

Serbia and Hungary Form Strategic Council Despite EU Opposition

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*The idea of forming a Serbia-Hungary Strategic Council was announced by Serbian **President Aleksandar Vučić** after his meeting with Hungarian **Prime Minister Viktor Orbán** in Belgrade on March 25. Specifically, Vučić announced that the strategic council between the two countries would be established in May. As Serbia is a non-EU/NATO member, unlike Hungary, it is guaranteed that Brussels and Washington are not happy about the strengthening ties between the two neighbouring countries.*

Accordingly, the council would deal with the issue of security, the fight against terrorism, and opens the possibility of cooperation between their armies and police in the military-technical sense. It is for this reason, despite the benefits that this strategic cooperation brings for both countries, Brussels and Washington are not happy with this emergence.

The issue of security is very important and is back at the forefront due to the crisis in Ukraine. More than ever, the spotlight has not just been placed on security in the traditional sense, but also in regards to energy. Serbia and Hungary are connected not only by good mutual relations, but also by their tense relationship with the European Union. Although Hungary is an EU member, it has a number of open issues with the bloc, such as the handling of the war in Ukraine. Fundamentally, Serbia's and Hungary's current interests are opposed to that of the EU, and it is also this factor which unites them.

Serbia has excellent economic relations with Russia and China, and Orbán as a Hungarian nationalist, broke from EU consensus and concluded that his country should not have confrontational ties with Moscow. Serbia and Hungary are looking towards a Eurasian future rather than an Atlanticist one, something which binds their commonalities and necessitates the need for a common strategic council.

In addition, Hungary is surrounded by countries with which it has a rather difficult historical

(and sometimes current) relations with, regardless of mutual NATO and EU membership, namely Romania and Slovakia. However, Hungary also never had great relations with Ukraine or Yugoslavia. With Serbia though, the successor of Yugoslavia, this has massively changed.

Both Belgrade and Budapest have invested a lot of energy into thawing relations in the last ten years. This developing relationship was epitomised with the Serbian Parliament in December ratifying the agreement on strategic cooperation between Serbia and Hungary.

Hungary is the only country neighbouring Serbia that Belgrade has concluded a strategic cooperation with, and it relates to more than twenty areas. This includes infrastructure and the economy, where Hungary is already among the first foreign trade partners of Serbia. This also extends to other sectors too, which is why Hungary is rapidly becoming one of Serbia's closest partners.

When the future strategic council of Serbia and Hungary is viewed objectively, it is seen purely political in nature and an effort to thrive under new global circumstances. That is why the council is essential. The current events in Ukraine, where there is a large Hungarian minority, and the remaining question over Kosovo, means that Serbia and Hungary will need to support each other more than ever as most of Europe is in favour of backing the Kiev regime and separatists in Kosovo.

Hungary has openly and repeatedly said that it does not want to be part of any adventure and war. Serbia also maintains a neutral position politically, although the majority of people are pro-Russian because of their own experience with NATO and the entire historical experience preceding and following it.

The fact that Budapest has good relations with not only Belgrade, but also the Republika Srpska (the Serbian entity of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Federation), is also important as it demonstrates again that Orbán's Hungary is not only working based on values and principles, but also on the need for an ally in the region. Practically, with an interesting turn of historical circumstances, the Hungarians realised that their most reliable ally would be the Serbs, both in Serbia and Republika Srpska.

Hungarian **Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó** commented on the meeting in a video on his Facebook page. He stressed that the strategic partnership and friendship between Belgrade and Budapest will greatly contribute to Hungary's ability to better address the challenges it faces – primarily economic, security, and energy supply.

Szijjártó also recalled that under the long-term agreement with the Russian state-owned Gazprom, “natural gas for Hungary's supply comes via Serbia, and Hungary stores hundreds of millions of cubic metres of gas for Serbia.”

European countries have destroyed their economies for sanctioning Russia and cutting gas supplies, something Budapest has done its best to avoid. For this reason, it is increasingly finding itself with more common interests with Belgrade and will not be hindered from jointly pursuing them just because Serbia is not an EU or NATO member.

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