



## Serbian-Russian Relations

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### Abstract

*Serbian and Russian Relations have potentially been influenced by the strong sense of nationalism among Serbs. This statement seems paradoxical at first, but this intertwined with the died-out idea of Pan-Slavism, as well as the historically shared legacy of Orthodox Christianity. In order to fully understand the relations between the two countries, we must look at their past relations as the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Both countries went through the attempted socialist reforms and the regime in Moscow closely watched the potential outcomes in Yugoslavia, as they might reflect in Soviet Union. These countries used to be multinational, multiethnic, communist federations that tried to preserve the cohesion in the wake of ethnic consciousness, particularly in Yugoslavia. Elections of democratic governments in individual states in Yugoslavia and president Milosevic's tactics further complicated the relations between the two countries. Individual Yugoslav states began cooperating with USSR republics which was also seen as one of the factors encouraging disintegration on both sides. After the collapse of Soviet Union, and the emergence of the new president, the relations became further polarized. The new president distanced himself from the Yugoslav president. During the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, Russian president Boris Yeltsin continued to express his general sympathies toward Orthodox Serbs, and he spent much of his days condemning this act. Post 2000 is seen as a new era in Serbian-Russian relations, especially during Putin's first few years of his regime. Putin's "soft" power gained momentum in Orthodox Serbia. Russia's Gazprom bought 51% of shares of Serbian Oil Industry, which later increased to 56%. Visa-free policy travel has been in effect since 2008. In general, relations between the two countries have gone from being stagnant in the 90's to being very dynamic. Russian extending influence in Serbia is awaited mostly with open arms and Orthodox Christianity undoubtedly binds these two countries together.*

German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder regarded nations or states as responsible for much of the unhappiness in human history (Armour, 2006, 36). Nationalism, on the other hand, was a positive thing; people's natural drive to express their inner "soul." He argued that the all of humanity would be at peace only if all the nationalities were free to express or cultivate their cultural identity (Armour, 2006, 36). This sense of cultural identity is

very strong among Serbs, today. Herder's emphasis on the origins of language, culture and national identity, gave a powerful incentive to the development of nationalism. His work was widely read in Eastern Europe (Armour, 2006, 37). At the end of this spectrum lies the old idea of Pan Slavism. How do some Serbs with a strong sense of nationalism give into the idea of "merging" with the largest Orthodox, brotherly Russia, if they could? This might be far from reality

but the continuous Russian involvement and extending influence in the past decade, is awaited with warm, open arms on all horizons. This is dangerous for Serbia since its path toward the EU integration and democratization of its institutions is unfinished.

In order to fully understand the Russian-Serbian relations in the past 30 years, we must look at the former Yugoslavia state of affairs with the former Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev's foreign policy challenge during the last five years of the Soviet regime was dealing with the prelude to and violent aftermath of Yugoslavia's disintegration (Cohen, 1994, 814). Gorbachev had made bold efforts to reform state socialism, something that was attempted in Yugoslavia before. It was natural that Gorbachev was an advocate for preserving the cohesion of Yugoslavia and he viewed Milosevic's tactics of preaching ethnic consciousness, as dangerous (Cohen, 1994, 814). Individual states of Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia and Bosnia elected the anti-communist governments, while Serbia and Montenegro remained communist. JNA (People's Army of Yugoslavia) mostly dominated by Serbian and Montenegrin republics, secretly received the delivery of Soviet Arms while other Yugoslav states began bilateral cooperation with the individual USSR Republics. This cooperation later encouraged the disintegration on both sides. War in Yugoslavia erupted in 1991. Boris Yeltsin emerged as a national hero and a new president of the Russian Federation who seemed to distance himself from Milosevic, however it was still "business as usual" (Cohen, 1994, 824). Yeltsin supported the UN imposed sanctions on Serbia, blaming Serbs for much of the bloodshed in Bosnia. Because of this, he was faced with great criticism and thousands of Russians volunteered to fight in Bosnia, supporting

the Serbs. Yeltsin's foreign policy was characterized as "internationalist" with democratic elements. His decisions regarding Serbia were filled with contradictory solutions and measures (Cohen, 1994, 837). During the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, he spent much of his days condemning this act, warning of the WWII, also claiming: "Russia will not get involved unless the Americans push us to do so" (CNN, 1999). Post 2000 is seen as a new era, under Vladimir Putin's leadership. Serbia's become an easy "prey" for Russia's soft power. Bilateral cooperation between the two countries have gone from being relatively stagnant, to very dynamic. In 2008, 51% of the oil and gas company of Serbia (NIS), was bought by Russian Gazprom. Few years later that stake increased to 56%. There is the existing visa-free policy travel between the two countries. Trade grew, as well. In 2012, Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Center was established in central Serbia, in the city of Nish. President Putin also backs Serbia over the Kosovo issue, declaring it immoral and illegal. In January 2019, Vladimir Putin visited Serbia and the state media falsely reported that about 100,000 people came out to see him. The real number was around several thousand, which is still significant and testifies to the warm relations between the two countries. President Vucic received an Order of Alexander Nevsky Medal, from Putin, just like other leaders of the countries that are not particularly famous for democracy and human rights. It's also important to note that the Serbian military relies on Soviet era arms and Russia donated several secondhand MiG 29 fighter jets, that needed expensive maintaining. President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic paid \$213 million for the maintenance. Currently, Serbian president is faced with some harsh criticism at home due to the general discontent of people and media censorship. There have

been relatively peaceful protests in Belgrade, since December 2018.

Serbs who came out in January to see President Putin, seem to like him more than the President Vucic. Orthodox faith undoubtedly binds these two countries

together and allow for Putin's soft power to thrive in this neutral, NATO-free, Orthodox state. Gains for Russia are obvious if it only maintained "the carrot on a stick" tactic, calling upon the glorious Orthodoxy and imperialist West. Geopolitics 101.

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