Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.

Serbia

Population: 7.21 millions (#101 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 77,474 square km. What was once the former Yugoslavia, Serbia is a landlocked, Eastern European nation that borders Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Hungary. Fertile plains occupy most areas, with more hilly and rugged terrain in the south adjacent to Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro. The Danube River enters Serbia from the north, runs through the capital of Belgrade, and exits the country to the east, forming the Romanian and Bulgarian borders. The climate consists of hot, humid summers and cold, snowy winters. Serbia is administratively divided into Central Serbia and Vojvodina, the latter of which is an autonomous province.

Peoples

Serb: 83.3%

Hungarian: 3.5%

Romani: 2.1%

Bosniaks: 2.0%

Other: 5.7%

Unknown: 3.4%

Population: 7,111,024 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: -0.46% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 1.44 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 72.8 male, 78.8 female (2017)

Languages: Serbian (88.1%), Hungarian (3.4%), Bosniak (1.9%), Roma (1.4%), other (3.4%), unknown (1.8%). Serbian is the official language in Serbia. Croatian, Hungarian, Romanian, Ruthenian (Rusyn), Serbian, and Slovak are official languages in Vojvodina. Only Serbian has over one million speakers (6.3 million).

Literacy: 98.2% (2016)

History

Several ancient peoples, including the Celts and Illyrians populated Serbia prior to the Romans in the first century BC. Serbia became an independent empire in the seventh century to the fifteenth century until coming under foreign rule by Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. During this time, Kosovo, which was regarded as the center of Serb culture, was lost to the Ottomans. Uprisings and periodic self-rule occurred for the following centuries. Following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes united in 1918 as a kingdom that became Yugoslavia in 1929. During World War II, Nazi Germany invaded the region. Ethnic groups did not yield to Nazi rule, yet inter-ethnic fighting occurred. Josip Tito Broz took command of Yugoslavia in 1945 and established a communist regime that maintained its own sphere of influence separate from Eastern and Western Europe. Slobodan Milosevic became president in Serbia in 1989, and Serbian-dominance of political affairs headed by Milosevic resulted in Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina declaring independence in the early 1990s. Wars, primarily with Croatia and Bosnia, ensued in an effort to unite Serb-dominated areas in other nations into Serbia. The Yugoslav Wars ended in 1995 with the Dayton Peace Accords. Insurgency in Kosovo ignited conflict again in the region with a Serbian military campaign against ethnic Albanians resulting in hundreds of thousands fleeing the country. A NATO-led bombing of Serbia commenced in the spring of 1999, resulting of the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo and the installment of NATO forces in Kosovo. In 2006, Montenegro declared independence from Serbia, and two years later Kosovo also declared itself independent. Serbia continues to not recognize Kosovo's sovereignty. Part of Serbia—Vojvodina—is an autonomous province that administers northern Serbia, home to a mix of ethnic groups.

Culture

Serbia has rested on the boundary of Eastern and Western Europe and received cultural influences from both for centuries. This has resulted in Serbia possessing many cultural similarities with Western Europeans yet still retaining their Orthodox heritage. Serbians have a historical legacy with Kosovo, resulting in increased violence and instability in the region. Basketball is one of the most popular sports. Alcohol and cigarette use rates appear high.

Economy

GDP per capita: $15,200 (2017) [25.5% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.776

Corruption Index: 41 (2017)

The economy lost half its value between 1990 and 1999 due to poor management under the Milosevic administration. Serbia's GDP in 2015 continued to be 27.5% less than what it was in 1989. In the past 15 years, Serbia has taken significant strides towards integration with Europe and has prospects of membership in the World Trade Organization and the European Union. Unemployment remains high (16% in 2017). Stagnant household incomes, a lack of private sector job creation, economic reforms of state-held enterprises, high levels of corruption, and an aging population pose economic challenges. Agriculture is an important part of the economy and employs 18% of the workforce and produces 10% of the GDP. Common crops include wheat, maize, sugar beets, and sunflowers. Services account for 56.5% of the workforce and produce 49% of the GDP. Industry constitutes about 25.5% of the workforce and 41% of the GDP. Primary industries include base metals, furniture, food processing, and machinery.

Corruption is perceived as widespread. According to a survey of 601 individuals in March 2010, at least 80% of Serbians believed that political parties were corrupt, 54% paid bribes to doctors for treatment, and 19% paid bribes to law enforcement.[1] There has not appeared to have been any noticeable improvement addressing corruption in recent years.

Faiths

Christian: 90.6%

Muslim: 3.1%

Atheist: 1.1%

Other: 0.8%

Unknown: 4.4%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Serbian Orthodox – 6,015,926

Catholic – 355,551

Seventh Day Adventists – 6,377 – 167

Jehovah's Witnesses – 3,922 – 67

Latter-day Saints – 378 – 3

Religion

Nine-tenths of the population is Christian and the vast majority of Christians adhere to the Serbian Orthodox Church. Most Muslims are Bosniaks, ethnic Albanians, and Roma. There is a small Jewish community. Catholics account for 5% of the population and are concentrated among Hungarians and Croats in Vojvodina. One percent (1%) of the population is Protestant. [2]

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom and permits individuals to change their religious affiliation. Traditional religious groups, such as the Serbian Orthodox Church, receive preferential treatment. Religious groups do not need to be registered to be active in Serbia, but registration guarantees rights, including holding financial assists, buying or selling property, and publishing literature. To register, a religious group must prove it has at least one hundred members, a present summation on its beliefs and practices, and demonstrate its source of funding. Some nontraditional religious groups report acts of vandalism to their houses of worship.[3]

Largest Cities

Urban: 56%

Beograd, Novi Sad, **Niš, Kragujevac, Subotica, Zrenjanin, Pan?evo,** ?a?ak, **Novi Pazar, Kraljevo**.

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregation.

Three of the ten largest cities have a congregation. Thirty percent (30%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities.

LDS History

The first missionary preached in Serbia in 1899. Mischa Markow arrived in Belgrade and was arrested and banished to Hungary shortly thereafter. In 1934, there were two members in Serbia who met with the Czechoslovak Mission president. The Church assigned missionaries to Yugoslavia in the 1970s who primarily worked in Croatia and Belgrade. The first recent mission outreach among the peoples in Yugoslavia occurred in Austria prior to missionaries entering Yugoslavia. Missionaries were not permitted to proselyte and entered as students.[4]

Kresimir Cosic, a popular Croatian basketball player who joined the Church in the 1970s, helped raise awareness of the Church and its teachings in Yugoslavia.[5] In 1981, the first Yugoslav convert was called as a missionary.[6] In 1983 in Belgrade, the

first senior couple missionaries were assigned, and a branch was organized in 1988. The Novi Sad Branch and the first district in the country were organized in 1992. Government officials also granted permanent visas for full-time missionaries to serve in the country the same year. Due to civil war, missionaries were evacuated in 1993, and Serbia was transferred from the Austria Vienna Mission to the Hungary Budapest Mission. Once the civil war ended Serbia was transferred back to the Austria Vienna Mission.[7] A third city had a branch organized in 1997: Sremska Mitrovica.

Missionary work has been consistently interrupted by war and political turmoil, especially in the 1990s. Missionaries were withdrawn from Serbia at the beginning of the Kosovo conflict in 1999 and did not return until the end of 2001. During the conflict, members continued to attend Church faithfully despite buildings near the chapel in Belgrade suffering damage from bombings.[8] Fourteen missionaries and a missionary senior couple were evacuated as a precaution.[9] Serbia was assigned to the Europe East Area in 2000.[10] In December 2001, six missionaries from the Bulgaria Sofia Mission were transferred to Serbia.[11] Missionaries were again withdrawn from Serbia in 2008 when Kosovo declared independence. Missionaries did not return to Serbia for several months until civil unrest and hostility towards Americans decreased. The Serbian translation of the Book of Mormon was published in 2008. Based in Croatia, the Adriatic North Mission administers Serbia. The Church continues to experience intense societal criticism and persecution from Serbian media and the public to the point that it has included verbal and physical assaults that target LDS missionaries.[12]

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 378 (2017)

At the end of 2000 there were 196 members. In late 2001, membership totaled fifty in Belgrade, fifty in Smerska Mitrovica, and twelve in Novi Sad.[13] Membership has increased slowly since the 2000s at a rate of around ten per year, reaching 228 in 2003, 265 in 2006, 307 in 2010, and 347 in 2014. In 2017, one in 18,812 was LDS.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 3 Groups: 1 (2017)

No additional branches have been created since the late 1990s. Three branches continue to function in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Smerska Mitrovica. Members have met in groups in the past in Subotica and Panchevo. A member group has functioned in ?a?ak since the mid-2010s.

Activity and Retention

Eighty attended a music concert held at the Belgrade meetinghouse in 2007.[14] A seven-country conference that included Serbia had 130 in attendance in 2007.[15] Fourteen were enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2008–2009 school year. Missionaries reported that there were approximately 45 active members in the Beograd Branch in early 2018. There were approximately 10-15 active members in the Sremska Mitrovica Branch in the mid-2010s. Returned missionaries estimated that approximately fifty members were active in 2009, or 17% of total membership at the time. In 2018, there appeared to be approximately 60-70 active members nationwide, or 17% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Croatian, Hungarian, Serbian, Romanian, Slovak

All LDS scriptures are translated in Croatian, Hungarian, Romanian, and Ukrainian. Only the Book of Mormon is available in Serbian and Slovak. In 2017, the Church reported plans to translate remaining LDS scriptures into Serbian.[16] The Church has translated many unit, temple, priesthood, Relief Society, Sunday School, young women, primary, missionary, Church proclamations, and family history materials in Croatian and Serbian. Many CES materials are translated in Croatian. Hungarian and Ukrainian have a wide range of materials available, such as the Church Handbook of Instructions and many audio/visual materials. Church materials translated in Slovak consist of several unit, temple, priesthood, Sunday School, Primary, and family history materials. The Liahona has twelve Hungarian issues, six Romanian issues, and two Croatian issues a year.

Meetinghouses

The church appears to own or rent a remodeled building in Belgrade. In other locations, congregations meet in rented spaces.

Health and Safety

Threats directed at Americans have resulted in many precautionary evacuations of full-time missionaries, many of whom are

from North America.

Humanitarian and Development Work

Two hundred twenty-two (222) humanitarian and development projects have occurred in Serbia since 1985 in regards to clean water, community projects, emergency response, maternal and newborn care, refugee response, vision care, and wheelchair donations.[17] Senior missionary couples consistently serve in the country and oversee these humanitarian efforts.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Missionaries may openly proselyte, and the Church faces no restrictions on its activities in Serbia. The Church numbers among the seventeen “nontraditional” religious groups registered with the government.[18] Despite this recognition, the Church has taken precautions throughout its history due to threats directed towards foreign full-time missionaries.

Cultural Issues

Perhaps one of the greatest cultural factors limiting success in missionary work is the view Serbians have towards other religions. The Serbian Orthodox Church is the predominant religion of Serbia, and other religious institutions are seen as strange and heretical. Decades of communism taught Serbians to be weary of organizations that come from outside the country, especially from America. As a result, the Church has experienced intense criticism and skepticism from Serbians for many years. High rates of tobacco and alcohol use pose challenges for individuals to permanently abstain from these substances before and after baptism.

National Outreach

Cities with a current LDS presence (Belgrade, ?a?ak, Novi Sad, Smerska Mitrovica) provide outreach to 21% of the national population. Cities that have previously experienced periodic outreach and no permanent congregations at present (Subotica and Panchevo) account for 2.4% of the population, indicating that at least 76.6% of Serbians live in a location where LDS outreach has never occurred. There are approximately ninety cities with 10,000 to 90,000 inhabitants without a congregation or missionaries assigned. Most Serbians are likely unaware of the Church’s presence in cities with missionaries and congregations due to historically frequent evacuations and the large population of these areas.

In addition to Slovenia and Serbia, the Adriatic North Mission also administers to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Montenegro. Mission resources are limited for Serbia, as other Balkan nations have seen greater receptivity and have more pressing needs for missionaries to serve as branch presidents and assist in reactivating less active members. Distance from mission headquarters in Zagreb, Croatia may be an additional factor limiting mission outreach in Serbia.

One of the greatest obstacles for Church growth is the very small number of members in the country presently. Five of the six cities in which branches or groups have ever operated in Serbia are nearby the capital or in the northern portion of the country. There has been no missionary work conducted in the southern portions of the country, likely a result of mission leadership hesitating to open new areas in the country significantly further away from already established Church centers where there are no Church members. Furthermore, southern areas were in greater proximity to more recent violence and civil unrest in neighboring Kosovo.Internet-based mission outreach in Serbia may be effective in finding investigators. Many Serbian-language materials available on the Church website, including translations of the Book of Mormon and the missionary guidebook Preach My Gospel.[19]

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Wars and frequent missionary evacuations have forced members to become more self-sufficient and less reliant on full-time missionaries for Church administration. However, the relationship between local members and full-time missionaries was strained when missionaries were evacuated in 2008. Returned missionaries report that missionaries did not inform members of their departure and left in a disorderly manner. Serbian members had to break lease agreements with the former missionaries’ landlords and clean the former missionaries’ apartments. The withdrawal of missionaries in 2008 was not only conducted poorly with missionary housing but also with Sunday services. In Subotica, some members and investigators came to Church on Sunday during this time only to find the former meetinghouse locked and no contact available to the Church. These events resulted in many hard feelings between members and missionaries that may have resulted in some members leaving the Church.

Senior couple missionaries have conducted outreach programs with single members and youth, particularly in Belgrade. No improvement in activity rates has occurred over the past two decades. The source of some inactivity and low convert retention may be due to teaching and missionary approaches tailored to Western Christians.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Vojvodina appears to have some potential for ethnic integration issues. However, there do not appear to have been any reported in the Church. The Church has experienced some receptivity among Roma in Serbia, unlike many other European nations. One of the Belgrade Branch counselors in 2009 was a Roma.

Language Issues

The Church has taken many years to translate the few available materials in Serbian despite Serbian-speaking members and returned missionaries in the Church for more than thirty years. The Serbian translation of the Book of Mormon only became available in 2008, limiting the doctrinal understanding and restricting the use of Latter-day Saint scriptures until only the past decade.

Missionary Service

Creative methods for finding investigators and introducing the Church have occurred. Street contacting is generally challenging and typically unproductive.[20] Missionaries sang two church songs in Serbian in a concert in Belgrade that had 270 attend.[21] Missionaries distributing fliers for a free English class have brought converts into the Church, including Nikola Kovic, the Belgrade Branch president in 2010.[22] Eight missionaries and a senior missionary couple served as volunteers at the Twenty-fifth University Olympics in Belgrade, providing a positive public relations opportunity for the Church and allowing others to approach missionaries to learn more about the Church. Missionaries in the late 2010s reported attending book fairs with translations of the Book of Mormon in various languages. Missionaries reported that there were six Serbian members serving full-time missions in April 2018 – a significant achievement for a country with less than 400 members on church records.

Leadership

Leadership is strong although few in numbers. The operation of the Beograd Serbia and Montenegro District for nearly two decades further indicates the continued dedication of local and mission leadership. Serbian members appeared to comprise the entire Beograd Serbia District presidency in 2018. A full branch presidency comprised of native Serbian members operated in Beograd at the time. In 2018, the other two branches were only partially led by native members. Native branch presidents led branches in Belgrade and Sremska Mitrovica in May 2010, whereas the Novi Sad Branch had a missionary acting as branch president.

Temple

Serbia is assigned to the Frankfurt Germany Temple district. Temple trips likely occur regularly by bus to the temple. Current active membership does not appear self-sustaining in staffing needed personnel to conduct many ordinances and activities in the temple in Serbian. Serbia may be reassigned to the Rome Italy Temple when the temple is completed.

Comparative Growth

Serbia has one of the lowest ratios of LDS members to population in Europe among countries with an LDS presence for at least 25 years, as one in 18,812 Serbians was LDS at year-end 2017. Other nations in the former Yugoslavia with a Church presence for at least 25 years have a higher percentage of Church members, greater national outreach, and comparable or higher activity rates than Serbia. These nations have tended to enjoy greater stability than Serbia in the past couple of decades.

Other nontraditional, proselytism-focused Christian groups report slow or stagnant growth in Serbia. The number of Seventh-Day Adventist members and congregations has slightly declined during the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses report slightly fewer members at present in comparison to a decade earlier albeit Witnesses maintain approximately 10 more congregations.

Future Prospects

Continued frustrations with low receptivity, societal suspicion and persecution of foreign full-time missionaries, few active members, and little local leadership create an unfavorable outlook for future church growth despite efforts from mission leadership to expand outreach. The translation of remaining LDS scriptures may improve member and convert understanding and conviction to the gospel, but significant cultural challenges continue to inhibit growth. Serbian LDS leaders present a

valuable asset for the Church in the future particularly if societal conditions improve and become more conducive to missionary efforts.

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