



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

The state of Serbia covers 29,913 square miles (77,474 square kilometers) and is about the size of Maine. Serbia is a landlocked nation, since its access to the Adriatic Sea was cut off when Serbia's federation with Montenegro ended in 2006. However, several major rivers flow through the country, including the Danube, Sava, Tisa, Morava, and Drina. Vojvodina (in the north) is part of the Danubian plain and has fertile agricultural land. The North Albanian Alps (Prokletije) and Šar Mountains are in the southwest, and the Balkan Mountains are in the east. The climate is central continental. Serbian winters are cold, averaging 32°F (0°C) in January; summers are warm, averaging 75°F (23°C) in July. Central Serbia is susceptible to strong winds (*košava*) that pick up speed on the plain of Vojvodina.

History

Slavic peoples settled on the Balkan Peninsula in the seventh century and for several generations were organized by clans rather than in a united state. In the 11th century, Serbs united and consolidated territory that eventually became the empire of Tzar Dušan. Montenegro was then incorporated in the 12th century. In 1346, Tzar Dušan's rule included Albania and northern Greece. Serbian power began to decline with the Battle of Kosovo (1389), when the Serbs were defeated by Turks. For the next five hundred years, Serbs were ruled by the Turkish Ottoman Empire and still consider the era one of bondage.

Serbia rebelled under the leadership of Karadjordje (1804) and of Obrenović (1815), both of whom formed ruling dynasties. Serbia achieved full independence in 1878. Other Balkan Slavs had been subjugated to both the Turkish and Austro-Hungarian Empires, and Serbia determined to rid the Balkans of these powers. In the First Balkan War (1912), Serbia defeated Turkey with the help of neighboring nations. The Second Balkan War (1913) brought victory over a former ally, Bulgaria. In 1914, a Bosnian Serb assassinated the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand in the effort to liberate Serbs in Bosnia. Austria declared war, regional alliances formed, and the conflict quickly became World War I. The Austro-Hungarian Empire lost the war and was broken into several new states. At that time, Serbia led the move to unite Slavs under one government, becoming the principal power in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in 1918. The name was changed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929.

When Germany invaded Yugoslavia in 1941, Croatian leaders sided with the Fascists against Serbia. At the same time, a bloody civil war was being waged in Yugoslavia between communists and monarchists. Fighting on both fronts, many Serbs lost their lives battling Croatians and at the hands of fellow Slavs. Thousands of civilian Jews, Roma (Gypsies), and Serbs were killed in Croatian concentration camps. The civil war ended when World War II did, and the communist fighters emerged victorious. Under Josip Broz Tito's leadership, they formed a federal socialist state.

Tito died in 1980 and the federation weakened. Ethnic tensions and an economic crisis led Croatia and Slovenia to demand secession in 1990. Slovenia's independence proceeded smoothly, but Croatia's was resisted by resident

Serbs who wanted to remain united with Serbia. Serbia also supported Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina in their war against Muslims and Croats. The 1995 Dayton Peace Accord formally ended the war. Serbia and Montenegro, the only republics left in the federation, had declared themselves the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992.

Kosovo and Vojvodina, semi-autonomous provinces, were part of Yugoslavia. When Yugoslavia was dissolved, the provinces became part of Serbia. But unlike the rest of Serbia, Kosovo is mostly populated by ethnic Albanians who practice Islam. Kosovo was embroiled in tensions between the ethnic Albanians (who had moved to the area relatively recently) and the Serbs (who regard the area as the cradle of their culture). The tensions eventually erupted into fighting, and by September 1998, Serbs had forced several hundred thousand ethnic Albanians to flee Kosovo.

Negotiations and international sanctions failed to deter Yugoslav forces. In March 1999, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) began air strikes on targets throughout Yugoslavia, especially Belgrade and Kosovo. Meanwhile, Serb forces systematically destroyed Albanian property and also used torture, rape, and mass executions to “cleanse” the province of Albanians. Nearly a million refugees fled to Albania, Macedonia, and other states. After 78 days of air strikes, President Slobodan Milošević agreed to withdraw his forces. An estimated 10,000 Kosovar Albanians were killed in the Serbian campaign; more than 3,000 Albanians, Serbs, and Roma went missing. The conflict also caused billions of dollars in damages and devastated the economy. A large multinational peacekeeping force was deployed to establish order.

Following defeat in September 2000 elections and mass demonstrations, Milošević was ousted and Vojislav Koštunica became president. Milošević was arrested in 2001 on allegations of misappropriation of funds and abuse of power. Milošević was subsequently extradited to The Hague to face charges of crimes against humanity. In March 2006, while still on trial, he died of a heart attack. In July 2008, former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić was arrested after over a decade in hiding; he was taken to The Hague to stand trial for war crimes.

In 2002, Serbia and Montenegro agreed to loosen ties between their two states and, after three years, hold a referendum on continued association. The Union of Serbia and Montenegro (all that remained of the former Yugoslavia) dissolved completely when a slim majority of Montenegrins voted for independence in May 2006. After UN-sponsored talks aimed at negotiating limited independence for Kosovo failed, the region declared independence from Serbia in February 2008. Serbia labeled the move illegal, though Kosovar independence was immediately acknowledged by the United States and some European countries. The legality of Kosovo's status was later given to the International Court of Justice to decide. In 2010, Serbia received large loans from both Russia and the International Monetary Fund to help sustain its economic viability in the wake of the global recession of 2008 and 2009.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Serbia's population is just over 7.3 million and declining at a rate of 0.47 percent annually. Most people in Serbia are ethnic Serbs (83 percent). Ethnic Albanians (88 percent) dominate Kosovo, which has regarded itself as an independent nation since 2008. Hungarians (4 percent) are concentrated in Vojvodina. Serbia is also home to smaller numbers of Romany (Gypsies), Yugoslavs, Bosniaks, Montenegrins, Romanians, Croats, Ruthenians, Turks, and Slovaks. Nearly a third of Serbians inhabit Belgrade. The next largest cities are Niš, Novi Sad, and Kragujevac.

Language

The principal language is Serbian, a Slavic tongue virtually identical to Croatian. In fact, before 1990, the language of Yugoslavia was Serbo-Croatian. Serbian can be written in both Cyrillic (the official alphabet) and Latin scripts; schoolchildren are required to learn both. In 1974, Albanians and Hungarians won the right to use their language in local government, media, and education. In addition to Serbian, several other languages have official status in Vojvodina: Romanian, Hungarian, Slovak, Ukrainian, and Croatian.

Religion

The majority of Serbs (85 percent) are Serbian Orthodox Christians. Roman Catholics make up the next largest religion, followed by Protestants, Muslims, and other faiths. Religion was neglected during the communist period, but activity has surged since 1990, as evidenced by growing numbers of baptisms and religious wedding ceremonies. The Serbian Orthodox Church has a great impact on local culture. It was formed in 1219 by St. Sava and is similar to the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches in practice and doctrine, though it distinguishes itself from them in some respects. For example, it teaches that each family is protected by a patron saint. On the day when the saint is commemorated, the family prepares large amounts of food for visitors. Hosts serve the food with a spoonful of *žito*, a mush made of wheat, sugar, and nuts. The *žito*, representing resurrection and eternal life, is offered in honor of the patron saint and remembrance of deceased family members. The Serbian Church follows the Julian calendar, which is 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar.

General Attitudes

Serbs consider themselves principally to be a heroic and proud people. Based on a history of resisting Turks, Austrians, and Germans, many Serbs view themselves as liberators and as warrior peoples. They honor the memory of military conquests, such as the 14th century Battle of Kosovo in which the Turks defeated the Serbs. This battle has been ingrained in the national consciousness as the time when Christian Serbs tragically but heroically chose to die at the hands of Muslim Turks rather than surrender.

Serbs are openly emotional and are not a very private people. They share their lives with extended family,

neighbors, and friends. They tend to be pessimistic and sometimes fatalistic about events that surround them. They value family, country, and honesty. Serbs also have a sense of humor that allows them to laugh at their own faults.

Personal Appearance

Concerned with public appearance, people take care to look well dressed and groomed. Most wear Western-style clothing, except in a few rural areas where older people wear *nošnja*. This traditional attire varies by region but tends to include long skirts and cotton shirts for women; men wear wide pants, vests over white shirts, and *opanke* (leather shoes with upturned toes). Older women in rural areas often wear scarves that cover their hair. In urban areas, some older men wear hats. Women often dye their hair (gray hair is seldom seen); red and auburn shades are popular among younger women. Running shoes and jeans are popular throughout the country.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

When strangers are introduced to each other, they shake hands and say their last name, followed by *Drago mi je* (I am pleased). If people already know each other, they shake hands or kiss (often three times on alternating cheeks) and say *Zdravo* (Hello) or *Dobar dan* (Good day). Widely popular among younger groups is the greeting *Ciao* (Hello), taken from Italian. In greeting someone older, the younger person must rise. Men rise when greeting women.

Adults are addressed by professional (i.e., “Dr.,” “Professor”) or conventional titles and their last names. *Gospodin* (Mr.), *Gospodja* (Mrs.), and *Komšija* (neighbor) are common conventional titles. *Tetka* (auntie) and *čika* (uncle) are reserved for older people who are not family but for whom “Mr.” and “Mrs.” are too formal. For example, one might use these terms for family friends or for a friend's parents. People never refer to others, except close friends and family, by their first names. Likewise, they use *vi* (“you” formal) to address others, especially initially. Moving from *vi* to *ti* (“you” informal) must be initiated by the older person, or if two people are the same age, by the female, but this practice is changing with the younger generation.

Gestures

Serbs do not use hand gestures much when speaking. It is impolite to stretch, yawn, or crack one's knuckles in public. It is also impolite to point with the index finger. Female friends commonly walk down the street holding hands. Smoking in public used to be rude, but it is increasingly common in both urban and rural areas. Eye contact is valued and is expected when people are raising glasses in a toast.

Visiting

People spend a lot of time visiting and entertaining. Sitting for hours over cigarettes and a cup of coffee or some *rakija* (alcoholic drink usually made from plums) is common. The length of visits reflects a leisurely pace of life. Most visiting is on an informal, unannounced basis; people simply drop in.

Sometimes people prearrange socializing but usually not far in advance. Guests often bring gifts such as flowers, coffee, wine, or a box of chocolates; if one is visiting for the first time, a gift is nearly obligatory. Flowers are given in odd numbers, as even numbers are reserved for funerals. Guests bring relatively expensive gifts when visiting on special occasions, particularly for weddings.

Eating

Most people's workdays start around 6 or 7 a.m. As a result, people wait until 10 a.m. for breakfast (*doručak*), which can be a substantial meal. The main meal of the day is called *ručak* and is eaten after work, around 4 p.m. This is a heavy meal that includes soup and a meat dish. Dinner is a light snack. Guests invited to *ručak* are served *meze* (an antipasto of cheese, sausages, etc.) before the meal.

When entertaining, hosts offer more food than can be eaten; this is a sign of hospitality and wealth. Indeed, hosts consistently urge guests to eat more during the meal and guests customarily decline several times before accepting. The host or hostess often places more food on the guests' plates despite protests. As times change, people are declining only once or twice before accepting; further protests are taken seriously by a growing number of hosts. However, guests are still expected to finish all food on their plates. Meals are times for family conversation and social interaction.

LIFESTYLE

Family

The family is highly valued among Serbs, and nearly everyone expects to marry and have children. Divorce and remarriage are common. Rural families tend to be larger than urban ones, though some urban couples are responding to the renewed influence of the Orthodox Church by having more children. The father is considered to be the head of the family; in rural areas, male children tend to be valued more than females. Rural households most often include three generations. Upon marriage, a couple typically moves in with the groom's parents. Because housing is hard to come by, urban couples might also live with parents briefly, but this is seen more as an economic necessity than a desirable tradition. Throughout the country, both husband and wife usually work outside the home. Children are cared for by grandparents, other relatives, and child-care facilities.

Housing

Large-scale urban migration has resulted in a housing shortage. Though mortgage conditions have improved, enabling more people to purchase real estate than ever before, the majority of urban dwellers rent or live with relatives. Most urban apartment buildings were built in the communist era and have gray exteriors and multiple (over five) stories. The average apartment is roughly 645 square feet (60 square meters). Individual houses are the norm in rural areas. “Tent” houses with roofs extending to the ground protect mountain dwellings from snow during the winter. Such houses usually have two floors and an attic. Houses located on the plains

(mainly in Vojvodina) have one floor, with one wall facing the street. People enter the house from the yard, which contains functional buildings (barns, granaries, workshops) and an orchard and vegetable patch. Infrastructure in rural areas is poor.

Dating and Marriage

When dating, young people tend to go out with one steady partner. They go for walks, to cafés and parties, and to each other's homes. Civil wedding ceremonies are most common, but religious ceremonies are on the rise. Rural weddings are more elaborate than urban weddings; celebrations include several days of drinking, dancing, and eating that often force the family into debt. However, cash gifts from guests help defray the cost. The groom's family usually pays most wedding expenses, except in less traditional urban areas where costs are split more evenly.

Rural brides often have a dowry (a gift of home furnishings or cash to the groom's family), and they usually are given a piece of jewelry by the groom's family. Among Albanians, the groom's family pays a bride-price to the woman's family and the bride has no dowry.

Life Cycle

When a child is born, the father invites his closest friends and family members to his house or a restaurant for feasting and drinking. Upon arrival, the guests tear off a piece of the host's shirt and save it as a good luck charm. Soon after the birth, a *babine* is organized by women in the family, who bring food and drinks for celebration and presents for the baby. When friends and family visit the baby, they often slip some cash under the baby's pillow. If parents are Orthodox, the child is usually baptized during its first year.

Deaths are usually announced in local newspapers or in small pamphlets placed in common areas of villages or towns. The Orthodox Church does not accept cremation, so bodies are usually buried. A large cross (replaced with a star during communism) is placed next to the grave. After attending the funeral, family and friends gather at the house of the deceased for food and drink. In rural areas, close family members of the deceased may show their mourning by wearing all black clothing for 40 days after the death.

Diet

The cuisine is influenced by Turkish, Austrian, Hungarian, and Greek cultures. The most common foods include *pasulj* (beans), *sarma* (cabbage leaves stuffed with minced meat and rice), *roštilj* (grilled meats), *ćevapčići* (small, elongated, minced meatballs eaten with chopped onions), *punjene paprika* (stuffed peppers), and *pite* (pastries). Roasted pork or lamb, served with potatoes, is favored on special occasions.

Typical cheeses include *kajmak* (consisting of the accumulated skim of boiled milk) and *sjenièki sir* (a soft and fatty cheese often crumbled on *šopska*, a Greek-like salad). Locally grown produce includes cabbage, lettuce, tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, apples, raspberries, pears, watermelons, strawberries, and plums. Bread (usually white) is eaten with each meal, and wine is served at the main meal.

Recreation

Visiting and talking are favorite leisure activities, but people also enjoy watching television. In small towns, residents walk the main streets in the evening. Soccer is the most popular sport, followed by basketball, volleyball, swimming, and skiing. Sports are stressed in school, so young people tend to be more enthusiastic about such activities than older people are. Some people enjoy boating on lakes and rivers, and many men enjoy fishing and hunting.

The Arts

Music is popular throughout the country, but in rural areas, folk music (*narodna muzika*) is especially favored. People perform folk dances such as the *kolo*, which consists of small movements by dancers sometimes linked in a long line or circle. The pipe, accordion, and fiddle are traditional Serbian instruments. Also popular are *trabaci* (horn bands). Traditional music, dance, and costume vary from one region to another. Young people enjoy *turbofolk*, dance music that is a mixture of folk tunes and rock instruments and is prevalent in larger cities. Most theaters are run by the state and have permanent acting troupes. Serbs enjoy native and foreign movies, and Belgrade's annual film festival shows works from all over Europe. Visual arts are strongly supported through museums and galleries, especially in Belgrade. Government aid to preserve the country's cultural heritage has been more forthcoming in recent years.

Holidays

Serbs celebrate Orthodox Christmas (7 Jan.) and New Year's Day (14 Jan.). The International New Year (1 Jan.) is also celebrated. Women's Day (8 Mar.) honors women in the home and at work. Easter is in the spring. Workers' Day (1 May), once a major holiday, is declining in importance. *Vidovdan* (28 June) is a religious holiday and also commemorates the Battle of Kosovo. Four times throughout the year, Orthodox Serbs mark *Zadušnice*, which is a day to honor the dead. One such day is in early November soon after Catholics and Protestants have their own day (1 Nov.) to visit the graves of family and friends. Muslims celebrate various religious holidays throughout the year.

SOCIETY

Government

Serbia is a republic divided into 29 districts. The legislature consists of a 250-member unicameral National Assembly, which elects the prime minister (currently Mirko Cvetkovic). Major political parties include the Democratic Party (DS), the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The president is chief of state and is directly elected by Serbian citizens to a five-year term, with a two-term maximum. Boris Tadić was elected president in 2004 and reelected in 2008. The voting age is 18. Serbia is pursuing economic reforms that will eventually prepare it to be integrated into the European Union (EU).

Economy

The Balkan conflicts of the 1990s left the economy in shambles. Significant funds were spent to supply ethnic Serbs in warring areas with food and weapons and to house refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sanctions following Serbia's role in the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina resulted in a block on external trade and a freeze on foreign assets until 1996, suffocating the economy and precipitating hyperinflation. The sanctions that followed during the Kosovo crisis weren't entirely lifted until 2001.

Long-lasting problems stem from when the government first began dismantling its market socialism system in 1990. Few accurate statistics are available, but many live in poverty. Unemployment and inflation are high. Slow reform, corruption, lack of privatization, an expanding trade gap, and a "brain drain" of skilled-labor emigrants are hindering progress. However, since Milošević's fall in 2000, foreign donors have prompted recovery, and Serbia is now pursuing economic reforms that will eventually prepare it to be integrated into the European Union (EU).

Serbia produces fruit, vegetables, wheat, corn, oats, and livestock. Natural resources include lead, zinc, copper, and lignite. Textile, metal, and vehicle manufacturing plants are located in Serbia. The currency in Serbia is the *dinar* (YUM).

Transportation and Communications

Serbia's public transportation system is well-developed and serves most of the population. Rail and bus services connect Belgrade to major cities. Rural areas are reached by bus and private vehicle. Most roads are paved. Newspapers and magazines usually receive some government support and are under pressure to accept certain controls, though the press has gained more freedom since the fall of Milošević. Television and radio stations are usually private, but some state-controlled stations also broadcast. Some urban residents have access to cable or satellite television.

Education

Children begin free schooling at age seven, with eight mandatory years at the basic (*osnovna*) level. Optional high school (*srednja škola*) includes grades nine through twelve. In high school, students can specialize in a specific field (such as agriculture or mechanics) or prepare more generally for higher education. Graduates can go to a two-year technical college, called *viša škola* (higher school), or to a university. Entrance to the four state universities is determined by examination, and a public university education is seen as more prestigious than a private one. Ethnic minorities have the right to education in their language; Albanians, Hungarians, Ruthenians, Slovaks, Romanians, and Turks may attend separate schools through high school. There are also Hungarian- and Albanian-language universities.

Health

Serbia has an extensive national healthcare system. Private medical practices were legalized in 1990, but most people cannot afford private care. Public hospitals suffer supply and equipment shortages, and health standards are deteriorating. Food shortages prior to 1996 caused some nutritional

deficiencies in children. NATO bombing in 1999 led to depleted-uranium contamination of some areas, though the level of contamination is not considered high enough to pose a direct health risk.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	7,344,847 (rank=97)
Area, sq. mi.	29,913 (rank=116)
Area, sq. km.	77,474

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	60 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	NA
Real GDP per capita	\$10,600
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 94% (female)
Infant mortality rate	7 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	71 (male); 77 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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