FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 11.09.2023 | Lily Lynch

Exchanging glances: Serbia seduces illiberal America

As the US is seeking to improve its relations with Serbia, Belgrade is paying to clean up its image on the other side of the Atlantic

On 20 August, Tucker Carlson published a video on the 'social media' platform formerly known as Twitter. The 3:30 clip follows a jovial Carlson as he visits the embassy of Serbia in Budapest to meet the Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić. The former Fox News host describes Vučić as 'smart and aware', with 'a perspective that you don't get in the United States that often'.

The video cuts to Carlson in the embassy, vigorously shaking hands with the Serbian sports minister, Zoran Gajić, and the finance minister, Siniša Mali. Carlson engages in some chitchat, punctuated by his signature peals of shrieking laughter. A wide-eyed, starstruck Mali tells Carlson that his eldest son is his 'biggest fan', while a more reserved Gajić briefly recounts the highlights of his storied career as a top volleyball coach. Vučić hangs back, interjecting only occasionally, with the light-hearted, deferential demeanour he assumes in the presence of powerful visitors from the west.

The exchange looks so congenial it is possible to forget, momentarily, that this is the Serbian government looking very much at home on an American show — yet Serbia, by all accounts, is the most anti-American country in Europe. Though generally a hospitable place for visitors from the United States, sentiment towards policy in Washington is completely different.

The legacy of the 1999 bombing of Serbia by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), along with US support for Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence — Belgrade still views Kosovo as its southern province — have badly wounded relations. According to one poll, nearly 60 per cent of Serbs oppose co-operation with the US.

Seemingly unbridgeable differences

But a charm offensive is under way. The US embassy in Serbia has been eager to deepen its relationship with Vučić, despite the authoritarian nature of his decade-long reign and his dark political history as Serbian minister of information, when Slobodan Milošević was president of Yugoslavia, during the late 1990s.

For the Americans, Vučić is someone they can do business with. They see him as having been eager to implement 'badly needed economic reforms' — such as a revision of the labour law to the benefit of foreign investors and the detriment of Serbian workers. They view him as prepared to do almost anything to maintain personal power and therefore amenable to making unpopular deals encouraged by the west, even on Kosovo. And they think him sufficiently autocratic to keep a lid on the unseemly elements within the Serbian far right, while powerful enough to rein in the more overtly pro-Russian leader of *Republika Srpska*, Milorad Dodik, who periodically raises the spectre of its secession from Bosnia-Herzegovina.

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Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the US embassy in Belgrade has been on a blitz to compete with Russia for Serbia's affections. So far, Serbia has refused to impose sanctions on Russia, despite sending mixed messages in other fora — at the United Nations, Serbia has repeatedly voted to condemn the invasion and breaches of Ukraine's territorial integrity.

More significantly, Serbian-produced ammunition has quietly found its way on to the Ukrainian battlefield, although arms shipments were recently halted after the US Treasury placed Aleksandar Vulin, the head of Serbia's intelligence agency, BIA, under sanctions. Vučić coyly said to the *Financial Times* in June: 'Is it possible that it's happening? I have no doubts that it might happen. What is the alternative for us? Not to produce it? Not to sell it?'

Furthermore, the US embassies in Belgrade and Pristina have laid much of the blame for the recent spasms of violence in north Kosovo on its prime minister, Albin Kurti. Much of the media has followed suit — as with this unsubtle teaser in the *Economist*: 'This time, Kosovo's ethnic

Albanians are largely to blame'. Such uncharacteristically harsh condemnation of Pristina has been interpreted by many as another attempt to curry favour with Serbs.

Working on its reputation

While the US is seeking to improve its relations with Serbia, Belgrade is paying to clean up its image on the other side of the Atlantic. In recent weeks, the Serbian government has enlisted a new roster of well-placed lobbyists to promote its interests in the US. The names and backgrounds of the hires suggest a multi-pronged approach: altering public perceptions, managing the media and influencing decision-makers.

In late July, the Serbian government retained the services of KARV communications, a public-relations firm based in New York. Over the past month, a number of 'registered foreign agents' working for Serbia have been added to the US Foreign Agents Registration Act database — the act requires that individuals representing foreign interests disclose such information publicly. These new registrants, all of whom work with KARV communications, will 'help promote and explain various Government of Republic of Serbia policy initiatives through outreach to media and relevant US-based groups'.

Among the new registrants is one Alana Abramson, a graduate of Columbia journalism school who recently worked as a producer for CNN. Previously, she was a White House and congressional reporter for *Time*. We can assume she will now be leveraging her many contacts in the media and politics to advance the interests of the Serbian government. The government has also retained Adrian Karatnycky, a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center, a frequent contributor to *Foreign Policy* and *Foreign Affairs* and former director of Freedom House. Karatnycky has long served as a controversial lobbyist for client governments of questionable integrity — a few years ago, his Myrmidon Group worked for Dodik in *Republika Srpska*.

A few of Serbia's newly registered lobbyists are perhaps slightly better known to Balkan audiences. Gordon Bardos once served as assistant director of the Harriman Institute at Columbia. He is a major proponent of the idea that Muslim-majority Balkan countries are incubators for Islamist violence. In a 2021 op-ed for the *National Interest*, Bardos chastised the US government for 'consistently supporting the worst figures in the Balkans'. Clearly, for Bardos, Vučić is not one of these.

Serbia has long employed top-shelf foreign lobbyists and advisers: the disgraced British PR firm Bell-Pottinger, the former Italian foreign

minister Franco Frattini, the former Austrian chancellor Alfred Gussenbauer, the former British prime minister Tony Blair as well as Cherie Blair, the former US ambassador to Serbia and Montenegro Bill Montgomery and the former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani. These celebrities have given Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party the credibility they crave on the world stage and a narrative arc of redemption — without having to engage in any redeeming action.

Perfectly crafted propaganda

Just out is the trailer for a movie called the *Heroes of Halyard*. The already-controversial film was funded directly and indirectly by the Serbian government and is the perfect propaganda film for this moment of warming Serbian-US relations.

Halyard tells the story of a World War II rescue in which Serbian *Chetniks* helped evacuate downed US airmen from German-occupied territory. This serves important functions: it highlights a positive moment in the history of Serbia-US relations, encouraging the US to be appreciative; it whitewashes the *Chetniks*, who collaborated with the Nazis yet are presented as heroes, and it airbrushes out the real heroes, the Partisans, who ultimately defeated the Nazis. With anti-communism thrown in, the film seems tailor-made to appeal to nationalist (but western-friendly) audiences in Serbia and conservative viewers in the US.

Those who have long dreamed that Serbia would change and become 'a normal western country' may soon get their wish — but what it means to be 'a normal western country' may have changed fundamentally in the meantime.

Which brings us back to the appearance by Vučić on Tucker Carlson. The clip came out just a few days before the first Republican presidential debate. It offers insight into the Serbian government's likely audience for its image rehabilitation — the western populist right, with the hope that one of its candidates will win the 2024 US presidential election.

Critics of much of the west's policy towards Serbia often miss that this is what *rapprochement* will look like — not Serbia being folded into a vaunted rules-based order of liberal democracies (with adoption of the associated human-rights rhetoric and foreign-policy preferences) but at home among the illiberal populists of the American and European far right. Those who have long dreamed that Serbia would one day change and become 'a normal western country' may thus soon get their wish —

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This is a joint publication by Social Europe and IPS-Journal



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