

Introduction



Where Is Serbia?

This should be, but is not, a straightforward question. In 2022, an answer depended on whether one considered Kosovo, which unilaterally declared independence in 2008, a part of Serbia or not. The Belgrade government refused to recognize the independence of its (former) province, and in this it was joined by around 90 other countries, including China, Russia, India, Brazil and five EU member states: Spain, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Cyprus. A slightly higher number of countries, including the USA, UK, Germany, France and Italy, recognized an independent Kosovo, but the former province of Serbia remained without a seat in the UN. Whichever view one takes, two things seem undisputable: Serbia no longer controlled Kosovo after 1999, while Kosovo had little control over its mainly Serb-populated north, where around one half of the remaining Kosovo Serbs live today.

The problem of Kosovo was not the only reason why the opening question could not be answered easily. Since 1912, Serbia has had at least four different territorial incarnations – not counting the interwar period, when there was no Serbian polity within the framework of ‘first’ Yugoslavia, and the Second World War years (1941–45), because the Territory of the Military Commander in Serbia was a German-occupied land, albeit with a local, collaborationist administration. It is often said that an average East-Central European could have lived in several countries without ever travelling anywhere, and this is also true of the Serbs. On 30 October 2013, *Politika*, Serbia’s

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newspaper of record, reported that Kalina Danilović, a housewife from southern Serbia, died at the age of 113. Because local birth certificates did not survive the First World War, the exact date, and probably year, of Kalina's birth was not known. It is believed that she married in 1918, aged around 20 and therefore 'quite late'; the groom was six years younger. Around the same time, the regional media reported the death, in Belgrade, of Slava Ivančević at the age of 117 or 119 (depending on source). If true, Slava – whose recipe for long life allegedly included daily shots of home-made brandy and generous consumption of menthol mints – would have been one of the oldest people in the world at the time of her death.

Subsequently the accuracy of these claims has been challenged, but in any case, a person born in Serbia in 1912, on the eve of the Balkan Wars, when Serbia incorporated Kosovo, Macedonia (present-day North Macedonia) and Sandžak, and still alive in February 2008, when Kosovo declared independence, would have been 96 years of age. Even if they never left their place of birth, they would have still lived in eight different countries. If the year of Slava's birth (1894) was correctly reported, she would have lived in nine countries, spending only the final years of her life in an independent Serbia. She was born in Bihać, present-day Bosnia-Herzegovina, which in the 1890s was an Ottoman province under the Austro-Hungarian occupation; and she died in Belgrade, as one of tens of thousands of Bosnian Serb refugees during the war of the 1990s, when Serbia was, together with Montenegro, part of 'rump' Yugoslavia.

The 2006 declaration of independence, from the Serb-Montenegrin union, by Montenegro automatically made Serbia an independent country once again, for the first time since 1918. Much has been said about Serb nationalism, which, for all the confusion between Greater Serbian and Yugoslav 'projects' during the late 1980s and '90s, was able to mobilize powerful support among the population. It was both a destructive and a

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self-destructive force that, unlike the nationalisms of the Serbs' neighbours, did not necessarily seek to create an independent Serbia. Ironically perhaps, Serbia in 2006 in some ways resembled the Austria of 1918 – a former core of a larger, multinational state that became independent by default because everyone else had declared independence after a devastating war.

Even without Kosovo, Serbia remains the largest and one of the most multi-ethnic Yugoslav successor states, with a rich and turbulent history and geographically a strategic location as a land-locked country in the central Balkans, or South-East Europe, depending on one's preference, which exercises varying degrees of influence over Serb communities in neighbouring Bosnia, Croatia and Montenegro. Those parts of former-Yugoslavia not in the EU (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) and Albania have been in recent years termed jointly the Western Balkans – perhaps because the prefix 'Western' makes the Balkans sound less 'Eastern'. However, if joining the EU means leaving the Balkans, then adding 'Western' in front of the Balkans is unnecessary since, with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU in 2007, there is no longer Eastern Balkans. Geography is of course rarely free of political symbolism, and this is perhaps especially true of the Balkans. The Balkans as Europe's Other, its Orient in the Saidian sense, has become a discipline of its own.¹

Serbia borders Bulgaria to the east, Romania to the north-east, Hungary to the north, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to the west, Montenegro to the south-west and Albania/Kosovo and North Macedonia to the south (see Map 0.1). As Serbia's Balkan neighbours have joined the EU and NATO in recent years, or

¹ M. Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*, New York, 1997, is now a classic; cf. M. Bakić-Hayden, 'Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia', *Slavic Review*, 54:4 (1994), 917–31; D. Bijelić and O. Savić (eds), *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, Cambridge, MA, 2005; V. Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination*, New Haven, CT, 1998.

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MAP 0.1 Serbia and its neighbours in 2022. Drawn by Joe LeMonnier, <https://mapartist.com/>

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exist as de facto western protectorates, it may be possible to imagine that only Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, with its own Serb entity, remain in the Balkans.

According to Serbia's official sources, the country occupies a territory of around 88,500 square kilometres. If Kosovo's 10,887 square kilometres is taken away, the government in Belgrade controls roughly 77,600 square kilometres, a territory similar in size to the Czech Republic, Scotland and Nebraska. According to the 2011 census, Serbia's population (not counting Kosovo) was close to 7.2 million people, comparable to Arizona, Bulgaria and Paraguay, and slightly below the size of the population of Hong Kong. In 2019, that figure was estimated at just shy of 7 million according to the country's Statistics Office. In 1991, Serbia's population without Kosovo was 8 million. In 2019, the UN estimated that due to emigration the population of Serbia (including Kosovo) will decline by almost 19 per cent between 2020 and 2050. According to another study, Serbia (without Kosovo) has experienced an annual decrease in population of 5.4 per cent per year between 2010 and 2020, due to emigration and low birth rate; if the trend continues, it is projected to shrink to 5.79 million people in 2050 – a decrease of almost 24 per cent since the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991.² With 18.5 per cent of its population aged 65 or above in 2015, Serbia falls just below the European average of 18.9 per cent, and below countries such as Germany (21 per cent) and Italy, which has the oldest population in Europe with nearly 22 per cent of over-65s.³

² T. Judah, "Too Late" to Halt Serbia's Demographic Disaster', *Balkan Insight*, 24 October 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/24/too-late-to-halt-serbias-demographic-disaster/>. Similar or even worse projections exist for other Balkan countries, including EU member states Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania.

³ 'Population structure and ageing', *Eurostat*, June 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Population_structure_and_ageing. These figures will likely go down once the tragic death toll of the Covid-19 is considered.

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Kosovo's predominantly Albanian population had fought for decades to achieve independence from Serbia, but many ethnic Albanians continue to emigrate, seeking better opportunities elsewhere, even though Belgrade's rule ended in 1999. More than half of the pre-war Serbian population of Kosovo – estimated at c.300,000 – and tens of thousands of Roma have left the province since 1999. These trends, combined with declining birth rates in Kosovo – previously the highest in Europe – means that its population is projected to fall from c.1.8 to c.1.66 million by 2050.

The main reason for the recent depopulation of the Balkans is therefore not ethnic cleansing, but emigration to the West, often of young and well educated. The migrant crisis in the Balkans exists in more than one form. The arrival of Middle Eastern and African refugees, who seek to reach western Europe through the 'Balkan route', presents Serbia with an opportunity to encourage at least some to stay and settle, for example, in its almost depopulated villages. Most would want to continue for more prosperous countries of the EU, but it is possible some might choose to stay, despite rising anti-migrant sentiments following an initial, surprisingly warm reception of migrants by Serbia.⁴

The capital Belgrade is Serbia's largest city by far, with close to 2 million people if suburban areas are included. Other main cities are Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, Subotica, Leskovac, Kruševac, Kraljevo, Zrenjanin, Pančevo, Čačak, Šabac, Novi Pazar and Smederevo; of these, only the population of Novi Sad and Niš exceeds 200,000 inhabitants. According to the 2011 census (which did not include Kosovo, whose largest city Priština/Prishtina is home to around 200,000 people), slightly over 83 per cent

⁴ D. Djokić, "Wait, the Serbs are now the good guys?", *openDemocracy*, 15 November 2015, www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/wait-serbs-are-now-good-guys/, originally published (in J. Plamper's German translation) in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 27 October 2015.

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of Serbia's citizens declare themselves as Serbs; the majority, nominally at least, belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose jurisdiction extends into Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo and Montenegro – a legacy of history, as this book shows. Orthodoxy, and a related tradition of *slava*, or *krsna slava*, a celebration of a family patron saint arguably specific to the Serbs, are important markers of Serb identity and tradition. The popularity of religiosity and observation of main religious holidays do not necessarily mean that most Serbs are deeply religious or knowledgeable about religion they formally profess.⁵ Although Serbia is a secular state, the Orthodox church often plays an important symbolic role in the country's politics, and so it is not unusual to see political leaders – both in government and in opposition – allegedly seeking blessing from the Serbian patriarch or another senior bishop. As will be seen, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Serb patriarchs were de facto ethnarchs, that is 'national' leaders. In other words, there is a tradition of blurred boundaries between politics and religion. This is even more pronounced in Montenegro, where Orthodox bishops doubled-up as ruling princes between the late seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, while in more recent times, the Metropolitan of Cetinje had played a major political role in the country.

The Serbian church has dioceses not just across the Balkans but also in central and western Europe, North America, Australia and South Africa. The Serbs are a Diaspora people, and this is another important layer of their identity – though not to the extent that it is the case with Armenians, Greeks and Jews. Perhaps a better parallel may be made with the Russians. Large Serbian and Serbian-speaking communities live in the former Yugoslav 'near

⁵ R. Radić and M. Vukomanović, 'Religion and Democracy in Serbia since 1989: The Case of the Serbian Orthodox Church', in S. P. Ramet (ed.), *Religion and Politics in Post-Socialist Central and Southeastern Europe: Challenges since 1989*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2014, 180–211.

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abroad', and, in smaller numbers, across the globe, because of war, revolution and state collapse.

Significant and historically important Serb communities live in neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina (1,360,000 or 31 per cent of the country's population; Bosnia's Serbs mostly live in its Serb entity Republika Srpska [Serb Republic]),⁶ Montenegro (178,000 or almost 29 per cent of the total population identified as ethnic Serbs in 2011, but nearly 43 said their mother tongue was Serbian)⁷ and Croatia (124,000 or 3.2 per cent of total population in 2021, down from 581,600, or 12.2 per cent, in 1991).⁸ There are perhaps 146,000 Serbs in Kosovo today (close to 8 per cent of the population), down from c.300,000 in 1999, according to Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) estimates.⁹

Hundreds of thousands of Serbs were displaced during the 1990s wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo; most initially fled to Serbia, where some settled permanently, while many others moved on elsewhere. Large groups of 'Diaspora' Serbs live in western Europe (especially in Austria, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland), the United States and Australia, including descendants of earlier generations of political and economic (*Gastarbeiter*) émigré communities. A smaller number of Serbs has emigrated to Cyprus, Greece, East-Central Europe and Russia.

Serbia is an ethnic nation state, despite its constitutional commitment to civic equality of all regardless of ethnic background. Prior to Kosovo's declaration of independence, ethnic Albanians

⁶ [Official Statistics Office, Bosnia-Herzegovina], 'Popis 2013. u BiH', www.statistika.ba.

⁷ Office for Statistics of the Republic of Montenegro, 'Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova u C. Gori 2011. g.', www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje%281%29.pdf.

⁸ State Office for Statistics, Republic of Croatia, 'Rezultati Popisa 2021', <https://popis2021.hr/>.

⁹ 'Kosovo: Serbs', Minority Rights Group, March 2018, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/serbs-3/>.

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were the largest minority, who made up between 15 and 20 per cent of Serbia's population. A similar number of non-Serbs lives in the rest of Serbia (without Kosovo). The largest ethnic minority among them are Hungarians (c.250,000, down from c.338,000 in 1991), Slav Muslims (c.200,000, many of whom now declare themselves as Bosniaks), Roma (c.150,000, up from c.91,000 in 1991), Croats (c.60,000, down from nearly 100,000 in 1991), Slovaks (c.50,000), Montenegrins (c.38,000, down from c.118,000 in 1991) and Vlachs (c.35,000), a stateless ethnic group whose language is similar to Romanian. Some 23,000 people declared as Yugoslavs in 2011, down from nearly 315,000 in 1991.¹⁰ There is also a small but culturally significant Jewish community, historically strong in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Šabac, Subotica and Zemun. Roughly 75 per cent of 2,500 Serbian Jews are Sephardim and the rest are mostly Ashkenazim. The majority of Serbian Jews live in Belgrade today, joined in recent years by Israeli entrepreneurs and a small number of Orthodox Jews who have moved to Serbia's capital. Since 2019/20, students enrolled at the Faculty of Philology, Belgrade University, have been able to learn Hebrew. Serbia was widely praised when in 2016 its parliament adopted a law on the restitution of Jewish property lost in the Holocaust and during the communist government in Yugoslavia. Much of the rest of former-Yugoslavia must catch up in this respect.¹¹

Serbs like to describe their country as the crossroads of Europe and this, many believe, explains their historical predicament.

¹⁰ [Official Internet presentation of the Government of the Republic of Serbia], 'Stanovništvo, jezik, vera' [2011] (www.srbija.gov.rs/tekst/36/stanovnistvo-jezik-i-vera.php); cf. P. Vlahović, *Srbija: Zemlja, narod, život, običaji*, Belgrade, 2011.

¹¹ R. Shnidman, 'Israelis to teach Serbs how to say "shalom"', *The Jerusalem Post*, 22 June 2019; 'Serbia to Extend Restitution to Holocaust Survivors Living Abroad', *Haaretz*, 5 April 2017; J. Rock, 'The Significance of the Sephardic Language as a Source of Cultural Identification in Sarajevo From a Comparative Perspective', in S. Rauschenbach (ed.), *Sefardische Perspektiven*, 4, (2020), 121–36, 128.

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They see Serbia as a meeting place between East and West, and a country that is at once eastern and western – a metaphor wrongly attributed to a thirteenth-century Serbian saint in the late twentieth century (see Chapter 2). Essentially, according to this narrative, Serbia is a defiant victim of the Great Powers' rivalries and interests.

Whatever one's ideological view may be, the country's geography and climate have had a major impact on its history. The physical map of contemporary Serbia (without Kosovo) reveals a north–south river axis, formed by the Tisa, Danube, Velika Morava and its subsidiaries Zapadna and Južna Morava. In the west, the river Drina forms natural part of Serbia's border with Bosnia-Herzegovina; the rivers Danube and Timok flow along the eastern border with Romania and Bulgaria (Map 0.1). Sava, Danube, Tisa and Velika Morava belong to the Black Sea basin, are navigable and connect Serbia with Croatia, Hungary and Romania. The Velika (Great) Morava forms the aquatic spine of the country, before splitting into the Zapadna (West) and Južna (South) Morava. The latter connects Serbia with the Vardar River valley in North Macedonia, and is part of a route that links the central Balkans with the Greek port of Salonica. The Nišava River, in southern Serbia, is part of another aquatic route, towards Sofia and Istanbul, in Bulgaria and Turkey, respectively. River Ibar connects Montenegro, northern Kosovo and south-western Serbia, where it flows into the Zapadna Morava. Kosovo's largest rivers are Sitnica/Sitnicë, which flows into the Ibar, and Lab/Llap, while the Beli Drin/Drini i Bardhë dominates a river network in the valleys of Metohija/Rrafshi i Dukagjinit. Serbia is connected to the Adriatic Sea through Montenegro, including via the Belgrade-Bar railway, built after the Second World War.

Fertile land in Vojvodina in the north and valleys of the rivers Sava, Mačva and Morava represent the main agricultural regions. The further south one goes, hills and mountains become gradually higher – from Avala, near Belgrade (500 metres above sea