

## Russian-Croatian Soft Power Bond Grows Stronger

Agrokor might be the core component of the alliance that will extend far beyond the World Cup

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*Sometimes the eyes don't lie and what people see in front of them is actually what's happening, which in this case is the extremely unlikely partners of Russia and Croatia entering into a soft power alliance with one another that will extend far beyond the World Cup.*

It would be an exercise in futility to deny that Russia and Croatia aren't in a soft power alliance with one another after the fawning coverage that the host country's media outlets lavished on the second-place finisher's President, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, despite her past work as the Croatian Ambassador to the US and NATO's Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy. Sports are supposed to be apolitical so a simple explanation would be that the Russians were just very excited about rooting for the underdog, one which some of them regard as "fellow Slavs", and that Kolinda's charm offensive was successful in wooing them to her country's side. Nevertheless, whether as part of an intentional extension of informal policy or coincidental to the aforesaid, it can't be overlooked that this Russian-assisted public relations offensive in support of Croatia dovetails perfectly with Moscow's new policy towards Zagreb.

Russia's been [making outreaches](#) to this strategically positioned Balkan state and Three Seas Initiative member for the past two years, presumably encouraged by the influential "progressive" faction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that's been successful in advancing their country's fast-moving rapprochements with non-traditional partners such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan. Croatia, despite its World War II-era fascist past and the glorification of this dark period by some of its leaders, isn't judged for it any more than Turkey is for its so-called "Neo-Ottoman" vision, which is to say that it's a non-factor influencing the course of this bilateral relationship. There are understandably some who might object to the pure pragmatism of this approach, but it's evidently the most flexible strategy to apply in responding to the twists and turns of the emerging Multipolar World Order and being in the best possible position to shape them.

Geopolitical considerations are still very important for influencing foreign policy, but no longer in the same way as before in all cases, such as concerning Russian-Croatian relations. Without any tangible interests in a given state, it essentially loses all strategic value because its territory is deprived of any practical significance for the outreaching party, which is why one needs to understand exactly what it is that's driving the Russian-Croatian rapprochement and possibly even the two sides' soft power alliance. For starters, Kolinda's

former US and NATO past isn't seen as a problem but an opportunity, with Russia believing that it could influence her to utilize those same connections as part of its backchannel diplomatic efforts for sanctions relief. Relatedly, her highly regarded status in Western circles makes her public embrace of President Putin and Russia all the more important for improving both of their images, too.

Still, openly courting the archrival of Russia's Serbian ally solely out of hope that it could facilitate informal inter-elite communication and potential rewards would be much too narrow-minded of a strategy that's completely out of character for Moscow's diplomatic professionals, which is why there's obviously more to it than just that. Unbeknownst to most people outside of the Balkans and the Western academic community that focuses on that region, Russian banks just secured 47% control of the bankrupt Agrokor food & retail enterprise that's the biggest company in the Balkans following extended and recently concluded negotiations over its future. This has in turn given Russia a massive physical stake in the real-sector economic activities of the region, potentially making Agrokor altogether more important for its Balkan strategy than even the Russian-owned Serbian energy companies that the Kremlin had previously depended on for influence.

Naturally, it wouldn't be surprising for Russia to want to "rehabilitate" the reputation of such a significant newfound partner, hence what might have been the strategic calculations that possibly contributed to the month-long public relations blitz surrounding Kolinda and Croatia. Another motivating factor might have also been that Russians are looking for a safer holiday alternative to replace Egypt and Montenegro, the first of which is a well-known terrorist target and the second is becoming increasingly hostile to Russia ever since it joined NATO in spite of that country's impressive tourist & real estate investments there. Croatia, by comparison, is now seen by most Russians as a friendly country eager to return the hospitality that was provided to them during the World Cup, and it wouldn't be surprising if tourist companies begin promoting it as the next main destination to be discovered.

Having discussed the most important factors contributing to the Russian-Croatian soft power alliance, it's now possible to understand it in its proper context instead of as the stand-alone political anomaly that it would otherwise be interpreted as. Although grand geopolitical motivations related to "balancing" the Three Seas Initiative through Croatian-facilitated diplomatic means and more local interests dealing with a new holiday destination for Russian tourists are important, the most pivotal one is the influence that the Agrokor settlement had on these two countries' relations, which transformed them from being simply about symbolic gestures to acquiring a solid strategic basis that extends throughout the entire Balkans. Russia's old Serbian ally will always have a role in Moscow's regional policy by virtue of historical inertia and geography, but the country's new privileged partner for the 21<sup>st</sup> century might just end up being its Croatian rival.

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