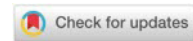


# CULTURE AND REGIONS IN SERBIA - CHALLENGES FOR DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** The main aim of the paper is to analytically and critically analyse the selected indicators of the cultural dimension of the territorial capital of regions in Serbia (the educational structure of the population, the number and distribution of the representative cultural institutions, associations, audiences and programs), as a set of various cultural possibilities and limitations which influence the internal development of the regions, take part in their positioning within the national frame and simultaneously strengthen or impede the social actors associated with it. Using secondary data sources (the results of relevant researches and the official cultural statistical data), the study was based on the application of the statistical and comparative-analytical methods. The results show significant regional differences in the educational structure of the population and the institutional cultural capacities, which are clearly reflected in the cultural offer and public cultural consumption. The cultural domination of the north at the expense of the south of Serbia is particularly noticeable, whereby the cultural regional hierarchy is established, dominated by the Region of Belgrade. The analysed cultural capacities significantly (re)produce the existing developmental asymmetries in Serbia, whereby it turns out that the developed regions are at the same time culturally favored. Some of the possible recommendations include the decentralization and the cultural sensibilization of regional development strategies, with the more successful use of cultural capacities as potential for the development of economically devastated regions in Serbia, with transformation of the national regulations from the command to the cooperative model of development management.

**Keywords:** cultural regional hierarchy, cultural (de)centralization, regional development mismatches, territorial capital.

**Field:** Social sciences

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, a region is viewed within the concept of territorial capital, in which various local cultural possibilities and limitations are seen as factors that influence the internal development of the region, take part in its positioning within the national or transnational frame (Camagni & Capello, 2013; Orsi, Cavaco, & Gil, 2022), which simultaneously strengthen or impede the social actors associated with it (Cox, 1997). In social theory and real politics, the cultural dimension of the territorial capital of regions is one of the key concepts and resources of local development (Ilmonen, 2015; Kalfas, Kalogiannidis, Ambas, & Chatzitheodoridis, 2024; Pasikowska-Schnass & Widuto, 2022). It includes elements such as the educational structure of the population, the cultural infrastructure and offered programs, the historical heritage, symbolic values (the image of the location), the cultural industry and creative sector, etc. Our starting point is that all of these elements that influence the cultural development of a region exist and obtain their meaning in social practice and the broader constellations of power (e.g. in case of increased dependence on external power relations or external development assistance), in a certain social context (Paasi, 2011).

Even though the current regionalization of Serbia was established as part of the post-socialistic reform process in 2010, to more effectively and responsibly achieve the interests of the citizens at the level of smaller territorial units, there are multi-dimensional regional developmental asymmetries at work. Firstly, the five statistical regions of Serbia have different legal (administrative) status. The status of the Region of Belgrade, which includes Belgrade as the capital of Serbia, is regulated by a special law, while the Region of Vojvodina has the status of an autonomous province. But the Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia, and the Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia do not have the same or even similar legal attributes. The Region of Kosovo and Metohija has the status of an autonomous province of Serbia, but it has been under the interim administration of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo since 1999, in accordance with resolution 1244 of the United Nations Security Council. Therefore, the regions of Serbia do not have an equal (full) institutional capacity, nor the same level of freedom when creating different policies (Rikalović, Molnar, & Mikić, 2017, p. 207). Then, the economic transition has contributed to the uneven economic development between the rich north and the poor south of Serbia (Гавриловић, Додиг Букилица, Вуловић, & Ћосић, 2023), while the greatest power of institutional and extra-institutional control centralized in the capital also testifies to significant political centralization. One quarter of the

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population of Serbia resides in the capital, so Belgrade has twice as many citizens as the next three largest cities/regional centres (Novi Sad, Niš, and Kragujevac) put together. The cultural regional differences are considered less frequently and to a lesser extent, which is a consequence of years of neglect of cultural potentials as a regional developmental resource by the political elite. For example, the analysis of the basic laws in the field of regional development and cultural policy (the Law on Regional Development and the Law on Culture, adopted in 2009) "showed that the connection between these two areas has not been reciprocally established. In the Law on Regional Development, culture is not mentioned in any context" (Стојановић, 2019: 40).

Bearing that in mind, the subject matter of this sociological study are some of the main challenges for cultural and regional development in Serbia. The basic aim of the study is to analytically and critically analyse the selected indicators of the cultural dimension of territorial capital of the regions in Serbia, as possible predictors of disproportionate cultural and regional development. We were interested in whether the analysed cultural indicators of the regions in Serbia (re)produce the existing regional developmental asymmetries, i.e. existing social constellations of power in the production and identification of regional space.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The cultural dimension of the territorial capital of the regions in Serbia was operationalized by analysing the educational structure of the population, the number and distribution of the representative cultural institutions and associations, the cultural programs, and the audience. The paper relied on various secondary data sources: relevant scientific studies, legal and other formal documents, the research results of the Institute for Cultural Development Research of the of the Republic of Serbia (RS) and the Statistical Office of the RS. The survey included four regions in Serbia: The Region of Belgrade, the Region of Vojvodina, the Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia and the Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia (the Region of Kosovo and Metohija, as one of the five statistical regions of Serbia, was not included in the analysis because the Statistical Office of the RS has not been in possession of complete data for this region since 1999). The territorial division based on the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) of the European Union was used, regulated by a special legal provision of the RS. The studied regions were located on the NUTS 2 level, grouped into two additional units (NUTS 1): Serbia – North (Vojvodina; Belgrade) and Serbia – South (Šumadija and Western Serbia; Southern and Eastern Serbia).

**Figure 1.** The territorial division of Serbia based on NUTS 1; *Source:* Varjačić (2010a)



**Figure 2.** The territorial division of Serbia based on NUTS 2; *Source:* Varjačić (2010b)



The study was based on the complementary nature of the descriptive and explanatory sociological approaches. By applying the statistical and comparative-analytical methods, the selected indicators enabled an overview of the current situation, a comparison of selected regions, and an interpretation of the findings.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 3.1. The educational structure of the population

Two indicators of the educational structure of the population, their educational attainment and computer literacy are indicators of both the level of formal education of the population and the possibilities on which the innovative and competitiveness potential of the regions are based.

The 2022 census data for Serbia indicated that the majority of the population aged 15 or over in four of the analysed regions has a secondary education and is computer literate (which is congruent with the national average). Although there are university centres in the all analysed regions, the differences between the Region of Belgrade and all the other regions were evident (Table 1). For instance, the majority of individuals with a high or higher level of education and those who are computer literate are located in the Belgrade region. This is somewhat expected, considering that Belgrade as the capital of Serbia has, for the past few years, had the highest concentration of educational institutions and a large number of business entities offering job opportunities to highly educated people, which has increased the migratory movements of this population towards the capital. Compared to the Region of Belgrade, in Southern and Eastern Serbia there were twice as many people who only completed their primary education and who were computer illiterate (individuals who were incapable of using basic computer apps when performing their daily tasks at work, school, at home), and two and a half times fewer people with a higher education. We found similar results for the Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia. Therefore, we can say that the educational structure of the population decreases the cultural and overall developmental potential of the Serbia – South region, bearing in mind that reduced opportunities for the development of culture and knowledge based on formal education and digital literacy make it difficult to create an entrepreneurial society capable of responding to existing demands and to designing regional innovative strategies for future development challenges (CDIS, 2019, p. 9).

**Table 1.** The population aged 15 and over by educational attainment and computer literacy, by region (%)

| Educational attainment                    | Region of Belgrade    | Vojvodina | Šumadija and Western Serbia | Southern and Eastern Serbia |
|---|-----------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
|   | <i>Serbia – North</i> |           | <i>Serbia – South</i>       |                             |
| Without educational attainment            | 0,49                  | 1,17      | 1,02                        | 1,42                        |
| Incomplete and complete primary education | 12,17                 | 23,71     | 27,71                       | 29,08                       |
| Secondary education                       | 50,96                 | 55,03     | 54,28                       | 51,64                       |
| Higher education                          | 8,14                  | 5,43      | 5,12                        | 5,53                        |
| High education                            | 27,45                 | 14,37     | 11,60                       | 12,07                       |
| <b>Computer literacy</b>                  |                       |           |                             |                             |
| Computer literate persons                 | 60,08                 | 43,58     | 39,46                       | 39,56                       |
| Persons with partial computer skills      | 22,74                 | 32,93     | 32,07                       | 30,50                       |
| Computer illiterate persons               | 16,28                 | 23,13     | 28,18                       | 29,62                       |

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2023)

Considering that Southern and Eastern Serbia is also the poorest region in the country and that the speech (dialects) of this region makes “Southerners” deviate the most from the linguistic standard (in a formal-linguistic sense), the data obtained correlate with the stereotypical perception and symbolic identification of this region (Petrović, 2015). Specifically, in public discourse and popular culture (movies, series, commercials, jokes, etc.) a high level of discrimination and stigmatization of these cultural and other features of “Southerners” in Serbia can be seen. They are often linked to ideas of pre-modernity and other gradients of derision within a kind of symbolic geography (Živković, 2001), and are depicted using qualifiers such as “uneducated”, “unmannered”, “unsophisticated”, “backward”, “ridiculous”, which influenced the image of this region.

#### 3.2. Representative cultural institutions and associations

The analysis of the cultural institutions established by the RS, cultural institutions of national importance, as well as the representative cultural associations in RS indicated a great inconsistency in their number, location and importance in the analysed regions (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Cultural institutions/budget beneficiaries established by the Republic of Serbia, cultural institutions of national importance, and representative cultural associations, by region

| Cultural Institutions and Associations       | Belgrade                                    | Vojvodina  | Šumadija and Western Serbia | Southern and Eastern Serbia |
|--|---|------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
|  | Serbia – North                              |            | Serbia – South              |                             |
|  | Cultural institutions established by the RS | 23 (85,2%) | 2 (7,4%)                    | 2 (7,4%)                    |
| Cultural institutions of national importance | 30 (50%)                                    | 14 (23,3%) | 4 (6,7%)                    | 12 (20%)                    |
| Representative cultural associations         | 27 (79,4%)                                  | 6 (17,7%)  | 1 (2,9%)                    | 0 (0%)                      |

Sources: Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia (<https://kultura.gov.rs/tekst/sr/250/republicke-ustanove.php>; <https://kultura.gov.rs/tekst/sr/38/registar-reprezentativnih-udruzenja-u-kulturi.php>); “The Official Gazette of the RS”, 41/2013.

The differences in terms of cultural institutions between the capital and the other analysed regions, especially in relation to the Serbia-North and Serbia-South regions (NUTS 1), were pronounced. Out of the 27 cultural institutions founded by the RS, as many as 23 were located in Belgrade, two in the regions of Vojvodina and Šumadija and Western Serbia, but none in the Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia (The cultural institutions established by the RS, 2023). Thus, all the national cultural institutions were distributed solely in four settlements in Serbia (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Jagodina, and Sirogojno), while 85.2% of them were located in the capital, in the Region of Belgrade. Similar findings were available for the number and locations of representative cultural associations (The register of the representative associations in culture, 2024) which are some of the key actors in the implementation of cultural policy and the realization of the cultural development of the regions. Also, cultural institutions of national importance in accordance with their representative role received priority funding from the RS budget and attracted the largest number of tourists and visitors, as well as the most revenue. The results showed that out of 60 cultural institutions of national importance half were located in Belgrade (The Official Gazette of the RS, 41/2013). By region, cultural institutions of national importance are almost three times as frequent in the north of Serbia (in the Region of Belgrade – 30 and in Vojvodina – 14) as in the south (in Šumadija and Western Serbia – 12 and in Southern and Eastern Serbia – 4). The legal status of the capital opens possibilities for the alternative funding of numerous program and project activities related to culture at various levels of government (the city, municipal, and national). Also, the public budget in Serbia finances 18 provincial cultural institutions, established by the Province of Vojvodina, which have further favoured these regions (CDIS, 2019, p. 17).

Since the institutional cultural opportunities and limitations affect the overall development of a region, and its related actors in various sectors (the public, private, and civic) on the local level (Cox, 1997), we can say that the centralization of representative cultural institutions and associations in Serbia additionally reinforces the uneven cultural and other regional development. That is exactly why some of them could be relocated from the capital to less developed regions, following the example of the Louvre-Lens project in France (Петковић, 2020: 82, 83), in order to increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of different locations. On the other hand, some of the development obstacles are related to the fact that numerous material cultural resources were relocated and exhibited in some of the cultural institutions in the capital, despite their great importance for the symbolization of some local space. There is an interesting example of a bronze statue – of the head of the first Christian Roman emperor Constantine the Great (272-337), born in ancient Naissus (modern-day Niš), who is one of the most significant symbols of that city, which is the regional centre of Southern and Eastern Serbia. Despite that, the statue discovered in Niš at the end of the 19th century today is on display in the National Museum in Belgrade as a valuable national treasure, while a copy of this sculpture can be found in the National Museum in Niš. This and similar examples confirm that the equal development of cultural resources of Serbia and their significance for the population, cities, and regions is not only institutionally (hard resources), but also symbolically (soft resources) being limited (Storper, 1997, p. 20).

### 3.3. Cultural institutions, programs and visitors

Whether this kind of institutional development, and in what way, manifests the cultural offer and consumption in various regions, we determined using an analysis of select cultural institutions (various types and forms of possession), their programs and visitors during 2023 (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Evidence of the cultural institutions, programs and visitors/beneficiaries, by region (2023)

| Cultural institutions, programs and visitors/ beneficiaries | Belgrade       | Vojvodina  | Šumadija and Western Serbia | Southern and Eastern Serbia |
|---|----------------|------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
|   | Serbia – North |            | Serbia – South              |                             |
| <i>Population</i>   | 1.688.667      | 1.825.982  | 1.867.552                   | 1.452.125                   |
| <b>Cinemas</b>  | <b>23</b>      | <b>27</b>  | <b>32</b>                   | <b>20</b>                   |
| <i>Number of projections</i>                                | 5.016          | 2.977      | 1.942                       | 1.644                       |
| <i>Visitors per 100 inhabitants</i>                         | 119            | 53         | 24                          | 28                          |
| <b>Theaters</b>   | <b>25</b>      | <b>35</b>  | <b>22</b>                   | <b>15</b>                   |
| <i>Number of performances</i>                               | 3.063          | 1.660      | 760                         | 621                         |
| <i>Number of visitors</i>                                   | 660.798        | 270.597    | 137.093                     | 140.914                     |
| <b>Libraries</b>  | <b>474</b>     | <b>642</b> | <b>568</b>                  | <b>443</b>                  |
| <i>Number of beneficiaries</i>                              | 548.585        | 378.288    | 353.980                     | 266.835                     |
| <b>Museums</b>  | <b>44</b>      | <b>36</b>  | <b>39</b>                   | <b>29</b>                   |
| <i>Number of collections</i>                                | 1.260.054      | 596.693    | 264.095                     | 198.178                     |
| <i>Number of visitors</i>                                   | 859.949        | 493.831    | 625.212                     | 352.967                     |
| <b>Exhibition galleries</b>                                 | <b>52</b>      | <b>32</b>  | <b>21</b>                   | <b>21</b>                   |
| <i>Number of exhibitions</i>                                | 641            | 448        | 265                         | 226                         |
| <i>Number of visitors</i>                                   | 315.448        | 129.358    | 86.922                      | 70.389                      |

Source: Krstić et al. (2024) <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2024/Pdf/G20246011.pdf>

The Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia, compared to the remaining regions, has the fewest cinemas, theatres, libraries and museums, as well as the fewest cinema projections, theatrical performances, museum collections, and gallery exhibitions annually, which when combined impact even the smallest segment of the active public – museum and exhibition gallery visitors, as well as library members. That the Region of Belgrade is the leader in terms of public cultural consumption of the population, compared to the other regions, was expected, not only because the greatest number of representative national cultural institutions in Serbia are located there (with the greatest number of significant museum artefacts, gallery exhibitions and other cultural goods which attract the largest number of domestic and foreign tourists), but also because of the greatest prevalence of individuals with the highest level of education, which is one of the main predictors of the public cultural consumption of the population (Mrđa & Milančević, 2020, p. 103-127). Then, based on the number of the active public/users, the second in line is Vojvodina, whereby it is interesting to note that the greatest number of theatres and libraries are found precisely there. This is the result of the multi-cultural nature of the region and the prevalence of diverse cultural content in the languages of national minorities (for example, of the 35 theatres, 24 put on plays in Serbian, as many as 11 in Hungarian, and one each in Romanian and Croatian), while the majority of the libraries are school libraries (339 of the 642) which possess a multi-lingual corpus of books.

Therefore, in the analysis of these indicators as well, there is an evident regional cultural domination of the north compared to the south of Serbia (NUTS 1), both in terms of the cultural offer (approximately four more times as many museum collections and theatrical performances, three times as many movie projections, twice as many gallery exhibitions), and in terms of public cultural consumption (approximately three times as many cinema, theatre and gallery visitors, twice as many museum visitors, one and a half times more library members).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The results obtained confirm that the differences in the analysed indicators of the cultural dimension of the territorial capital of the regions in Serbia additionally increase the existing developmental inequalities in Serbia, whereby it turns out that the developed regions are at the same time culturally and social favoured. The cultural developmental asymmetry between the analysed regions is evident in all the studied indicators: the educational structure of the population, the number and distribution of the representative cultural institutions and associations, as well as the cultural offer and consumption of the population. The unequal cultural capacities (educational, institutional, and to a certain extent also symbolic) significantly reproduce the existing development asymmetries in Serbia (legal, economic, political), and at the same time stem from them. What is particularly noticeable is the cultural domination of the north at the expense of the south of Serbia (NUTS 1), whereby the hegemony is additionally emphasized by the establishment of a cultural regional hierarchy dominated by the Region of Belgrade (NUTS 2). Considering the examined indicators, we can say that Southern and Eastern Serbia in particular, but also Šumadija and Western Serbia, are culturally deprived, especially by the capital, and in the existing management model reproduce their more inferior position, which reduces the autonomy and integrity of the activities of local actors in these regions, limiting their choices of cultural and other goods and services in the social

space. Culture is not only a potential for economic development, but also for the overall well-being, which is why its balanced regional development is important.

One of the important factors impeding the progress of less developed regions in Serbia is the centralization of management, so the principle of subsidiarity, as an important element of the democratic order, has in fact been neglected in the case of the regional development in Serbia (The National Coalition for Decentralization, 2021). Some of the possible recommendations for changes for the existing state in Serbia include: 1) The decentralization of regional development policies and the cultural sensibilization of regional development strategies; 2) The greater and more successful use of cultural capacities as the potential for the development of cities and regions in Serbia (national and local/urban policies); 3) The more even funding of regional cultural projects and purposeful planning the budget for culture with the aim of achieving sustainable development of regions with the assistance of culture; 4) The improvement of international cultural cooperation between regions and cooperation between the capital and other cities in Serbia, especially those in economically devastated areas. It requires not only a formal, but also a factual transformation of the central levels of government and the national regulations from the command model of government to the cooperative model of government, in which the partners (actors from various sectors and territorial levels) would achieve their development goals "in the shadow of cultural and other hierarchies" (Jessop, 2011, for more on this see Petrović, 2014). The assumption is that the asymmetry of cultural development in Serbia would be increasingly pronounced and noticeable if overall regional differences in the cultural dimension of territorial capital were viewed in layers, separated into intraregional and inter-subregional differences, and if additional indicators of cultural development were to be monitored.

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