

# Serbia and the War in Ukraine

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**ABSTRACT** *The war in Ukraine has created a situation in which the Republic of Serbia may see an opportunity to take up some unfinished business; for this purpose, Serbia has recently been purchasing armaments from Russia and China and has sought also to purchase 12 fighter jets from France. The Serbian government does not recognize the sovereignty of Kosovo and regards the land controlled by Prishtina as rightfully Serbian, while the Republika Srpska (the Serb part of Bosnia-Herzegovina) has sought for years to secede from union with the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and to unite with Serbia. The weapons may figure as a way to pressure and intimidate the Albanians of Kosovo to return to the negotiating table and to present the Bosnian government in Sarajevo with a fait accompli.*

**Keywords:** Serbia, Kosovo, Republika Srpska, Ukraine, Russia, Weapons

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Russia's war against Ukraine has had political and strategic repercussions in the Western Balkans, creating a context in which Serbian dreams of expansion have been revived, albeit in a less ambitious form than were pursued by President Slobodan Milošević in the initial phase of the 1991-1995 War of Yugoslav Succession. Among the effects of the war in Ukraine is a pervasive sense that many things have become possible and, in particular, Belgrade's earlier program to annex Bosnia-Herzegovina and to re-establish its hegemony in Kosovo seems now to be revived, though conversations in Belgrade and Banja Luka (the latter, the capital of the Serb-controlled part of Bosnian-Herzegovina known as the Republika Srpska or RS) revolve around fantasies of conjoining only the RS, rather than all of Bosnia-Herzegovina (as Milošević attempted in the first years of the 1990s),<sup>1</sup> with Serbia. In Kosovo, Prime Minister Albin Kurti has expressed concern that there is a grave risk of armed conflict with Serbia.<sup>2</sup> NATO Councils take this risk seriously and, already in March, declared that the alliance was "ready to intervene if stability would be endangered."<sup>3</sup> NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg reiterated this pledge in mid-August 2022, noting that NATO already had more than 3,700 peacekeeping troops in Kosovo and was prepared, if necessary, to "move forces, deploy them where needed and increase our presence."<sup>4</sup>

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Russian President Vladimir Pu-

tin have something important in common: they are both unreconciled to the loss of territory in the past. Putin, for his part, has said that the break-up of the Soviet Union was the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century and his war in Ukraine reflects his desire to restore at least part of the Western borders of the empire once ruled by Moscow. This is, in fact, the fourth time Putin has gone to war to change the status quo on Russia's Western border. The first time was in 2008 when he went to war against Georgia and wrested South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgian control, setting them up as nominally independent satellites. This was followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea in February 2014 and later by the Russian establishment of the breakaway Donetsk Republic in Eastern Ukraine in April 2014. Politicians in the Baltic States (perhaps especially Estonia) worry that Putin might ideally like to invade their countries too, in spite of their being members of NATO. Finland's sudden rush to get into NATO reflects a suspicion in Helsinki that just maybe Putin might like to restore Russian control in their country, as Finland was part of tsarist Russia from 1809 to 1917. Putin sees his historical role as restoring the greatness of Russia and he has shown that he is prepared to accept high costs in the pursuit of this goal.

From Vučić's point of view, the loss of Kosovo was clearly the greatest tragedy in modern Serbian history, even though the population was more than 70 percent Albanian by 1971 and more than 80 percent Al-

banian by 1991. Today, the population of Kosovo is more than 90 per cent Albanian. But, since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even more so since the myth-making of the World War Two-era pro-Axis regime of Milan Nedić,<sup>5</sup> Kosovo has been seen by most Serbs as the historic cradle of Serbia. They remember that it was part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century empire of Tsar Dušan Uroš IV the Mighty and that it was in Kosovo that, on June 28, 1389, a Christian army led by Serbian Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović met an Ottoman Army led by Sultan Murad I on the field of battle. Lazar and Murad both lost their lives that day and, following the battle, Serbia became an Ottoman vassal until finally losing its statehood altogether in 1459. It is sometimes thought that most adult Serbs believe that the Battle of Kosovo was a significant event for Serbia (especially after the dramatic open-air commemoration of the battle on its 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary, at the site where it was fought) and some Serbs view Lazar as a Christian martyr.

It is extremely unlikely that the medieval kingdom and the battle of 1389 loom large in Vučić's thinking. But it is clear enough that he does not accept the shrinkage of what he still considers the legitimate borders of Serbia. Just as Putin wants to restore the greatness of Russia, Vučić wants to restore Serbia's effective pre-1999 borders, when Kosovo was still under Serbian control. Then there is the lost war of 1991-1995. The now deceased Serbian President Slobodan Milošević launched hostilities first

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against Croatia and later against Bosnia-Herzegovina with the idea that the territory of the short-lived Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1992-2003), consisting of Serbia with the provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo plus Montenegro, would be enlarged. Instead, Milošević failed to gain any territory through that war; in addition, his successors had to witness the declarations of independence first by Montenegro in 2006 (two months after Milošević's death in March 2006) and then, following multilateral coordination with the key Western states, by Kosovo in February 2008. For Vučić the loss of Kosovo is simply unacceptable, which is why Serbia has refused to recognize the country's independence. He gave the game away in March when he said, "Regardless of all pressures and blackmail, no matter what anyone thinks, Serbia will preserve its territorial integrity."<sup>6</sup> Given that the Serbian President does not recognize the independence of Kosovo, it follows that the territorial integrity he wants to 'preserve' includes Kosovo. It is worth noting, however, that Vučić's policy vis-à-vis Kosovo has evolved over time, at least to some extent. Thus, in 2018, he proposed an exchange of territories between Serbia and Kosovo,

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under which Belgrade would have ceded parts of the Preševo Valley to Kosovo, in exchange for which Prishtina would have ceded the northern part of Kosovo to Serbia.<sup>7</sup> This gambit raised many eyebrows in the region and, to a certain extent, provoked some tremors of instability in the Western Balkans, as Macedonia (which had not yet changed its name) and Montenegro feared that there might be a domino effect, impacting their territories. The only influential Kosovar politician to express some interest in the idea was Hashim Thaçi, at that time President of Kosovo (Thaçi was later forced to resign his office, due to allegations of war crimes; this contributed to the failure of the plan for an exchange of territories).

Then there is the legacy of the Dayton Peace Accords of November 1995, which divided Bosnia-Herzegovina into a Federation run by Bosniaks and Croats and the Republika Srpska run by Serbs. The dominant figure in the RS for the past three decades has been Milorad Dodik, currently the Serb member of the state presidency

of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Dodik has kept Bosnia-Herzegovina in a state of uncertainty for most of these years by repeatedly threatening to pull the RS out of Bosnia-Herzegovina – a move which cannot be justified by any appeal to constitutional or legal arguments. Although Dodik speaks of wanting to establish the RS as an independent state, it is more likely that he wants to see it conjoined with the Republic of Serbia; indeed, in an interview with the Belgrade daily newspaper *Večernje Novosti* in January 2022, Dodik promised that the Republika Srpska would, in due course, be linked with Serbia on a federal or confederal basis.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Dodik declared, at an event to mark the anniversary of the expulsion of 150,000 Serbs from the Croatian Krajina,<sup>9</sup> that there is only one Serbian nation and that the 21st century would witness the unification of Serb lands.<sup>10</sup> If he and Vučić could succeed in this, then Serbia would no longer be seen to have lost the war of 1992-1995 but, on the contrary, would have to be counted as having won it – even if only after the passage of over three decades. Moreover, if Vučić can manage to restore Serbian control of Kosovo, then he would be, at least in his own eyes, the “restorer” of Serbian land.

It is against this background that one must understand Vučić's ostensible positioning of Serbia between Russia and the West. The Serbian President projects an image of wanting to have good relations with all relevant powers – the U.S., NATO, Russia, and China being the most prominent –

that he values Serbian neutrality and sovereignty and that his government is serious about its accession negotiations for entry into the European Union. But Putin can offer Vučić two important things that he cannot get from the West: continued supplies of Russian gas tangibly below market price and support for Serbia's irredentism vis-à-vis Kosovo and the RS. These are, in turn, the main reasons that he has refused to impose sanctions on Russia in spite of Putin's war of aggression in Ukraine. Vučić is, at this point, clearly closer to Moscow than to the West. This has also been the case with many other politicians, such as Ivica Dačić, leader of the Socialist Party of Serbia and Prime Minister of Serbia from July 2012 to April 2014 and again from the end of May to the end of June 2017. Dačić has echoed Vučić by rejecting sanctions on Russia while expressing the desire to see Serbia join the EU. Serbia does not support Russia's violent attempt to carve up Ukraine or annex it together, at least not openly, but Belgrade continues to try to play to both antagonistic audiences.

### **Challenging Established Borders**

At the time the Soviet Union fell apart, Ukraine was in possession of the world's third largest nuclear arsenal – behind only the U.S. and Russia. It possessed 1,900 strategic nuclear warheads, more than what was in the arsenals of China, the United Kingdom, and France combined.<sup>11</sup> As of 1994, Ukraine had a stockpile of 176 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles

(ICBMs,) armed with 1,240 nuclear warheads, and 592 nuclear warheads on bombers, among other armaments.<sup>12</sup> At that point, U.S. President Clinton entered the picture, negotiating a deal under which Ukraine turned over its nuclear weapons to Russia for destruction, in exchange for clear and binding guarantees that Russia would respect Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity. The agreement was signed by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, British Prime Minister John Major, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, and U.S. President Bill Clinton. This agreement, known formally as the Budapest Memorandum, provided that representatives of the four signatory powers would meet if any of them felt that there had been a violation of the commitments undertaken.

The Budapest Memorandum survived for 20 years. But in February 2014, Russian troops entered Crimea and, the following month, Russia declared the annexation of the peninsula. The Ukrainian government then informed the other signatory powers that it wished to convene a meeting, and on March 5, 2014, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, British Foreign Minister William Hague, and Acting Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Deshchitsya came to Paris to meet. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was already in Paris at the time but refused to join the meeting, arguing that the Budapest Memorandum had been signed with Kuchma and not with the current Ukrainian government and was therefore no longer valid. This strange argument



Russian  
Ambassador  
in Belgrade  
Aleksandr Botsan-  
Kharchenko (R)  
meets Serbian  
President Vučić  
(L) in Belgrade,  
Serbia on June 6,  
2022.  
MILOŠ MIŠKOV / AA

is probably unprecedented in the history of diplomacy and, with that, Moscow signaled its unilateral withdrawal from the agreement, thus abrogating its commitment to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity. The following month, pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk declared the Donetsk People's Republic and, with Russian backing, succeeded in wresting away part of Eastern Ukraine from Kyiv's control. With this, a *de facto* state of war existed between Russia and Ukraine, although the West failed to come up with any effective response. Serbia was one of 25 states in the UN General Assembly that declined to support a UN Resolution condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Meanwhile, Dodik, at that time President of the RS, was keeping Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia) on edge by repeatedly threatening to

hold a referendum on the secession of the RS, even though any such referendum would be contrary to the Dayton Peace Accords and the country's constitution. Dodik was clearly playing hardball. Thus, in December 2017, he pledged to do his best to keep Bosnia out of NATO, justifying this by citing the RS's (illegal) declaration of military neutrality two months prior.<sup>13</sup> Then, on October 8, 2021, Dodik stated that the RS would be withdrawing its representatives from the joint military, the highest judicial body, and the joint tax authority, as a preliminary step to establishing its own corresponding institutions. In response, Serbian President Vučić invited Dodik to Belgrade to suggest that he calm down.<sup>14</sup> Although both Vučić and Dodik might like to see the RS attached to Serbia, Vučić judged that the time was not ripe for any unilateral action on this front. Indeed,

on June 6, 2022, Dodik announced that plans for the RS to secede from Bosnia-Herzegovina were being postponed as a result of the war in Ukraine.<sup>15</sup> This may be a ruse since, contrary to what Dodik claimed, the war in Ukraine has opened a unique opportunity for Dodik to realize his separatist ambitions. In this connection, it is worth noting that, according to *Deutsche Welle*, “Dodik has received tacit support from Serbia and Russia for his efforts to splinter the fragile Bosnia state.”<sup>16</sup>

Serbia had been purchasing natural gas from Russia at \$270 per 1,000 cubic meters and, in November 2021, the two sides agreed to extend the contract for that price by six months. This price is tangibly below the world market price and is one reason for Vučić’s favorable view of Putin. Russia’s continued support for the Serbian government’s refusal to recognize Kosovo’s independence was (and is) a second important reason. In May 2022, upon the expiration of the six-month extension of the Russian-Serbian gas deal, the two sides signed a new agreement on the sale of natural gas to Serbia at an “extremely favorable” price, in Vučić’s words.<sup>17</sup>

## Serbia’s Response to Russia’s Invasion

In early February, as Russia mobilized an estimated 100,000 troops along the border with Ukraine, the Serbian media displayed an ever-greater pro-Russian orientation, among other things accusing ‘the

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West’ of having provoked the crisis.<sup>18</sup> Journalists who expressed critical opinions about Russia’s aggression and atrocities have been threatened. Then, on February 24, 2022, Russian tanks and troops invaded Ukraine, supported by missile bombardments of Ukraine’s cities. Vučić, in line with his nominal policy of remaining equidistant between the West (the EU and NATO) and Moscow, supported a UN resolution on March 2, 2022, condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and, on April 7, joined other states in the UN General Assembly in voting to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council, while refusing to join the U.S. and EU countries in imposing sanctions on Russia. On February 25, 2022, the day after the start of the invasion, Serbian President Vučić declared Serbia’s support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity, noting that “the Republic of Serbia considers it very wrong to violate the territorial integrity of any country, including Ukraine.”<sup>19</sup> But, in the same breath, Vučić expressed appreciation of Russia’s refusal to impose sanctions

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on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) during the War of Yugoslav Succession (1991-1995), when Western states imposed economic sanctions on the Republic. He also underlined the importance he attached to the Kremlin's support where Kosovo's independence is concerned. Russia, Vučić said, was "the only [major] country that did not impose sanctions against us in the 1990s...[The Russians] also supported our territorial integrity in the United Nations. We must not forget that."<sup>20</sup> While Vučić was correct, of course, in acknowledging that Russia had not imposed sanctions on Belgrade during the turbulent 1990s, it is rather curious that the Serbian president failed to mention that Ukraine too refrained from imposing sanctions on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the War of Yugoslav Succession and has also held back from recognizing Kosovo's independence. In fact, in 1999, there were public demonstrations in Ukraine in support of Serbia. In a word, Ukraine has been as pro-Serbian as Russia during the past three decades. Meanwhile, the EU continued to pressure Serbia to abandon its posture of neutrality and join other European states in imposing sanctions on Russia. But

there have also been subtle signs of corresponding pressure from the Kremlin, with Russia's ambassador to Belgrade, Aleksandr Botsan-Kharchenko, suggesting in early August that Russia would be interested in opening a military base in Serbia.<sup>21</sup> Botsan-Kharchenko's statement could not go unchallenged and Vučić quickly responded that Serbia "does not need anyone's military bases... [and] will take care of itself."<sup>22</sup>

Public opinion in Serbia, predictably, has been divided over the war in Ukraine. Thus, according to a Demostat poll reported in March, 50 percent of Serbs want their country to remain neutral and not impose sanctions on Russia, 21 percent think that Serbia should take Russia's side in the conflict, 13 percent say that Serbia should side with the EU and Ukraine and impose sanctions on Russia, and 16 percent declined to answer.<sup>23</sup> A different survey, conducted by the polling agency Valicon, found that most Serbs blamed either NATO or the U.S. for the war in Ukraine.<sup>24</sup> Curiously, according to Ann Smith, some older Serbs are convinced that Putin will always support Serbia and never recognize Kosovo because, in their view, he feels a great affection for Serbs; they do not think that Putin might be pursuing his own or Russia's interests.<sup>25</sup> There have been both pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian demonstrations on the streets of Belgrade and Novi Sad. To take one example, on the evening of March 4, several thousand Serbs assembled at a monument of Russia's Tsar Nicholas II (1868-1918) and then

walked to the Russian embassy in a show of support, singing and carrying a large poster of Putin.<sup>26</sup> On the other side of the political divide, an informal group calling itself “Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Serbs together against the war” sent the government a manifesto criticizing those Serbs who were supporting Russian aggression in Ukraine. The same informal group organized a peaceful meeting in Novi Sad under the slogan “Say yes to peace and no to war.”<sup>27</sup> The anti-war group Women in Black, which opposed Milošević’s policies in the early 1990s, has also organized several protests, expressing support for Ukraine.<sup>28</sup>

## The Serbian Arms Build-Up

It was precisely now, with war raging in Ukraine, that Serbia imported arms from China (according to news reports, HQ-22 surface-to-air missiles), following on the country’s purchase from Russia of anti-tank Kornet guided missiles. Vučić also stated on April 11 that Serbia hoped to buy 12 Rafale fighter jets from France’s Dassault Aviation company. That same month, Vučić contacted Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to seek to obtain Turkish Bayraktar TB2 military drones.<sup>29</sup> Vučić also noted that his government was hoping to purchase 12 used Western aircraft from an unnamed country.

It is well understood in the region that the timing of these purchases is not accidental and that the war in Ukraine might create an opportunity

for Serbia to undertake certain initiatives. The governments of Kosovo and Montenegro have admitted to concern about the Serbian arms purchases and have criticized the Serbian arms build-up while, in early June, Montenegro joined Bulgaria and North Macedonia in refusing to allow overflight rights to a Russian plane that had been scheduled to bring Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Belgrade for talks with Serbian officials.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, only a few days after Russia’s invasion began, the government of Kosovo requested that the U.S. establish a permanent military base in Kosovo and speed up the country’s accession to NATO.<sup>31</sup> On March 2, 2022, Kosovo’s Prime Minister Albin Kurti announced that he would seek to accelerate the process for EU membership and reiterated his government’s interest in joining NATO as soon as practical. Kurti also stated explicitly that, under the prevailing circumstances, Belgrade might feel encouraged to do its best to promote instability in Kosovo.<sup>32</sup> On April 26, 2022, Kosovo’s Foreign Minister, Donika Gervalla, confirmed that her country planned to apply for EU membership before the end of the year.<sup>33</sup> After Kosovo applied on May 12 for membership in the Council of Europe, Serbian officials attacked the Kosovar government and claimed that the application violated UN Security Council Resolution 1244, forgetting that, among its provisions, the Resolution authorized UN officials to help to determine Kosovo’s final status. The Montenegrin government’s reaction to the Serbian military build-up has

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shown less sign of alarm than that of the government of Kosovo. Montenegro's membership in NATO (since 2017) may provide at least part of the explanation for this.

There is, as ever, a sense of crisis in Serbia.<sup>34</sup> And, in the present context, Serbia's state of crisis is almost entirely due to its unhealthy interest in lands under the jurisdiction of other governments. One can imagine Dodik organizing a referendum on the Republika Srpska's secession from Bosnia-Herzegovina, in violation of Dayton and the constitution, and defiance of declarations by the Office of the High Representative. With Serbs accounting for 81.5 percent of the population of the RS, Bosniaks for 14 percent, and Croats for 2 percent (with 2.5 percent others),<sup>35</sup> a referendum conducted in the RS would likely show overwhelming support for secession. At that point, Vučić could issue a statement of support and invite Bosnian Serb representatives to come to Belgrade to discuss some form of union with Serbia. According to *France 24 News*, Moscow has given Dodik tacit support for

his project to create a Bosnian Serb army under his command – in effect RS independence.<sup>36</sup> Although Željko Komšić, the Croatian member of the Bosnian state presidency, reported that there was a plan to defend the unity of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the event that Dodik actually took steps to set up his own army,<sup>37</sup> the mere existence of such a plan indicates that, among Bosniaks and Croats of Bosnia-Herzegovina there are fears of an outbreak of a new war in their country. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo certainly seem to be in the Serbian line of fire; as for Montenegro, Richard Kraemer, a Eurasia Program Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, has charged that the Vučić government is involved in efforts to stir up trouble not only in Bosnia-Herzegovina but also in this republic.<sup>38</sup>

The recent Serbian arms build-up is unlikely to be intended for defensive purposes since none of Serbia's neighbors or any other states for that matter present a threat to Serbia. The build-up must therefore be intended to intimidate non-Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina to allow the RS to secede and join Serbia and perhaps to exert pressure on Kosovo to reenter negotiations about its political status. And, of course, if intimidation fails to achieve its purpose, then recourse to military action could not be ruled out. The resentments in certain circles in Serbia concerning Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo have been around for a number of years (in the case of Kosovo, in different forms since the late 1960s). The war in Ukraine and

Putin's backing for Vučić and Dodik have served to reactivate these resentments, even at the risk of sparking a new Balkan war.

## Conclusion

Some politicians live for the present only and scarcely think beyond staying in power and maximizing their immediate interests. Other politicians nurture a vision of the future, such as American President Lyndon Baines Johnson (in office, 1963-1969) or longtime Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito (Prime Minister, 1944-1963; President of Yugoslavia, 1953-1980). Still, other politicians rivet their attention on the past, typically a past to be restored in some fashion – whether this involves the restoration of dethroned gods, as attempted by Roman Emperor Julian (331-363), or the reconquest of lost territories, as in the cases of Vladimir Putin and Aleksandar Vučić. Putin, thus, takes his cue from Russian Emperor Peter the Great (1672-1725), without wondering whether an 18<sup>th</sup> century monarch can serve as a model for a 21<sup>st</sup> century ruler.<sup>39</sup> Vučić does not linger in ruminations about the past or even want to restore the boundaries of Tito's Yugoslavia. But his muse is the nationalist spirit of Greater Serbianism, preserving, even if in a new and less ambitious form, some of the Chetnik ideology of World War Two. Politicians who have no interest beyond the immediate present and their own fortunes are at best useless. Politicians with visions of the future they want to build must be judged by the

contents of their visions. Politicians fixated on losses in the past, if they have power, are dangerous. ■

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