgrade, Moscow enjoys both of these factors. Finally, as referenced in the second accompanying article, the lack of a final resolution to Kosovo continues to impart to Moscow regional leverage broadly as an influential international arbiter in the process, and narrowly as the protector of (as yet unfulfilled) Serbian interests, strengthening even further Belgrade’s political dependence on Russia.

The still-serving Serbian Foreign Minister’s blunt 2019 opinion regarding Russian President Putin and NATO military operations in 1999, noted in the third accompanying reference (and revealingly quoted in the margins of the second accompanying reference), offers an instructive view of the general Serbian societal opinion of Russia – now and in 1999. That is to say, it was within the 1999 context of a chaotic, reeling, post-Soviet Russia that NATO (and the West) was able to perpetrate what most Serbs consider to be a historical wrong. This opinion, shared by both Moscow and many ordinary Russians, may ultimately be the most important aspect of the strong bilateral relationship. **End OE Watch Commentary (Sarafian)**

“Within the framework of Russian military cooperation with international partners, Serbia occupies a special place.”

“[Serbian] President Vučić has repeatedly stated that Serbia will not join NATO while he is in office.”



Continued: The Utility of Russian-Serbian Relations to Moscow

Source: “Сергей Шойгу в Белграде напомнил о том, что объединяет наши страны (Sergei Shoigu in Belgrade reminded [us] what unites our countries),” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 17 February 2020. <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2020/02/17/sergey-shoigu-v-belgrade-napomnil-o-tom-chto-obedinyayet-nashi-strany.html>

“Within the framework of Russian military cooperation with international partners, Serbia occupies a special place.”
... the Armed Forces of Serbia received six MiG-29s from Russia, as well as 30 BRDM-2MS [an upgraded BRDM-2 armored reconnaissance vehicle] and 30 T-72MS tanks...

“In 1999, Sergey Shoigu visited Belgrade multiple times and [as then-Russian Minister for Emergency Situations] led the Russian humanitarian aid operation [in response to NATO military operations against Serbia and Montenegro].”

“[Serbian] President Vučić has repeatedly stated that Serbia will not join NATO while he is in office.”

“During a brief visit to Belgrade, Sergei Shoigu took the time to take part in the ceremony ... at the Liberators of Belgrade [during WWII] memorial... [and] laid flowers at the monument to Soviet soldiers.”

Source: “На трех стульях: как Сербия лавирует между Россией, США и ЕС (Straddling three chairs: how Serbia maneuvers among Russia, the USA and the EU),” *Izvestia*, 1 March 2020. <https://iz.ru/981367/kseniiia-loginova/na-trekh-stuliakh-kak-serbiia-laviruet-mezhdu-rossiei-ssha-i-es>

“At the same time [as the March 2020 visit of Serbian President Vučić to the U.S.], an active rapprochement between Belgrade and NATO is occurring...”

“The White House has repeatedly expressed concern about Serbia’s acquisition of Russian arms, including the Pantsir-S1 air defense system.”

“It is unfavorable for Russia to support a final settlement of the Kosovo issue...”

Source: ““Если бы Путин тогда был президентом, нас бы не посмели бомбить” Глава МИД Сербии Ивица Дачич — о давлении Запада и обмене территориями с Косово (If Putin had been president [during that period], they would have not dared to bomb us” Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić- on Western pressure and the exchange of territories with Kosovo),” *Izvestia*, 19 April 2019. <https://iz.ru/869415/aleksei-zabrodin/esli-putin-togda-byi-prezidentom-nas-ne-posmeli-bombit>

[Portion of Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić’s reply to a question, regarding Serbia’s relations with western partners]

“We are grateful to the Russian Federation for the help that it provided at that time in [1999], but if Putin had been president [during that period], they would have not dared to bomb us. Russia, I think, would have taken a different position.”



In 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov instituted sweeping changes that have reorganized the country’s security forces and reestablished the nation’s military prowess. This study, *Kremlin Kontrol*, aims to describe how control over the security services and the military have hastened those changes.

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-books/197266/download>