



# Weekly Briefing

**Serbia external relations briefing:  
Serbia and Russia – brothers by history?  
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## **Serbia and Russia – brothers by history?**

### **Abstract**

*The second half of October brought three interesting events in Serbian-Russian cooperation: Prime Minister Medvedev's visit of Belgrade, conclusion of a free trade agreement between Serbia and EAEU, and Russian-Serbian joint military drill "Slavic shield". Both country's officials, among other things, emphasize that the two countries share similar views of contemporary history, especially Soviet role in World War II, which has been contested by many in the West. However, it is a fact that during the most of contemporary history Russia and Serbia were not on the same side, in spite of predominant Russophile orientation of Serbian people. Such history should be a warning sign that, despite some common national interests the two countries have at the moment, some other factors – such as Western influence in the Balkan region, and internal political imperatives of the governing elite in Serbia – could prevent Russian-Serbian brotherhood in reality once again.*

On October 19, Russia's Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev visited Belgrade to attend celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of joint Soviet-Yugoslav liberation of the city from Nazi occupiers. He had a very busy day – from airport, to "Serbia" Palace, where he met Serbian President Vučić, then to Belgrade liberators' cemetery and the Parliament, then back to the Palace for signing of numerous agreements with Serbian government, then to the central celebration at "Sava" Center, finishing with dinner in Topčider military compound, and going back to airport. During these events, he gave several speeches and statements. The most interesting thing he said, given the context of the visit, was the following: "There are not too many countries whom we in Russia can call friends, but not any friends – friends who share our view of history". President Vučić added: "As peoples who suffered terribly in World War II, we represent a force which struggles against forging the history".

Indeed, when we look into a recent European trend of undermining Russia's (Soviet Union's) role in the outcome of WWII, Serbia is a rare exception. This is why it may not be coincidence (although there was a formal explanation for this) that alongside Russia, Serbia was not invited by Poland to mark 80 years since the beginning of the war back in September. However, the claim that Russia and Serbia are brothers by history just because they look at some important historical events in similar fashion is a bit absurd, because during the most of

contemporary history, the two countries walked the separate pathways. Yes, Russia and Serbia (then Yugoslavia) were allied in WWII, but Kingdom of Yugoslavia established diplomatic relations only in 1940, and the “honeymoon” lasted just to 1948, when Josip Broz Tito decided to switch sides in the Cold War that was only beginning. Russo-Serbian alliance in WWI was preceded by several decades of Obrenović dynasty rule, who were mostly pro-Austrian and anti-Russian, and finished with October Revolution, which cut the ties between the two countries for more than two decades. After the end of the Cold War, in 1991, Serbian leader Milošević supported military coup against new Russian government, while in the following year Russia voted in favour of Western-sponsored UN sanctions against Yugoslavia. After 2000, a new pro-Western elite came to power in Serbia, not being interested in close relations with Russia for years. And now there is a new interesting phenomenon – while the two countries were never so friendly on rhetorical level, it is not clear how much of this friendship exists in reality, given the opportunism of the current Serbian ruling elite.

This opportunism is a result of the two main factors on which the political power in Serbia depends, but which are in conflict. The first one is the support by public opinion, as well as by important religious, cultural and academic elites that could influence this opinion. That said, it makes no difference that Serbia at the moment has a hybrid regime – public opinion matters even in the worst autocracies. And public opinion in Serbia is predominantly pro-Russian, so it is not surprising that its authorities have to act as Russophiles, at least rhetorically, to gain public support. The second factor is foreign – Serbia is situated in the Western sphere of influence, so its authorities should also secure the support by the West, in order to stay in power. And in situation where there is sharp political confrontation between the West and Russia, “sitting on two chairs” is dangerous, but optimal strategy for Vučić and his associates.

This of course has implications for some matters of Serbia’s national interest. As Russian officials did many times before, Medvedev reiterated that Russia will support peaceful solution for Kosovo, in accordance with UNSC Resolution 1244. This is a document which once affirmed territorial integrity and sovereignty of Serbia, paving the way for political process that should have ended in substantial autonomy for Kosovo. However, by unilateral proclamation of Kosovo independence and its recognition by most of Western countries in 2008, this resolution has already been breached. For the last two or three years, much has been spoken (including by Serbian officials) about a compromise solution for Kosovo, which should obviously have to contain some kind of Belgrade’s recognition of the province’s independence, for something (most likely part of the territory) in return. At the moment, this process is frozen,

given the lack of cooperation by Kosovo Albanians, but imagine it resumes at some point and results in a said “compromise” – would there be any UN resolution Russia could hold on to, in order to prevent it? When it comes to Serbia’s EU accession, Medvedev commented on it in a manner of ancient Greek Oracle of Delphi: we will support it “as long as it is in Serbian and Russian peoples’ interests”. Is this accession in anyone’s interest at the moment, including those in the EU, who recently refused to start accession negotiations with Albania and Macedonia?

Nevertheless, that not everything is a plain rhetoric, but some trends are visible in the essence, we can observe from two events that followed Medvedev’s visit in just a week. On October 25, Serbia signed a free trade agreement with Eurasian Economic Union. Previously, it had free trade agreements with most of its members, but the list and quantities of goods that can be exported to the EAEU is also expanded. Although this agreement is not expected to bring Serbia some immediate profit, the willingness of Moscow to conclude it is one of the signs that it wants to improve its connections with Belgrade and become more influential actor in the Balkans region. Another, maybe even more important sign, was a Russian-Serbian military drill “Slavic shield”, that took place in Serbia simultaneously with the signing of the said agreement. During the drill, a famous Russian S-400 Triumph air-defence missile system was deployed to Serbia, alongside with more modest (but still efficient) Pantsir-S1. Serbia bought the latter for its army, while President Vučić regretted it cannot afford the former. Deploying its state-of-the-art weapon to the heart of the Balkans, even only for the drill, is a certain signal Russia wants to make Western propaganda dreams of Russian interfering with the regional politics comes true. It is interesting that this is happening at the time when US Trump administration is showing lack of interest for the adjacent Middle East region, while failing to control even its own backyard (in Venezuela, for example) – why should not Moscow then try to increase its own influence at Washington’s expense wherever it had such opportunity?

In Serbia, having in mind mentioned Russophile orientation of the majority of its people, as well as the troubles with the West, such opportunity certainly exists. However, history teaches us that such opportunities are often hindered by pro-Western circles in Serbian governing elites, whose personal and group interests lie with the West, and who have very strong positions within the incumbent Serbian authorities. Although Moscow is certainly aware of this, it seems that its current approach is to rely mostly on Vučić to achieve its interests in Serbia, perceiving the opposition as even more Western-influenced. Recently, an internet project [Balkanist.ru](http://Balkanist.ru) was established by prominent Russian scholars familiar with the Balkan

history and politics, which is visibly biased in favour of Vučić's government as a guarantor of good Serbian-Russian relations. And in his recent interview for Russian RT, one of the most popular Serbian opposition leaders, Vuk Jeremić, warned Russia that by continuing its support for Vučić, it risks to make a similar mistake it made with Montenegrin leader Milo Đukanović, who firstly presented himself as reliable to Moscow, but then imposed sanctions against it and brought his country into NATO. Jeremić thinks Vučić could do something similar once a "compromise" solution for Kosovo is achieved, and it did not seem his Russian interviewer agreed with him.

All in all, Serbia and Russia may be brothers by current interpretations of contemporary history, but the distance between them during the most of this history should make us cautious to conclude they are on the path of establishing brotherly relations in today's reality. From the point of both Serbia and Russia's national interests, this would of course be beneficial, but governments of both countries (especially in Serbia) have not always put their national interests above the governing elites' internal political imperatives of the day. It seems that, if at the end of the day Russia and Serbia finish like brothers in essence, it would be more the result of the third actor's clumsiness (the West), than of their own virtue.

### **Conclusion**

Although some recent events, from Medvedev's Belgrade visit to military drill "Slavic shield", hint that Serbia and Russia are on the path of establishing ever closer relations, their contradictory history warns us this is far from certain.