



# Map of Religious Communities of Novi Sad: A Case Study

*Historically speaking the region of Vojvodina, the northern province of Serbia, has always been a crossroad of various cultures and religions—a fact not unknown to the elderly members of the domicile population.*

*The last census indicates that there are about twenty-seven religious communities and thirty-six nationalities living in Vojvodina, whereas its inhabitants, besides five languages in official use (Serbian in Cyrillic and Latin script, Hungarian, Slovak, Romanian and Ruthenian) speak also Croatian, Romani, Albanian and Macedonian on a regular basis.*

## Historical Background

The newly arrived people and the young of the domicile population are not fully aware of the fact that the roots of this situation reach as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

For instance, right after World War II the Germans who came into the region from 1940-1945 were considered oppressors, as in most of parts of Europe, and upon the end of the war even the domicile German population, that had been in this region for centuries, was forced into exile in fear of retaliation.

Furthermore, the newly established communist authorities at that time advocated against and almost completely prohibited all church-related activities under the flag of equality and uniformity of all people at all levels.

Churches, being the pillars of the religious, national and cultural identity of the people, were claimed to be a kind of a disintegrating element within this social context, and this policy was being put

forward over almost fifty years, simultaneously violating some of the basic human rights very blatantly.

These human rights are, for instance, those granted by the UN International Pact on Civil and Political Rights, especially Article 18 (freedom of religious expression) and Article 26 (protection from discrimination, amongst others on religious grounds), and the European Convention on Human Rights by the Council of Europe, Article 9 (freedom of religious expression) and Article 14 (protection from discrimination, amongst others on religious grounds).

A rebound to all this came at the beginning of the 1990's, with the fall of the communist regimes all over Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, and outbursts of nationalism and separatism that, eventually, led to wars in the neighbouring regions.

Most of the population of Serbia comes from the Orthodox background, and the second biggest religious community is the Islamic one. The territory to which these data refer includes the regions of Sandžak (on the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo) and Kosovo.

In this context it is also important to know that the second biggest *Christian* denomination in Serbia is the Roman Catholic Church, with most of its members living in the Vojvodina region.

The most striking fact in this context is that most of the members of minority Christian denominations (i.e. Protestants) live almost exclusively in Vojvodina and they make up less than one percent of the total population of Serbia—around sixty thousand.

In this setting, the Orthodox would mostly be Serbs, the Reformed would be Hungarians, the Evangelical-Lutherans and Methodists would be mostly Slovaks, the Greek Catholics would be Ruthenians and Ukrainians, the Roman Catholics would be Croats and Hungarians, and so on.

The fact that in Serbia one's ethnicity nearly always implies one's denomination makes it even more obvious why there was a need to offer people data and first-hand information on the diversity of the religious life as one of the spheres of human existence in general.

During the last fifteen years the ethnic composition of Vojvodina changed drastically because of the arrival of around 400,000 refugees and emigration of many people from various local minorities.

This caused a certain withdrawal within the frames of one's own nation and confession, resulting in mistrust, alienation and intoler-

ance towards differences and disintegration of the basic socio-cultural values of the region of Vojvodina.

At the time of creation and implementation of the *Pillars of Ecumenism: Map of Religious Communities of Novi Sad* project in 2002-2003, there was an urgent need for an easily accessible piece of information (in this case a map) as a suitable means for presentation of the religious situation in Novi Sad, as the capital of Vojvodina and the second largest city in Serbia.

Visitors to the town, its inhabitants and the general public are still very often unaware of the actual existence and scope and range of the activities of churches in this beautiful and important region.

The then-Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, then-Serbia and Montenegro, and, finally, Serbia struggled to become more open towards the rest of the world and more oriented towards civil society building. In this situation, this project was supposed to make a significant contribution within the scope of all other ecumenical, diaconal, humanitarian and social initiatives in the region.

The realisation of this project was also perceived as a way of contributing to the visibility of the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization (EHO), the implementing church-related organisation in the local community, as well as of the World Council of Churches (WCC) SEEPP Fund (i.e. the South East Europe Ecumenical Partnership Fund, the provider of project funding).

## Objectives and Targets

The project included preparation, printing and distribution of a map of Novi Sad that would present its ecumenical and multiconfessional character with the *overall aim* of promoting ecumenical cooperation and advocating peace, reconciliation and dialogue both among the local churches, their members and the public in general in the area of Vojvodina.

The main *objectives* of the project were to increase the level of awareness of the local community of the need for ecumenical cooperation between the local churches in the region. Furthermore, the aim was the provision of better information and education of the local community and its visitors of the religious and multiconfessional character of Novi Sad as the regional capital.

Also, our goal was to increase the visibility of minority churches

within the local community, and at the same time to reduce the level of prejudices towards the minority churches in the region.

Similarly, our task was the reaffirmation of the traditional values of Vojvodina: its multiculturality and multiconfessionality, its religious and ethnic tolerance, facilitating cooperation among the local churches and their members and among the church- and non-church-related organizations from all the three sectors (governmental, non-governmental and private) in the area of Novi Sad.

On the front of the map all churches, edifices and buildings have been clearly marked and coded, and on the back there is a legend along with a short background and possibly a photo of the building, and the times and languages of worships have been given.

The project *activities* included the following: making a list of all religious communities, their churches, edifices and buildings, the times and languages of worships, and collecting data on their background in this region.

Furthermore, it involved collecting data about the culturally and historically most significant churches, buildings and edifices, photographing them, writing a short background text, and translating the texts into English.

After that came the map design arrangements, collecting offers from printer's businesses and choosing the most convenient, preparation for printing, the printing of the map, a promotional press conference and the distribution of the map.

The three most eminent regional experts in culture, history and religious life in Vojvodina were engaged as consultants to this project, and the data were collected with the aid of a questionnaire asking leaders of all Novi Sad religious communities the same kind of information.

The project *target area* was the metropolitan area of Novi Sad, encompassing the city proper and its outskirts. The potential project *impact area* was the Southern Bačka District in the short term, and the whole Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in the long run.

The project *target groups* were primarily all visitors to the city interested in its ecumenical, multiconfessional and multireligious character, as well as the citizens of Novi Sad and its surroundings.

## Results, Outcome and Impact

More than ten thousand copies of the map were printed by the end of June 2003: five thousand in Serbian and five thousand in English. Along with the religious communities presented in the map, copies of the map were offered to all hotels, museums, galleries, bookshops and tourist information centres in town.

A promo press conference was organised in the premises of the city assembly in September 2003, and by that time more than three thousand copies of the map had been distributed mostly through the EHO founder churches and the volunteer network, as well as the Novi Sad Tourist Information Centre.

The local and regional media have reported about it duly as the first publication of its kind not only in the city, but in the country and certainly in the whole South East Europe region. Copies of the map have reached most European countries, the Middle East, Africa, Australia, Canada and the United States.

The project evaluation showed that most people who got a copy of it approved of its publication and considered this initiative as a very special and useful one, especially in the way it sets an example of bearing witness to diversity without any hints of evaluation, proselytism or doctrinal discussion of the religious communities presented in it.

From July 2003 *Dnevnik*, the most widely read official daily newspaper of the regional government of Vojvodina, started publishing the times of services of most of Novi Sad churches on Sundays and the section 'Religion' or 'Churches' was later added to the official websites of the city of Novi Sad and the Novi Sad Tourist Information Centre.

In 2004 the team of the EXIT music festival, the biggest music festival in South East Europe, asked EHO for an official permission to use information from the map on their website and the information on the religious life of Novi Sad has been on this site for three years now.

In 2004 and in 2005 the author of the map was invited to deliver two lectures on church-related charity and local religious diversity and ecumenical cooperation to graduate students in the sociology of religion course of the Sociology Department at the Faculty of Humanities of Novi Sad University.

## Approval and Publication

Each EHO project within had to be approved by the management board at the time - even more essential if the project involved ecumenical activities and publicity. The board, seating four Protestant bishops at the time, approved the project.

They were informed of its progress in each of its stages and were given all the texts in Serbian for proofreading and approving them before their publication and translation, and were invited to correct any material, stylistic or other mistakes, as well as to offer suggestions regarding its contents, translation and publication.

Some of the members of the board even gave the data about their religious communities personally. They also chose which religious communities were to be included into the map, while some less established and statistically insignificant communities were omitted, whereas others could not be reached in any way.

Upon its publication, however, it turned out that some religious communities, some of the board members included, were quite displeased with the visual and factual presentation of their communities, though they themselves had provided the data for the map and had approved the form in which it was to be published.

For example, some of them were discontent that there was no photograph of their church in it, in spite of the fact that their church either looked like a secular building with no formal markings of a church or was located in a narrow street with tall thick trees blocking the view of the building completely, making it thus impossible to photograph even from a distance.

On one occasion, expressing his own displeasure as well as that of one of the foreign institutions of greatest international authority as far as his religion was concerned, the local leader of this community even said that the whole batch of maps (60 pieces) sent to this community had been burnt (!) because the data were incorrect and they depicted this community as inferior to others.

After the author of the map had reminded him of their conversation and his insistence that he was too busy to spare time for any further work on the issue, he hesitated a bit, and then said that there is no deadline so tight that it could not wait for 'proper authorisation' (i.e. a personal endorsement) of each individual text.

The bottom line is that up to seventy percent of the church leaders interviewed and asked for proper data were actually stalling and

buying time, probably hoping that the map would not be published after all.

Furthermore, they were also asked to provide an exact English translation of the name of their own religious community; most of them failed to do so, but still protested about some names not being translated accurately once the map had been published.

## Data Collection Venture

Besides the latter efforts at slowing down the whole process (the project eventually indeed missed the deadline by two months), some religious communities were just impossible to contact. Some of those are clearly indicated on the map, but it does not imply that the others were eager to collaborate.

All religious communities were first addressed officially by a letter introducing the project and with a questionnaire enclosed, asking for their kind contribution to the future publication. None of them replied to this, except the EHO founder churches at the next board meeting.

The next step was calling them by phone and explaining the matter personally, but only three ministers (out of more than twenty leaders of religious communities) agreed to a face-to-face interview, with two of them even agreeing to be audio recorded.

The rest who had been reached over the phone gave the information asked by the questionnaire right there and then, mostly claiming that they were too busy to deal with the matter any further.

The next step was approaching those who were not to be located even by phone. The author of the map rode from one address to another, knocking on doors and ringing bells, leaving messages pasted on gates and with the neighbours, but only information about two more communities were obtained on these occasions.

Eventually, the data processing and formulation of the texts turned out to be quite challenging since there were sometimes great discrepancies between official records of the regional statistics institute, listing mostly official state and census data, and the data the religious leaders had given, especially in numbers of members of their communities.

Vojvodina has a bit more than 2 million inhabitants according to the last census. At one point, after the project team had added up the numbers of estimated members of the religious communities as

their leaders had shared them, it turned out that the population of Vojvodina, otherwise being the oldest region in Europe with a negative birth rate for decades back, must have increased by at least 30 percent since the last census in 2001.

Eventually, it was decided to list numbers the expert consultants were offering as estimates, whereas the years of historical events like migrations were taken from the relevant generally acknowledged literature.

## Distribution of the Map

Most religious communities were delivered thirty to sixty copies of the map in Serbian and English with an accompanying letter of thanks and an offer to have more copies delivered to them on request.

The map was printed from a donation and was thus free of charge for the churches, as well as other potential distributors and beneficiaries. Only four of the communities did actually respond to the letter, but only by phone, whereas one of them sent a brief thank-you e-mail.

The most enthusiastic about the distribution of map, except for EHO staff and volunteers, were the people from the Novi Sad Tourist Information Centre since their funds for promo activities have always been rather limited and they have used every chance to get and distribute more maps in both languages.

There was just one bookshop in the city that did its best to distribute the maps, whereas others, including museums, hotels and galleries showed no interest whatsoever. Upon being asked why, the staff answered they were just acting as instructed, while the managers could not be contacted for various reasons.

The experience from the Tourist Information Centre proved that the foreign tourists were most appreciative about the map, but the local ones were a bit hesitant, especially upon seeing that its title had 'religious' in it.

The bookshop had a similar experience. After they noticed that people would reach for the map and then withdraw after seeing its title, at one point they even started offering the map to everyone who had bought a book, but the reaction was mostly of the no-thanks kind.

Most of the local people interested in translation and English, however, asked for an *English* copy instead, explaining that they were interested in translation of the Orthodox notions and terminology into English.

## Promotion of the Map

In September 2003, nearly three months after its publication, the promotion room seating around seventy people was pretty crowded for the press conference introducing the map to the public for the first time, which looked great on the photos and in the reports. The people in the crowd were mostly attendees of an international ecumenical conference of the six twin cities of Novi Sad, accompanied by EHO staff and volunteers.

As far as the media were concerned, there were only three newspaper journalists at the conference and three newspapers had published the map publication press release on that day. Prior to that, the author of the map was a guest on a talk show of a local television station in July 2003.

All expert consultants announced as speakers came and addressed the public, whereas there were only three leaders representing their religious communities on this occasion. The next day the media quoted some of the statements from the presentation and did not miss out on the chance to point out that, according to the newly published map, there were at least nineteen other religious communities in Novi Sad besides the three whose representatives came to its promotion.

By the end of September 2003 more than three thousand copies of the map in both languages had been distributed and by June 2004 there were only some two hundred copies left with EHO. Today, the last two copies in Serbian and another ten in English are with the author, whereas EHO and some other local NGOs are interested in the publication of its second edition.

## Instead of an Epilogue

At the time of the project report writing there was a major and tragic religious incident in Novi Sad. Early in autumn 2003 there was a raid at the Roman Catholic and Protestant graveyard in Novi Sad.

More than eighty-five graves were desecrated and tombstones demolished on this occasion. Some of the graves had been dug up with bones visible on the surface, while some massive tombstones were overturned and broken into pieces.

In spite of the general public resignation and public condemnation of this hideous incident by some national, regional and local public figures, the official police investigation blamed the incident on two drunken underage teenagers, one of whom was a girl.

Later on there were similar incidents in some smaller settlements in Vojvodina, but none of them was as massive as the one in Novi Sad. Today ethnic, racial and religious hate speech graffiti are more common than ever all over Vojvodina, but the general public seems to have grown indifferent towards them.

There is, of course, no indication that the publication of the map had anything to do with the Novi Sad or any other of the other subsequent incidents. On the contrary, these incidents are actually a proof that such publications, along with larger-scale educational and advocacy activities concerning human rights, reconciliation and forgiveness are now needed perhaps more than ever.

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