

Vladimir Putin in Serbia: Navigating in the European Centre

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Inviting the punchy Russian leader to a military parade and awarding him a country's highest honour may well be considered as dangerous as inviting a drunk to a well-stocked wine cellar for a the prized drop, but the analogy would be specious. The relationship between Serbia and Russia is both complex and intense, a deliciously neurotic bond that has both disappointed and benefited the parties. While nationalist admiration tends to be misplaced, the occasion of celebrating liberation from the occupation of Nazi forces after 70 years is not. Every European country treasures it and the anniversary of Serbia's liberation this month is no exception.

Belgrade has been in history's tight spot for decades, enshrouded and packaged as both refuse and bad boy. It used to be as free as an audacious bird, taking flight and landing in places most states in the Eastern bloc could only dream of. Those were the days of Titoist extravaganza – Yugoslavia, defiant of Moscow, but also understanding of certain common principles.

Now, the rhetoric of navigating blocs of power have emerged – the aspirations of wounded but slowly emerging Serbia on the one hand; and the impositions of aggressively renascent Russia on the other. European officials peer cautiously from the west – they are eyeing Russian President Vladimir Putin's every move, a form of power pervy and inquisitiveness that has come to dominate EU chatter. The Russian bear is bearing down on the honey supply. What will Brussels and company do?

Officials in Belgrade have not disappointed. The military party bash, even if oddly timed, is extensive, the first military parade in 29 years. “We have held no parade for the past 29 or 30 years,” claims Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić. While the President tends to be Serbia's disappearing act, someone who is ventriloquised by the prime minister, the point is clear: Serbia is happy to remember those who helped it.

Serbia is certainly adopting a gymnast's pose here, though Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić sounds comical when he talks about a policy that is neither swerving, let alone moving, to the left or the right. It was impossible during the years when Russia was itself in history's straightjacket. “Serbia is going towards the EU, which is a strategic goal, but that it will not impose sanctions on Russia for many reasons, economic being one of them.”[1] The Prime Minister is keen to remind his audience that this is not a matter of concealment. “I am not concealing from our Russian partners that we are following the European course.” Point being: we are not Ukraine.

There is also that other issue of the South Stream construction project, a Russian gas pipeline that is seen by Vučić as “good for Serbia” on the one hand, but a headache for

other states. "This should pass through Bulgaria, Hungary, Austria and all other countries. As for Serbia, we have done our part, all the rest depends on others." [2]

The call for sanctions upon brother Russia has become something of a mindless reflection, a reflex that is encouraged for those willing to join the moral club – if you don't follow in step, you will be shunned. Serbia's imposition of sanctions on Russia would be, in many ways, a constriction and self-willing constipation. In the Serbian government scheme, the Russian purse is being directed to government assets, which is in some ways more enthusiastically directed than other western reserves. "[W]e expect participation of Russian investors in privatisation of certain enterprises."

Admittedly, that resource – Russia's hefty investment – has its own price tag, its own problematic influences. Such money bags do come with weighty considerations and consequence, the risk that the recipient state becomes both compliant and compliable. Being invested in is one thing; being filled to the point of becoming a client state is another matter. But the point to be made here is that the government should decide on its own accord, a decision exclusive to Belgrade as opposed to pen pushing moralists in Brussels. As Vučić has told the Russian Tass news agency, "Serbia is a free and independent state, Serbia is on the European path".

The other side of the bargain should also be emphasised: that the EU wishes Serbia to express the moral outrage of a member towards a force it considers a problematic citizen at international law, while denying that member membership. Moscow has misbehaved. It needs chastisement. The EU has been moving into the land of the gentleman's club, a sort of affair where cant and irritating sanctimony triumph over creditability and worth.

Putin, on the other hand, has his own targets. Making sure that he touches the palpitating heart strings, he is clear to remind readers of the Serbian paper *Politika* of a weakening of "the vaccine against the Nazi virus". While he may be a bit short on describing his country's own nationalist movements, he is not mistaken in noting "open manifestations of neo-Nazism, which have come common in Latvia and other Baltic states."

As ever, the Serbian political grouping has had to adopt the approach of the gambler, or at least the gambler who will concede to accepting money and self-reform. We have bad habits. (We are too close to Moscow, and have suspicions of the Albanians.) We are a frightfully traditional bunch, and we decided that a murderous approach might have been appropriate to keep the Yugoslavian union intact. Hardly exceptional, given the circumstances – but it has made for interesting discussion.

The application for EU membership these days is much like spending a life time on the waiting list of an exclusive, overpriced club, a sort of generational pondering as to whether you just might join the Marylebone Cricket Club. Given the chaos within an unsteady Europe, the Serbian antics on this look less peculiar, a sort of dogged manoeuvre before torridness. There is time – and European states should learn one thing: don't lecture the student who has not yet been admitted to the classroom.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/15/vladimir-putin-nazism-warning-serbia-visit>

[2] <http://euobserver.com/foreign/126078>

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