

Report From Serbia

by **George Friedman** - June 6, 2025

I first visited Serbia in the early 1970s. At the time, I was genuinely unaware that I was in Serbia. I thought I was visiting Yugoslavia, and though I realized it had many provinces, I didn't grasp that they were, in fact, different nations with their own languages and cultures. The only thing they seemed to share was distrust in one another.



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

What I saw in Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia, was an Eastern European city, old and still scarred by World War II. I traveled there because I was writing my doctoral dissertation on the intellectual foundation of the New Left. Yugoslavia fascinated me because though it was communist, it was not a Soviet satellite – indeed, it was frequently hostile to the Soviets. Josip Broz Tito, an extraordinary leader of the anti-German resistance and later the leader of Yugoslavia, appeared on the surface to be a New Leftist. But that was an illusion.

I was drawn back in later years to thinking about Yugoslavia, wondering how Tito held the place together and writing (from a distance) about NATO and the U.S. intervention in the Balkans – an act I regarded then (and now) as insane. So insane that it caused me to question then-President Bill Clinton's grip on reality.

I have been to Serbia several times, before and after the bombing, but my current visit has been the most startling. The rancor toward the U.S. has subsided. Everyone speaks English, which is taught as early as the first grade, and Belgrade has become a world-class city.

I was invited by the Pupin Initiative, an independent organization founded to bolster U.S.-Serbia ties through collaborative efforts and policies. Its founder and executive director, Vuk Velebit, arranged two full days of meetings for my wife, Meredith, and me. Over the course of those two days, I met with the country's foreign minister, the U.S. charge d'affaires and many others. My most striking meetings were with groups of young people, who were far more interested in their work and computer screens than in me. U.S. companies like Microsoft have entered Serbia – less, I think, for marketing purposes than to take advantage of a highly educated and technically capable generation of Serbians working on creating the future of technology on multiple levels. Frankly, it reminded me of my home in Austin, Texas. I should note that the employees of one company I visited were trying to create platforms for interactive maps that can integrate multiple dimensions of geography. Since geopolitics lives on maps, I was fascinated by the possibilities.

I left Serbia this time having learned three truths. First, though Serbia is Serbia, and though it is still located in the Balkans, it is not a slave to nationalism. Second, the intellectual power of Eastern Europe still exists, it is highly concentrated in Belgrade, and U.S. tech companies, having realized as much, are moving in. And third, despite all that has happened in the Balkans, I feel more at home in Belgrade than in most other cities I visit. Strangely enough, the technical and entrepreneurial spirit is more American there than anywhere else I've been in Europe.

It is different in another way. In Europe, memories are measured in centuries, and most memories are bad – even terrible. Those memories continue to haunt its people so much that they can define countries. The same bad memories are present in Serbia, but as with the U.S., where people remember but are able to a great extent to move on, Serbians are capable of looking forward instead of backward.

When I speak of the intellectual power of Eastern Europe, I do so not without empirical evidence. For better or worse, the atomic weapons were developed with the help of several Hungarian scientists. Nikola Tesla, the Serbian father of electricity, at least as great as Thomas Edison, was from here.

When I visited Serbian tech companies, I kept thinking of Tesla and his personal relationship with Edison, with whom he collaborated, and with whom he split. I don't know how much ego played a part in their divorce. But the American ego is not lacking in Belgrade. I value ego, as an engine of creativity, and it is here in Belgrade.

In Serbia, as in all places, it is essential to understand geopolitical realities. Tito was a communist who would not subordinate Yugoslavia's national interests to Moscow. Serbia has had a recent influx of Russians and Ukrainians fleeing war and seeking better lives. The country has close ties with Russia, yet last week, Russia accused Serbia of selling ammunition to Ukraine. (Belgrade said it sold the ammunition to someone else, who in turn, and without its knowledge, sold it to Ukraine.) The bottom line is that Serbia is following its own course, much as it did during the Cold War. It is keeping its distance from Russia and reaching out to others, and though this frustrates Russia, it does not frustrate it so much to invite Russian reprisal. (Not that it's even clear that Russia could respond if it wanted to.) It is equally noteworthy that English is the chosen second language of much of Europe, including Serbia, and that is perhaps more important than membership in NATO or the EU or any of the other legacy institutions of the Cold War. To me, it seems important that Serbia focus on being the southernmost nation of Eastern Europe, looking northward rather than being preoccupied with events to its south. Its future is bright, but the sun is rising in the north.

Geopolitics is the true dismal science. The history of the Balkans includes the Turkish conquest, communism and ruthless neutrality. The people of the Balkans understand geopolitical reality, I think from birth. They understand power and its limits, and they sense the power of the U.S. not from its ability to bomb them but from the ability of its technology to empower them. This may not be true of all the Balkan countries, but it is true of Serbia.

Serbia has cast its lot in one direction, not with America but with its own value to U.S. businesses – and thus what those businesses can bring to Serbia. Unlike **Romania**, which is deeply concerned by Russian power, Serbia has handled Russia more deftly. Russia is still a great power, in terms of size and potential, but Serbia is confident that with history and the lessons taught by Tito, it can continue to manage their bilateral relationship. What Serbia needs now is a strong relationship with the U.S., one based not on military alliance but on mutual commercial opportunity. In my view, there are times when U.S. businesses understand the world better than the State Department does. It is clear that the tech industry understands Serbia's potential, and I suspect the State Department is not far behind.

I am not by nature optimistic, and in my profession, optimism is prohibited. But I must say that what I have seen in Serbia justifies optimism. The first time I traveled here, I was searching for meaning in

the New Left, only to find that there was none. Then I came looking for vestiges of the Cold War, only to discover that the questions I had were as irrelevant as those of my first visit. Here, geopolitics is not as dismal as elsewhere.

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