

Zelensky in Belgrade: Kyiv's interests, a fig leaf for Vučić and outrage in Kosovo

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On 7–8 August, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky made his first visit to Serbia since taking office. His meetings with President Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Minister Đuro Macut focused on economic and energy cooperation, as well as the two countries' European integration. Serbia announced another package of humanitarian assistance for Ukraine in the healthcare and energy sectors, as well as plans for the imminent signing of a bilateral free trade agreement. The two sides also agreed that Serbia would assist with the reconstruction of a Ukrainian city. Both presidents reaffirmed their mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity – Kyiv does not recognise Kosovo's independence, while Belgrade emphasises its respect for international law in the context of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Arguably the most important, albeit undisclosed, subject of the talks was maintaining supplies of Serbian ammunition, which reaches Ukraine via third countries and plays a significant role in Kyiv's ability to sustain its combat capabilities. Vučić will use Zelensky's visit as leverage in relations with the EU, which has criticised him over increasing violations of the rule of law and his ties with Russia.

Commentary

- **Zelensky's visit to Belgrade was aimed at ensuring the continued supply of Serbian arms.** This applies in particular to scarce ammunition for Soviet-designed 122 mm and 152 mm artillery systems. Serbia is one of the few countries still producing this type of ammunition. According to the *Financial Times*, the value of these supplies amounted to around €800 million in the first two years of the war alone. Potential supplies of spare parts for MiG-29 fighter aircraft, as well as ammunition for anti-tank grenade launchers and Soviet-designed small arms, could also be significant. Cooperation with Belgrade enables Ukraine to reduce its dependence on Bulgaria, a key partner in the supply of Soviet-designed equipment, whose new government has expressed scepticism about military assistance to Kyiv, although commercial deliveries continue. Officially, Serbia neither supplies nor sells arms and military equipment to Ukraine. In practice, however, since 2022 Serbian arms and military equipment have reached Kyiv through a chain of companies based in countries including Poland and the Czech Republic.
- **Closer relations with Serbia fit into the broader objectives of Ukrainian foreign policy, including limiting Russian influence in Europe.** By visiting Belgrade, Zelensky is

signalling to Moscow that it cannot prevent one of its closest European partners from cooperating with Ukraine. Beyond ammunition supplies, closer cooperation with Belgrade forms part of Kyiv's strategy to strengthen relations with the countries of the Western Balkans. Since 2023, Kyiv has organised five Ukraine–South-East Europe summits and has announced plans to launch the so-called Carpathian Initiative this autumn. The initiative is intended to help harness the region's economic and logistical potential, which will be important for post-war reconstruction.

- **Zelensky's visit highlights Belgrade's ambiguous stance on the Russo-Ukrainian war.** Serbia has not imposed sanctions on Moscow, maintains political ties and intelligence cooperation with Russia, remains dependent on Russian natural gas and retains direct air links with the country. Although Belgrade recognises Ukraine's territorial integrity, Vučić publicly emphasises Serbia's neutrality in the war and denies that it provides direct military support to Kyiv. In doing so, he seeks to avoid further straining already deteriorating relations with Moscow and alienating the pro-Russian segment of his electorate.
- **Vučić will use cooperation with Ukraine as leverage in relations with the EU.** Serbia's failure to align with EU policy towards Russia was, alongside the erosion of the rule of law, one of the reasons why some member states opposed the opening of the third cluster of accession negotiations in July this year. Vučić hopes that Zelensky's visit will help him cultivate an image among Western partners as Ukraine's 'quiet ally'. He also seeks to secure a degree of EU 'forbearance' towards likely abuses of power in future parliamentary election. Participants in the protests that have been ongoing since November 2024 are demanding that such an election be called (see ['Protests in Serbia: the government and its opponents close ranks'](#)). In reality, however, he does not intend to abandon relations with Moscow altogether, including cooperation in the energy sector.
- **Zelensky's support for Serbia's territorial integrity has drawn sharp criticism in Kosovo.** Pristina has shown some understanding of Ukraine's efforts to obtain ammunition from Serbia as it continues to defend itself against Russia. Nor does Kyiv's refusal to recognise Kosovo's independence come as a surprise, as this has long been its position. At the same time, Zelensky's expression of support for Serbia's territorial integrity during his visit to Belgrade provoked a strong backlash. For the first time in more than a year, Kosovan politicians and commentators united in recalling the crimes committed against Albanians by Serbian forces in the 1990s, comparing them with Russia's crimes in Ukraine. The Ukrainian flag was removed from the central square in Pristina. Kosovo pointed out that it has condemned Russia's invasion from the outset, imposed sanctions on the aggressor – unlike Serbia – and provided Ukraine with military assistance within its means. Albania's foreign ministry also criticised Zelensky's remarks, while anti-government demonstrators in Tirana chanted slogans against the Ukrainian president on Sunday.