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## **ON VISIT TO SERBIA, PUTIN ACCUSES KOSOVO OF 'ILLEGALLY' SETTING UP AN ARMY**

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Russian President Vladimir Putin, on a visit to Serbia, has accused Kosovo of taking provocative measures, including establishing an army.

Speaking at a joint news conference after talks with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic in Belgrade on January 17, Putin said Kosovo's steps had ratcheted up tensions with Serbia and could destabilize the region.

Serbia lost control over its Kosovo province in 1999 after NATO launched air strikes to stop the killing and expulsion of ethnic Albanians by Serbian forces during a two-year counterinsurgency war.

Relations between Pristina and Belgrade have been tense since Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008. More than 110 countries, including the United States, recognize Kosovo's independence, but Serbia and Russia do not.

Putin said he thought Kosovo's decision to set up an army was illegal.

"Regrettably, Kosovo's authorities took a series of provocative steps lately, thus greatly aggravating the situation. First of all, I have in mind their December 14 decision to form a so-called Kosovo army," Putin said.

Kosovo's parliament on December 14 voted to convert its 2,500-member Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into a national army with some 5,000 personnel and more substantial weaponry.

Belgrade and most of the 120,000 ethnic Serbs in Kosovo have vehemently opposed the creation of a Kosovar military, arguing that it would violate UN resolutions and be used against the Serbian minority -- a claim denied by officials in Pristina.

"It goes without saying that this is a direct violation of the UN resolution which does not allow for the creation of any paramilitary forces except for the international UN contingent," Putin said.

The United States has expressed support for Kosovo's move to create a national army, while NATO said the move was "ill-timed."

Putin also said that the European Union's mediation between Serbia and Kosovo has not produced the desired results.

"We know that the European Union has acted as a mediator in resolving a number of issues, but

unfortunately hardly anything has been implemented," he said.

Vucic said he hoped for better relations between Belgrade and Pristina but added, "I am not sure that it's going to happen anytime soon."

### Free-Trade Zone

The Russian leader also said he hoped that an agreement on a free trade zone between Serbia and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) would be signed as early as this year.

He said Moscow was ready to invest some \$1.4 billion in infrastructure development in Serbia to allow the multiline TurkStream pipeline project to transit through Serbia.

TurkStream is a natural gas pipeline running from Russia to Turkey across the Black Sea and has replaced the canceled South Stream project.

Russia's state energy giant Gazprom has said that it sees Serbia and EU member-states Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Hungary as potential markets for Russia's natural gas supplied via TurkStream.

The United States has warned that Moscow is using the pipeline to establish control over the region's energy security.

"Russia is using a pipeline project, Nord Stream 2, and the multiline Turkish stream, to try to solidify its control over the security and the stability of Central and Eastern Europe," Energy Secretary Rick Perry said last November in Prague.

Putin arrived in Serbia on January 17 to a lavish welcome by Vucic and other Serbian officials at Belgrade's Nikola Tesla Airport on January 17, as many billboards around the Serbian capital featured a mix of Russian and Serbian flags.

"Welcome honored President Putin, dear friend," read one of them.

Putin's one-day trip included a visit to the Church of St. Sava, the biggest Orthodox church in Serbia, where he was greeted by thousands of people.

People who were bused in from various parts of Serbia marched through the streets of Belgrade on their way to the church waving Serbian and Russian flags and holding placards with Putins portrait.

Traffic in downtown Belgrade was completely blocked for hours because of the crowds and the parked buses.

Putin, who was accompanied during the visit to the church by Vucic and Serbia's Orthodox Patriarch, Irinej, addressed the crowds, thanking the Serbian people "for its friendship."

The two countries have long shared close economic and Slavic cultural and religious ties, forcing Belgrade to balance its historic ties to Moscow with its desire to join Western organizations such as the EU.

Serbia has rejected calls to join Western economic sanctions against Moscow while Russia supports Belgrade by refusing to recognize the former Serbian province of Kosovo as an

independent state.

Russia has also worked to maintain strong military ties with Belgrade by supplying it with hardware and holding joint maneuvers with Serbian forces.

However, most Serbs believe that the EU offers a better model for their future than Russia, according to London School of Economics professor James Ker-Lindsay.

On the eve of his trip, Putin criticized the United States and other Western countries, asserting that their policies were "aimed at fostering their dominance in the region," which he said is "a major destabilizing factor."

In an interview with Serbian pro-government newspapers published on January 16, Putin argued that Montenegro joining NATO in 2017, without holding "a relevant referendum, has led to "political instability" in the Balkan country.

But Montenegro's accession to NATO has put added pressure on Moscow to maintain tight relations with Belgrade, its last foothold in the Balkans. So has Macedonia's success toward ending a dispute with Greece that will open the doors to Macedonia's membership in the EU and NATO.

Like Montenegro, Macedonia was part of Yugoslavia until the country disintegrated amid the wars of the early 1990s.

Russia "has always viewed [the Balkans] as a space for constructive cooperation \*□□ the strategic partner Serbia holds a special place, Putin said.

In a show of the Kremlin's aim to curry favor with Serbia, Putin last week awarded Vucic with the Order of Aleksandr Nevsky, a prize that is usually bestowed upon civil servants for at least 20 years of "highly meritorious service" and is rarely given to foreigners.

The award, which Vucic is likely to receive during the visit, underlines Putin's popularity among the majority of Serbs. A recent survey by Faktor Plus showed 57 percent naming the Russian leader as the most-trusted foreign politician.

"Vucic is the first Serb to receive this high award in our time, which in itself speaks volumes," said Aleksandr Chepurin, Russia's ambassador to Serbia.

"Protecting the interests of our countries, Russia and Serbia, instead of satisfying the interests of the West -- that's basically the philosophy of both the Russian and Serbian leadership," he told Serbia's state news agency Tanjug on January 2.

Chepurin said the tense situation in Kosovo between the ethnic Serb minority and Kosovar Albanians would be high on the Putin-Vucic meeting agenda.

Also under discussion will be strengthening bilateral relations and cooperation in economic spheres such as energy, trade, innovation, technological development, and the digital economy, he said.

The delegation of ministers and other officials joining Putin in Belgrade includes Foreign Minister

Sergei Lavrov and Gazprom head Aleksei Miller.

The Kremlin press service said Russian and Serbian officials will also discuss a possible extension of the Turk Stream natural gas pipeline into Serbia. The pipeline currently runs under the Black Sea from Russia to Turkey and then into Greece.

Some analysts say the close relations with Russia are not all as promising as they often appear.

Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic said last month that Serbia's foreign policy priority remains joining the EU, and that "we can be even more efficient in the reforms that we conduct, primarily because of our citizens."

<https://www.rferl.org/a/ahead-of-high-level-visit-to-serbia-putin-blasts-west-s-role-in-balkans/29714843.html>

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