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Country Snapshot Serbia

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Country snapshot Serbia

By Belgrade Open School

The Christian faith has been present in the territory comprising modern Serbia since the Roman period. After the initial spread of Christianity to the area in the 2nd century, religious authority fluctuated between Rome and Constantinople, before Eastern Orthodoxy became established in the late 9th century. Under the medieval Nemanjic dynasty, the Serbian Orthodox Church achieved autocephalous status in 1219, and was elevated to a patriarchate in 1346. Islam was introduced in Serbia with the Ottoman presence in the Balkans from the 14th century onwards. Varying degrees of tolerance between the Orthodox and Muslim populations of foreign and Slavic descent followed. Between 1804 and 1815, a series of Serbian uprisings against Ottoman rule culminated in Serbia gaining autonomy under the rule of Serbian hereditary princes in 1830, and eventually in complete independence in 1878. However, in southern parts of Serbia, a minority population of Slavic Muslims and Albanian Muslims remains.

During the communist regime after 1945 when Serbia was a part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, religion was tolerated but discouraged, whilst the property of religious organisations was mostly nationalised. The impact of socialist political ideology on religion in Serbia can be seen in the fact that data on religious affiliation was ignored for ideological and political reasons in the censuses of 1961, 1971 and 1981.⁹⁶ Moreover, recent data has shown a decline in the proportion of people identifying as atheist since then by a factor of 10, the underlying reason for which could be the changed political and ideological atmosphere of Serbian society.⁹⁷

The substantial overlap between religious affiliation and ethnic identity played a major role in the wars that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, and continues somewhat to this day. This reflects the role of religion in creating an atmosphere of mutual intolerance among the different nations in the Balkans, with rises in nationalism being reinforced by a rise in expressions of religious identity. This increase in the importance of religious identity in Serbia was also demonstrated by the establishment of the Ministry of Religion of Serbia in 1991, which lasted until 2012.

Church-state relations

The Republic of Serbia is a secular state according to Article 11 of its Constitution. Churches and religious communities are separated from the state and no religion may be established as a state or mandatory religion. The 2006 state law which regulates churches

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⁹⁶ A special study written on the basis of the 2011 Census, the Etnomozaik, is available only in Serbian; Republic of Serbia, 'Census of population, households and dwellings in 2011. Ethno-confessional and linguistic mosaic of Serbia', p. 178, <http://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/Popis2011/Etnomozaik.pdf>

⁹⁷ Ibid. p.182

and religious communities grants special treatment to the seven religious groups which the government defines as 'traditional'. These are the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Slovak Evangelical Church, the Reformed Christian Church, Evangelical Christian Church, the Islamic Community, and the Jewish community.⁹⁸ The law grants these seven traditional religious communities tax exemptions, the right to have their faith taught in public schools, and the right to provide chaplain services to military personnel.⁹⁹ Besides the seven traditional religions, there are another twenty religious communities and churches on the state register.

Religious composition of country

All statistical data on Serbian religious demography is based on the 2011 census, and does not include data for Kosovo,¹⁰⁰ which declared independence in 2008. The data for two municipalities bordering Kosovo is incomplete since a number of Albanian citizens in those areas refused to participate in the census. The majority of the Serbian population identified as Christian (91.22%), belonging to the major denominations – Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and various branches of Protestantism. Of the different Christian denominations, the vast majority belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church (84.59%), while 4.97% identified as Catholics. The majority of Roman Catholics live in the northern part of Serbia – Vojvodina.¹⁰¹

The third biggest religion in Serbia is Islam, according to the 2011 census Muslims represent 3.10% of the population. They are organised in two different communities – the Islamic Community of Serbia and the Islamic Community in Serbia. The first has its seat in Belgrade and consists of three mufti units, while the second is located in city of Novi Pazar, a Muslim majority area and is under the riyasat (executive body) of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The traditional Protestant communities constitute around 1%, mostly of the Slovak and Hungarian national minorities. More than 90% of Serbia's 36,000 Jews were killed during the Holocaust, and as a result the Jewish community now has less than 1000 members.

Interfaith relations

According to independent reports, religious violence has declined in last years, although it is sometimes hard to determine if a violent act has been motivated by religion or ethnic identity. Interfaith relations are generally good in Serbia, but tensions persist between the Serbian Orthodox Church and other unrecognised Orthodox Churches – the Montenegrin and Macedonian – as well as divisions between the two Islamic communities.

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98 US Department of State, 2017 International Religious Freedom Report – Serbia, p. 3, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dliid=280956>

99 Ibid. p. 3

100 This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

101 Republic of Serbia, 'Census of population, households and dwellings in 2011. Ethno-confessional and linguistic mosaic of Serbia', <http://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/Popis2011/Etnomozaik.pdf>

Religious identity continues to overlap with and reinforce feelings of national or ethnic identity.¹⁰² A major outbreak of religious violence took place in 2004 when mosques in the centres of Belgrade and Nis were damaged soon after a series of attacks in Kosovo in which more than 36 Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries¹⁰³ were destroyed in rioting by Kosovan Albanians.¹⁰⁴

Kosovo

The situation in Kosovo remains very complex¹⁰⁵, as tensions between the majority Albanian and minority Serbian populations have not abated 20 years after the war of 1998–99.¹⁰⁶ While Kosovo declared independence in 2008, it is still not recognised as a member state of the United Nations and it is not officially recognised by approximately half of its member states – despite the EU’s several resolutions that encourage its members to recognise Kosovo’s independence. What makes the situation especially difficult, is that a significant number of Serbian Orthodox Church properties are located in Kosovan territory.

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102 Ibid.

103 Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, <https://unmik.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s-2004-348.pdf>

104 Human Rights Watch, ‘Failure to Protect: Anti-Minority Violence in Kosovo, March 2004’, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/07/25/failure-protect/anti-minority-violence-kosovo-march-2004>

105 On current state of relations, “Serbia-Kosovo relations: Confrontation or normalisation?”, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)635512_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI(2019)635512_EN.pdf)

106 Especially see the part on Religious/Ethnic Violence in “Kosovo 2019 Crime & Safety Report”, <https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=25857>