

Attitudes Towards Older People Among National Minorities in Serbia

Insights from Subotica and Novi Pazar

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A research team spent five days in Subotica and Novi Pazar to find out how local communities care for older people.

The perception of old age and the attitude towards older adults in a society depend on many factors, such as cultural traditions and social conditions. Identifying those factors and their contextualization and analysis are important tasks of our research. Within the first year of research on narratives related to anxiety of aging, our attention was focused on finding two environments in each country (Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia), which differ significantly in terms of attitudes towards older people. For this purpose, the Serbian team started from the idea that cultural (ethnic) differences might matter. For analytical reasons, we chose two settings that differ as much as possible in terms of cultural patterns.

During the summer of 2023, a research team from Serbia spent five days each in Novi Pazar and Subotica to identify the basic paradigms and values by which local communities are guided in regard to care for older people. We explored these attitudes both in institutions of elderly care and among the general population. Research was conducted in state and private homes for the elderly, in gerontological clubs, and among the population that was chosen according to the principle of a random sample. A total of twenty-three people were interviewed in Subotica, and nineteen in Novi Pazar. Among them were directors and owners of homes for older people, caregivers, social workers, users, family members of users of these homes as well as older people who are not users of the homes. The interviews were semi-structured, although informal conversations were sometimes conducted. This research has not yet been completed.

Based on the preliminary results of the empirical research, which were supplemented with statistical data, we can conclude that the selection of the environments to be compared indeed paid off: they revealed very different models of care for older people. The analysis showed that, in addition to cultural patterns, the differences between the two environments are caused also by their geographic location, economic potential, demographic tendencies, as well as various social and political processes.

At one end of the scale of perception of old age and care for older people is Novi Pazar, a city in the south of Serbia, in an area called Sandžak, which is often referred to differently as the Raška region. The city itself has

about 130,000 inhabitants, while the Sandžak region has slightly less than 400,000 inhabitants. The area borders or is close to Bosnia, Montenegro and Kosovo. Most (about 90%) of the city's population are Bosniaks or Muslims. In Novi Pazar, the number of inhabitants increased by 20,000 in the last census compared to ten years ago, and the average age is among the lowest in Europe: 35 years. 2,292 children were born in Novi Pazar in 2022. The attitude towards older people in this area is shaped both by Islam and by a strong Ottoman or oriental cultural heritage, one of the main characteristics of which is patriarchy.



Novi Pazar

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At the other end of the scale is Subotica, a city in the far north of Serbia in the province of Vojvodina, close to the border with Hungary. It has about 120,000 inhabitants, with members of the Serbian and Hungarian nationalities accounting for slightly more than one third of the population each. Croats and Bunjevci (a Catholic, Slavic minority in Vojvodina) comprise slightly less than 10 percent of the population each. Since the census ten years ago, Subotica has lost almost 20,000 inhabitants. The negative demographic trend is not only influenced by weak natural growth, but also by the mass emigration of members of the Hungarian population to Hungary, which is supported by Hungary granting its citizenship to all members of the Hungarian minority in Serbia. The average age of the citizens of Subotica is forty-four years. In 2022, Subotica registered 854 life births and Novi Pazar, with a smaller total population, 1,348. The economic situation is quite different as well: average net salaries amounted to 670 Euro in Subotica and 480 Euro in Novi Pazar in 2022. Both towns are shaped also by different historical (imperial) legacies. In Subotica and the entire region of Vojvodina, the strong influence of the Austro-Hungarian legacy is still felt, which left not only a rich multicultural heritage but also a long tradition of social institutions. In Novi Pazar, in contrast, the Ottoman legacy is visible in the architecture and family patterns are following a different cultural tradition than in Subotica.



Subotica

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The geographical position of the observed towns is somewhat similar in terms of their peripheral situations, both distant from the center of the country. Both towns are located in border areas. However, this fact affects demographic and economic processes differently. Residents of Novi Pazar are located near countries and regions areas that are economically less developed than Serbia (Kosovo, Bosnia, Montenegro), which means that the local population have no incentive in migrating to those areas. Their migrations are directed towards relatively distant countries of Western Europe or to Turkey. Local families, however, do not support such migrations, as we could observe. Families try to talk members wanting to leave out of it, because they want everyone to live together.

Things are different in Subotica. The proximity of Hungary, a developed country that is part of the European Union, constantly attracts especially younger members of the Hungarian population, who are supported by their families in their decision to move away. Although the Hungarian government is making some efforts to keep the Hungarian minority in Serbia, investing in the development of infrastructure and industrial production, these efforts are not yielding much results. Proximity to the border plus Hungarian citizenship thus proves to be a strong pull factor that must be included in the analysis of demographic processes. The different migration patterns also affect the opportunities of care for old people.

The mentioned factors produce clear differences in the institutional care for for older people. Homes for older adults, or institutions of a similar type, have existed in Subotica for more than a century, and the institutionalization of such care facilities in Serbia began right in the Vojvodina, the former Habsburg parts of the country. In Subotica, apart from the state home, there are twelve licensed private homes for older adults, and a larger number of informal (irregular, non-licensed) homes. In contrast, Novi Pazar was the last town to receive a state home for older people in Serbia (only nine years ago) and there are no private homes. There are nine gerontology clubs in Subotica and its surroundings, but there is none in Novi Pazar.

At the individual level, differences in attitudes towards older people are even more visible and drastic. Thanks to a greater focus on family coherence and traditional values, the attitude towards them in Novi Pazar is marked by great respect and a sense of obligation to care for older family members and relatives at home. There is great solidarity among family members, relatives and neighbors, as well as a certain mistrust in social institutions. In addition, there is a certain pressure from the environment that occurs in the form of shaming those who place their older members in a state care home. A frequent statement of our respondents was:

“I would rather kill myself than put my parents in a nursing home.”

Respondent from Novi Pazar

Local distrust towards an institution of this type was so widespread that, after the opening of the state-run home for the older people, this home threatened to become a failed investment due to a lack of interest in its services. That is why the management of the home had to change its strategy and accommodate first with users from abroad and from other regions in Serbia, until the local population gets used to it. In Subotica, in contrast, there is a long tradition of institutional solutions to the problem of older people’s care. The local population displays stronger individuality and a weaker reliance on the traditional family patterns than in Novi Pazar. This has led to a significantly more favorable climate for institutional care solutions.

“Old age is a privilege. In order to take advantage of all the benefits of staying in a home for the elderly, you need to enter it on your own two feet, that is, healthy.”

Director of a home for old people in Subotica

And indeed, in Subotica there are many who came while they still had a choice, while in Novi Pazar, it is mostly those who cannot live on their own anymore and have no family support who decide to move to a care home, as the last option.