

Miroslav I. Emejdi

Keystone Serbia

How Misjudgments Weaken the West

With forewords by Bernd Paul and Vasco Malta

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Foreword

by Bernd Paul

This work addresses a highly relevant subject of considerable importance, both in contemporary political debate and in practical application.

The author, Miroslav Emejdi, is endowed with a wide range of talents, as I have been able to observe over many years while following his personal and professional development. His broad interest in politics, history, and culture is combined with extensive and well-founded scholarship. Raised in a multilingual environment, he leads a polyglot life and has contributed his expertise to the Hessian police, among other roles, as a migration officer, a specialist in migrant communities, and a member of the domestic security service. He is a recognized speaker among both German and international security agencies, with a focus on geopolitics and international security affairs. His analytical capabilities and his ability to present complex geopolitical dynamics in a clear and accessible manner make this book—*Keystone Serbia: How Misjudgment Weakens the West*—a compelling read. Despite the inherent complexity of the subject, he succeeds in presenting the key perspectives in a balanced manner, before subjecting them to sharp and insightful evaluation. One can only hope that this “debut work” will receive the attention it deserves among decision-makers in international politics, particularly in Europe and the United States.

Serbia, with approximately six and a half million inhabitants, the largest of the Western Balkan states, possesses geopolitical significance of global magnitude—yet one that has not been sufficiently translated into political action. None of the six Western Balkan states are members of the European Union, though all aspire to become so. While Brussels hesitates and fails to provide a clear strategic perspective, Moscow—and increasingly Beijing—are intensifying their economic, strategic, and infrastructural engagement in the region, particularly in Serbia. Its president, Aleksandar Vučić,

continues to emphasize close ties with Russia, even after its violation of international law through the invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, Serbian officials point out that not only this invasion violated international law, but also the 1999 NATO intervention against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The fact that this comparison receives little attention in the West is widely interpreted in Belgrade as evidence of double standards. In parallel, Chinese President Xi Jinping described relations between China and Serbia in 2024 as an “ironclad friendship.”

This state of strategic ambiguity is highly problematic from both a geopolitical and a security perspective. It is precisely this dynamic that Miroslav Emejdi's book succeeds in capturing with clarity and force. Despite its complexity, the work remains both accessible and engaging. It is addressed not only to experts in geopolitical affairs but also offers valuable insights to a broader politically interested audience. It expands the existing body of literature and provides important impulses for research, teaching, and practice — particularly for policymakers, institutions, and organizations shaping Europe's future, especially in relation to the Balkans.

I am convinced that this work will secure a firm place within the ongoing debate on Europe's role and that of the transatlantic alliance in relation to autocratic states. I wish it wide dissemination and an attentive readership.

— Limburg, September 2025

Bernd Paul

Former Chief of Police

Foreword

by Vasco Malta

My first encounter with Miroslav Emejdí took place in the context of our joint nomination for the prestigious International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) of the U.S. Department of State—he as a representative of Germany, I as a representative of Portugal. Even at that time, it became clear that Miroslav did not approach geopolitical developments through the narrow lens of national interests, but consistently placed them within the broader context of global power shifts. Since then, we have been connected not only by the shared experience of participating in one of the most significant exchange programs of American diplomacy, but also by a common conviction: that the defining challenges of our time—migration, security, climate change, and global governance—can only be addressed through genuine transnational cooperation. This conviction continues to guide my work today within the United Nations, where I serve as Head of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Portugal.

The theses advanced in this book may appear provocative—and it is precisely in this that their value lies. Miroslav Emejdí challenges us to question established narratives and to engage with perspectives that rarely receive adequate attention in public discourse. At a time when geopolitical tensions, resource conflicts, and emerging alliances are reshaping the global order, his voice is both necessary and timely.

Europe, and the European Union in particular, faces immense challenges. This book serves as a compass for decision-makers, scholars, and all those seeking to understand the tectonic shifts of the 21st century. At the same time, it reflects the work of an author who combines sober analysis with personal depth—allowing us to grasp not only what Serbia represents today, but also the role its development will play in shaping the future of Europe and the West.

—Vasco Malta

Acknowledgments

The path from the initial idea to publication was long and marked by numerous challenges. Along the way, it is easy to stumble or lose one's direction. All the more valuable, then, is the ability to rely on people who are dependable, perceptive, and deeply committed. I therefore owe particular thanks to Bernd Paul, who throughout this process proved to be an attentive, critical, and inspiring companion. Every one of our conversations—whether by phone or in person—was enriching. Not only because of his sharp analytical insight, but also due to his valuable strategic perspectives and his extensive life experience. My sincere thanks also go to Dr. Iris Pilling, who, despite her demanding schedule, was always available whenever her perspective was needed. I would also like to thank my long-time colleague Antje Suppmann for her keen eye and remarkable perseverance, and for serving as a meticulous and highly conscientious editor. For the valuable impulses and insights drawn from our discussions, I am equally grateful to Dr. José Fernandez Perez and Necati Benli, whose diverse perspectives enriched the development of this book.

A very special acknowledgment is owed to my wife. During the nearly two years in which I was deeply absorbed in the research and ideas behind this work, she stood by me with patience, understanding, and constant encouragement. Without her support, this project would have been difficult to bring to completion.

In the course of my research, I was able to draw on a wide range of sources. In addition to personal conversations and interviews, I relied on extensive studies, commentaries, digital archives, and statistical data from various fields. I also consulted numerous national and international daily newspapers, weekly publications, and magazines in order to develop as broad and up-to-date an understanding of the subject matter as possible. Some of these works are cited directly in the text, while others are listed in the bibliography.

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Motivation

A Serbian Consul General once told me: “You combine the best of both worlds—the German and the Serbian.” I would not go quite that far. Yet my familial roots in the fractured landscape of the former Yugoslavia, combined with the deep imprint of my Western birthplace, Germany, may offer me a perspective that is not equally accessible to everyone. At the core of my motivation for writing this book was therefore the intention to provide the reader with a second, transparent, and differentiated perspective on Serbia and its complex geostrategic position. In doing so, I seek to highlight the urgent necessity of integrating this fascinating country into the European community without delay. Its significance extends far beyond what is immediately apparent at first glance.

It is important for me to emphasize that my occasionally critical observations do not imply that I view other states or their actors as inherently “evil.” Rather, they act from within their respective perspectives in order to secure the greatest possible advantage for themselves. And even if one may at times find oneself on opposing sides in the midst of an intense competition between political systems, it remains essential to listen. At the same time, however, it would be naive not to recognize current developments as part of a broader global struggle over the future. The Western nations, which for centuries held a dominant position, now face a multitude of challenges—not only on other continents, but also within Europe itself. This book is therefore intended as a wake-up call to the West: to rediscover its own strength and to act with strategic clarity. It does not claim to be a strictly scientific or purely analytical treatise. Rather, it emerges from an empirical perspective, grounded in my own observations and experiences.

PART I

“European unity was once the dream of a few.

It became a hope for many.

Today, it is a necessity for all.”

Konrad Adenauer,

First Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, 1949–1963

I.1 Prologue

In the aftermath of the devastating events of the Yugoslav wars (1991–1995) and the Kosovo conflict (1999), Serbia faces the task of redefining its role and interests in the world. This redefinition is shaped not only by tradition and geography, but also by economic strength, political will, and military capabilities. In today's geopolitical landscape, the country—alongside Ukraine and Turkey—ranks among the key continental states for a stable European Union. Yet, it appears that Serbia continues to occupy a marginal position in the analyses of many experts. This hesitation, however, may prove to be a future historical miscalculation. For it is precisely here that the spheres of interest of the European Union, the United States, the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, and Turkey converge. The central question, therefore, is whether Serbia possesses the political will and the power to remain neutral—or whether it will ultimately be forced to choose a side.

For the so-called West, of which the European Union forms a central part, a deeper integration of Serbia into European structures—and its timely accession to full membership in the European Union—would represent the most reliable path toward a stable continent. Such a step may provoke skepticism among certain policymakers. Yet in these highly dynamic times, a solution-oriented approach appears indispensable. There is little doubt that geopolitical and economic realities are shifting. The pendulum of U.S. geopolitics is increasingly swinging toward Asia and the Pacific—even in the context of the war in Ukraine. Following the G20 summit in India, U.S. President Joe Biden visited communist Vietnam to publicly announce a strategic partnership. Washington is seeking to establish a stronger counterweight to China's growing influence in Asia—regardless of ideological considerations. This, in turn, implies that the European Union must, in the medium term, be capable of addressing challenges on its own continent independently. Brussels cannot rely indefinitely on support from the White House. In recent years, American policymakers have repeatedly emphasized that Europe—and the European Union in particular—must

assume a greater role in managing its own security affairs. It was therefore only a matter of time before a future U.S. president, such as Donald Trump, would place different priorities on security policy. Rather than justifying itself, Brussels, Berlin, and Paris must respond with pragmatism. The longer the European community of states hesitates, the greater the risk that other actors will fill potential security gaps in Southeastern Europe. This, in turn, would evolve into a new challenge for the West as a whole—not only for the EU.

For this reason, the stabilization of the Western Balkans is of decisive importance, including for the United States—even if both sides differ in perspectives and priorities. The transatlantic partnership in global politics, economics, and security will likely remain of paramount importance. In light of growing challenges from Asia and other regions, cooperation will become ever more critical. This requires closer coordination in multiple dimensions: the exchange of information, alignment of political strategies, and a pragmatic *modus operandi*. For these reasons, it also appears strategically advisable for the current U.S. administration not to overlook developments in Serbia. The West as a whole will endure only if the structures of North America and Europe remain stable. In this context, Serbia plays a key role within Europe.

To date, the European Union and the United States have, through at times uncoordinated engagement and imbalanced intercultural advisory approaches, contributed to the emergence of a potential risk factor. Belgrade therefore does not yet appear fully convinced of a shared path with the European Union. The consequence may be that the People's Republic of China, in particular, will use this small but strategically significant country not only as an infrastructural gateway for its goods into Europe, but also—under certain circumstances—as a destabilizing multiplier against the West.

At present, continuous investment and increasing military activity by Beijing can be observed. Recent developments indicate that Serbia has invested in Chinese military technology, including the HQ-22 air defense missile system—the first European country to deploy such a system from East Asia. In addition, drones with an estimated total value of €20 million have reportedly been acquired.

The Pupin Bridge in Belgrade (constructed between 2011 and 2014), the first major Chinese infrastructure project on European soil, represents yet another example of the People's Republic's expanding presence. Furthermore, Chinese companies are investing heavily in the steel sector, raw material extraction, and various infrastructure projects. The West should therefore respond to these developments with a clear-eyed and realistic strategy. At the same time, it remains essential to adopt a balanced and fair approach in dealing with China as an important trading partner—without compromising one's own principles and boundaries.

The Russian Federation also maintains a strong interest in expanding defense cooperation with Serbia. As a long-standing recipient of Russian military equipment—including MiG-29M fighter jets and combat helicopters—the Balkan state remains a close partner on the military level. Cultural ties also run deep, as reflected in financial support for projects such as the mosaic in the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade. Covering approximately 15,000 square meters (about 161,000 square feet), it is considered one of the largest mosaics in the Orthodox Christian world. Yet, despite these seemingly strong ties, a paradox emerges: Serbia—alongside Belarus, the only European country that has not imposed sanctions on Russia—has increasingly become a place of refuge for Russian opposition figures. Their presence in this small Balkan state is striking. The Russian language is widely heard in the streets of Belgrade and Novi Sad, and the urban landscape is marked by a visible number of Russian license plates. Serbian media report figures of up to 300,000 Russian migrants. This corresponds to nearly five percent of the population. Certainly, not all of them are dissidents—but they are present. The real estate sector is booming. References are made to a “Little Moscow” or even a “Russian Silicon Valley” along the Danube, as a comparatively large number of Russian IT specialists have sought opportunities abroad. Yet it is not only the People's Republic of China and Russia that are demonstrating significant interest in Serbia.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) are also investing—particularly in the agricultural sector and in real estate. In addition, the national airline Etihad acquired a stake in Serbia's flag carrier, Air

Serbia. The multi-million-dollar investment by DP World (Dubai Ports) in the Danube Port of Novi Sad is another indication of growing interest from the Gulf region. Serbia's central location—between the source of the Danube in the north and the Black Sea—may prove to be of considerable strategic importance in attracting further foreign capital. Northern Serbia is also home to the largest hydrographic junction on the European continent. Moreover, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has repeatedly demonstrated interest in the Balkans in recent years, seeking to expand influence, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After years of relative restraint, the Republic of Turkey has rediscovered the region.

Time is pressing for the West—particularly for Germany—as a reliable investment partner. The Federal Republic continues to enjoy a high level of trust in Serbia. To avoid squandering this goodwill, however, Berlin must act more pragmatically and rely less on moralizing expectations. There is a widespread skepticism toward Western policy. The Kosovo conflict, and the manner in which it was resolved, have left deep marks across all levels of society. In order to bring Serbia closer to shared geopolitical objectives, Western policymakers must develop a deeper understanding of the Serbian perspective. People on the ground clearly see themselves as Europeans who share European values. Yet it is striking that, when the term “Europe” is used, some do not think of the continent, but of the European Union.

At the same time, Donald Trump is regarded by many Serbs as one of the most popular U.S. presidents, as his Balkan policy is widely interpreted as being favorable toward Serbia—despite the fact that in 2025 he signed a tariff decree that placed Serbia, after Switzerland, among the countries facing the highest import duties in Europe. From their perspective, Serbia is not being treated as an equal partner in the European integration process. The result is a gradual decline in the attractiveness of the political West—even among younger generations. This development is risky, but not entirely without cause. After more than three years in Serbia, I can report from numerous personal conversations that this hospitable and proud nation, with its warm and resilient people, will respond only to a limited extent to overt public pressure from the West.

From a standpoint of self-interest, transatlantic decision-makers would be well advised to engage Serbia with honesty and respect—without exaggerated denunciations. The time for shared objectives has come, and the West should not allow this opportunity to pass. It is the responsibility of Brussels and Washington to act decisively and to recognize the importance of this country within Europe's geopolitical landscape—not merely through declarations of intent. The stability of the Western Balkans, the European Union, and the broader Western world depends on how these challenges are addressed. It is essential to set the course in the right direction without delay and to work collectively toward a resilient transatlantic future.

“You cannot buy Serbs — you can only rent them.”

This remark by a veterinarian friend has stayed with me ever
since.

I.2 Geography

A clear and definitive geographical delineation of Serbia has never been fully possible – and remains so to this day. Over the course of history, state borders have been subject to constant change, at times even extending into what is now modern-day Greece. The historical context is complex, with recurring efforts to unite all Serbs and their settlement areas within a single state. At the same time, Serbia has, for centuries, been shaped by the influence of great powers and was for long periods under the rule of both the Ottoman and the Habsburg Empires.

Even today, the process of “border definition” remains unresolved for some. While certain groups have accepted that Kosovo has been “lost,” others refer to it as a “holy land” and reject its current status. The Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Irinej, who passed away in 2020, described Kosovo as a “holy land, the cradle of our history and culture.” According to him, more than 1,300 churches and monasteries have been built there over the “centuries of our presence in this region.” There are also those Serbs who regard certain regions of other former Yugoslav republics as Serbian territory – such as Republika Srpska, an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina. These complex historical and cultural backgrounds have led to a situation in which the definition of Serbia’s borders and identity continues to be shaped by differing perspectives. Historical upheavals and political dynamics have contributed to a deeply rooted emotional connection between the Serbian people and their land, as well as to diverging views on territorial boundaries. Surrounded by nine neighboring countries – Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, and the disputed territory of Kosovo – Serbia functions as a link between East and West, as well as North and South. As a country in Southeastern Europe, it lies strategically at the heart of the Balkans. This geographical position gives Serbia particular geopolitical significance, as it serves as a bridge between different cultural, political, and economic spheres of influence. Furthermore,