Transitions

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Playing the Wild Card in Belgrade

by **Barbara Frye**
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What does Serbia's increasingly close link with Russia mean for its EU accession, or for the EU itself?

Among the armies parading across Red Square on Victory Day next month will be Serbia's, as their president, Tomislav Nikolic, takes his place alongside the leaders of Russia and, so far, about two dozen other countries on the reviewing stand.

Nikolic indicated in March that he would accept the Kremlin's invitation to the ceremonies, ruffling feathers in Brussels, especially when he essentially told the head of a European Parliament delegation to Serbia to **take a hike** for suggesting he not attend the parade.

Such nose-thumbing makes for good political theater in a country where many both resent and would like to join the EU. In a **November poll**, those who viewed Russia positively outnumbered fans of the EU by 20 percentage points, but most still wanted Serbia to become a member of the union. And when it came to where they would want their children to live, there was no contest: the EU swamped Russia by 70 percent to 17 percent.

Significant majorities said they expected EU membership would help improve the country's infrastructure, safeguard human rights, and reform the widely mistrusted judiciary and other p

Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic hosts Vladimir Putin in Belgrade in October 2014.

institutions. In an **earlier poll**, conducted for Belgrade's European Integration Office in December, the three most popular reasons Serbians gave for wanting their country to join the EU were that it would mean a better future for young people, more job opportunities, and freedom to travel around the union.

Why, then, the growing affection for Russia, even as most Serbians seem to welcome the reforms required for EU membership (and which would hardly be required to join a Russia-led bloc)? Does this relationship threaten to throw Serbia off the EU path, or is it more an escape valve for people who still feel victimized by the West, even as they know that's where their future lies?

The bedrock of this alliance, of course, is Serbia's gratitude for Russia's refusal to recognize the independence of Kosovo and for keeping the former province out of the UN.

After the NATO bombing of Serbia and, years later, the humiliation of widespread recognition of Kosovo in the West, "Serbia became a one issue country, and here comes Russia and here comes Russia's support," former Deputy Defense Minister Dusan Spasojevic told a recent conference on Russia in the Balkans.

Aside from a shared sense of victimhood at the hands of the West, the rhetoric of historical ties and pan-Slavism and the popular notion that Moscow has become a financial sponsor of Belgrade have only helped bind the countries tighter.

But much of that collapses under scrutiny. The tale of Slavic brotherhood omits periods when Serbia and Russia were on the outs, including the Tito-Stalin split and the tenure of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic from 2001 to 2003, as Jelena Milic, who runs the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies, noted in a **recent commentary**.

And although its money is welcome, it is not Russia, but the EU that is crucial to Serbia's economy. In 2014, 80 percent of foreign direct investment came from the EU, compared with 7 percent from Russia, according to the **Serbian central bank** (pdf). Further, Serbia's **trade with the EU** (pdf) is worth more than six times the value of its trade with Russia.

"Who is creating this self-fulfilling prophecy" of brotherly bonds between Russia and Serbia, Milic asked the Russia-Balkans conference, which was held in mid-March at the London School of Economics.

She pointed the finger at elements in Serbia who see a Russian alliance as a way to scuttle EU integration: some politicians and politically controlled media, shady businesses that do not want to operate in the daylight, and security operatives who "assume that getting closer to the EU would result in more demands for trials in domestic courts" and who she said are setting up nongovernmental organizations in northern Kosovo intent on undermining Serbia's association agreement with the EU.

Still, Belgrade insists it is committed to joining the Brussels club, and only two weeks ago EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said detailed, subject-by-subject membership talks could begin by the end of the year.

For all the Serbian government's acts of defiance – foot-dragging on joining Western sanctions against Russia, Nikolic's attending the Victory Day parade, pushing on with Gazprom's ill-fated South Stream pipeline despite EU law to the contrary – there is an inevitability about Serbia's accession to the EU.

"I suppose that if you talk to Russian officials honestly, they'll admit that candidate countries, if they are pushed to choose, will of course choose Brussels over Moscow," journalist Konstantin von Eggert told the conference.

Which does not mean that Russia will be sitting outside a locked door. Von Eggert noted that in the late 2000s, when it was becoming clear that the Western Balkans were heading toward membership in Western institutions, Gazprom began negotiating to buy Serbian pipelines and to build South Stream, and Moscow started handing out bailout credits to Belgrade.

"I think that the idea that via some countries of the ex-Yugoslavia, you could basically open the back door to the EU and NATO and basically stay or be inside, have platforms inside in the future, became very appealing," he said.

Even Milic, who argues that the Kremlin wants to keep the countries of the Western Balkans out of the EU, writes that Moscow "is now counting on the 'Putinization' of the Western Balkan states to keep low institutional and democratic standards even once these countries finally join the EU. Then they can serve as an example that joining the EU does not bring any desired outcomes like democratization or a better living standard."

So much for why Serbia would want to join – and why Russia might go along with that. But at a time when Russian foreign policy seems intent on undermining EU unity, Brussels' embrace of an obstreperous new member with divided loyalties might seem perverse. Until you consider that it is the accession process itself, more than membership, that could weaken some of those anti-EU, pro-Russia forces that worry Milic: after the rather disappointing experience of Romania and Bulgaria, Brussels now opens accession talks with the fundamentals, including the rule of law and public administration, Andrew Rasbash, an adviser to the European Commission, told the conference. In some respects, then, Brussels has more leverage over hopefuls such as Serbia and Albania than it does over club members Greece and Cyprus.

Meanwhile, Nikolay Petrov, a former analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center, said that by its actions in Ukraine Russia has done itself no favors in the Balkans.

The annexation of Crimea "creates a moral distance between people in the Balkans and Russia," Petrov said. "Conflicts in Russia's back yard give Balkan leaders a new view of Russian foreign policy."

That cold shiver – once reserved for Western allies who recognized Kosovo – along with declining Russian investment in the region as Russia's GDP falls and the ruble limps along, will see Moscow being eclipsed in the Balkans, Petrov predicted.

But that "moral distance" has not shown up in opinion polls, and, wary of Russia, Serbia's leaders have issued only pro forma statements of support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. So while it's difficult to imagine Serbia turning away from the EU, it's much easier to see it eating away at the bloc from within.

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