



OCTOPUS Journal: Hybrid Warfare & Strategic Conflicts

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<https://octopusinstitute.org/ojs/index.php/octopus-journal>

Double-Blind Peer-Reviewed

ISSN Online: 3006-5925

ISSN Print: 3006-5917

Volume 2, 2024

PUSH AND PULL: HOW SERBIA USES THREATENING AND NEGOTIATING TACTICS TO INFLUENCE THE STABILITY OF KOSOVO

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Serbia has adopted a dual approach in its relations with Kosovo, a key issue for regional stability. Under the leadership of President Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia has employed a combination of threats and negotiations to advance its national interests. This “push and pull” strategy allows Belgrade to oscillate between aggression and diplomacy, using the threat of destabilization to exert pressure on Kosovo while engaging in diplomatic dialogue to maintain international legitimacy.

From Nationalism to Dialogue: Vucic’s Maneuvers on Kosovo

Push Strategy: Assertive Nationalism

Vucic often adopts a confrontational attitude toward Kosovo, invoking Serbia’s historical, cultural, and religious claims over the territory. This attitude is not mere rhetoric; it is reinforced by military posturing and aggressive rhetoric that serve to mobilize nationalist sentiment within Serbia. The Serbian government’s support for the Serbian community in Kosovo, particularly for controversial figures, exacerbates ethnic tensions and further complicates the already fragile relationship between the two states.

This push strategy serves several purposes:

- *Mobilizing Domestic Support:* By emphasizing Serbia’s historical claims, Vučić appeals to nationalist sentiments, consolidating his political base.
- *Constraining Kosovo’s Actions:* Military readiness and aggressive rhetoric signal to Kosovo and the international community that Serbia is prepared to defend its interests, interfering in Kosovo’s internal affairs and efforts to establish law and order.

Pull Strategy: Pragmatic Engagement

Despite his aggressive stance, Vucic engages in dialogue with Kosovo, facilitated by the European Union. This pull strategy is characterized by a willingness to negotiate and seek the normalization of relations, albeit from a position of strength. Vucic positions himself as a pragmatic leader open to discussions while being critical of the terms proposed, aiming to extract significant concessions that align with Serbia’s national interests.

This dual approach allows Vucic to:

- *Maintain International Legitimacy:* By participating in negotiations, Serbia can present itself as a responsible actor in the international arena, countering accusations of being an aggressor.
- *Leverage EU Support:* Engaging in dialogue with Kosovo is crucial for Serbia’s EU integration ambitions, allowing Vucic to secure necessary financial and political support from the bloc.
- **Advance the “Serbian World” Plan:** The dual approach enables Serbia to benefit from a policy of appeasement by the West while gradually advancing the realization of the “Serbian World”—or preparing the groundwork for its conventional realization, should geopolitical circumstances shift.

The European Union: Balancing Criticism and Integration

Push: Criticism and Victimhood

Vucic frequently criticizes the EU, portraying Serbia as a victim of bias in the Kosovo dialogue. This strategy mobilizes domestic support and increases pressure for more favorable conditions for Serbia’s EU accession. By framing the EU as an unfair mediator, Vucic seeks to position Serbia as a misunderstood partner deserving of greater consideration.

Pull: Commitment to the EU

Simultaneously, Vucic continues to prioritize EU membership as a strategic goal. Significant reforms have been undertaken to align with EU standards, aiming to secure development funding and ensure political stability.

Motives behind the Strategy

1. **Leverage in Negotiations:** This strategy gives Vucic capacity to extract concessions and delay unfavorable agreements.
2. **Political Capital:** Presenting himself as a defender of national interests strengthens support among nationalists.
3. **Geopolitical Flexibility:** Vucic maintains relationships with multiple actors, avoiding reliance on a single power.

Challenges of the Strategy

Tough Negotiations: Vucic’s strategy complicates the dialogue with Kosovo, hindering trust-building and long-term agreements.

Obstacles to EU Integration: Serbia’s close ties with Russia and China could slow its EU accession process, as they often conflict with EU values.

Risk to Regional Stability: While Vucic may position himself as a stabilizer, his unpredictable and often volatile attitude risks exacerbating tensions in the region, raising concerns among neighboring countries and international actors.

Serbia’s Military Posturing and Threats toward Kosovo

2018

March – The arrest of Marko Djuric in Mitrovica: The arrest of Marko Djuric for illegally entering Mitrovica caused an immediate spike in tensions in the region. President Vucic ordered Serbia’s military to be on high alert and used threatening rhetoric to pressure Kosovo. This move aimed to intimidate Pristina and influence the dynamics of international relations.

2019 and 2020

During these two years, Serbia did not engage in any significant military activity near the Kosovo border. However, tensions remained high due to harsh rhetoric and diplomatic threats, with Serbia continuing to use exclusionary and confrontational language against Kosovo and international representatives.

2021

September – Implementation of reciprocity for license plates: After the entry into force of the reciprocity of measures for license plates, Vucic ordered the military to be on high alert and deployed armored vehicles and fighter jets near the Kosovo border. This action was an open threat aimed at demonstrating Serbia's political and military strength, causing a sharp increase in tensions and raising concerns for regional stability among international partners.

2022

July – Implementation of the new border regulation: Kosovo's government submitted a new regulation requiring legal documentation and vehicle registration, even in northern Kosovo, which sparked significant tension. Vucic once again ordered Serbia's military to be on high alert, and Serbia deployed troops near the border. Potential conflict was avoided through international efforts, particularly from the EU and the USA.

December – Renewed tensions with barricades in northern Kosovo: After the arrest of a former Serbian police officer from Kosovo, local Serbs re-established barricades in northern Kosovo. Vucic raised the military alert level and sent additional troops and armored vehicles to the border area. This was one of the most serious military threats Serbia had made in this period.

2023

May – Clashes during local elections: Amid rising tensions during local elections, clashes between Serbian gangs and Kosovo security forces escalated. Vucic once again ordered military readiness and deployed troops and armored vehicles closer to the border. During this period, KFOR intervened to de-escalate the situation and maintain stability in the region.

June – Violent protests against Kosovo Police and KFOR: Violent protests against security forces and KFOR in northern Kosovo once again led Vucic to raise military readiness. The use of open threats and military mobilization was aimed at showing Serbia’s readiness to intervene in case of further escalation.

September 24, 2023

An organized terrorist group, well-prepared and armed, led by Milan Radojicis, carried out an attack in the village of Banjska, in the municipality of Zvecan, with the clear intention of provoking an escalation toward armed conflict. This terrorist act, involving professionally trained individuals infiltrated from Serbia, aimed to create a destabilizing atmosphere in Kosovo. The group was given clear instructions from Serbian authorities to provoke tensions, with the goal of secession of northern Kosovo and undermining the overall stability of the region.

Serbia’s “push and pull” strategy under Vucic reflects the complex dynamics of contemporary geopolitics in the Western Balkans. While it allows for a degree of flexibility in navigating relations with Kosovo, the EU, and other global powers, it also poses significant challenges regarding trust, regional stability, and international law. As Serbia continues to balance these conflicting interests, and the West persists in its policy of appeasement toward Serbia, the situation in the Western Balkans will remain a sensitive and vulnerable point, easily influenced by Russian forces through hybrid warfare.

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