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Nikola Jocić^{1*}, Nataša Jovanović-Ajzenhamer^{}**

** University of Belgrade, Faculty of Geography, Belgrade, Serbia*

*** University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade, Serbia*

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN SUBJECTIVE, INSTITUTIONAL, AND PRAXEOLOGICAL RELIGIOSITY IN SERBIA

Abstract: In this paper, we analyse the regional distribution of religiosity in Serbia based on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) from 2018, observed through four NUTS regions (Belgrade, Vojvodina, Šumadija and West Serbia, South and East Serbia). We operationalize religiosity as a multidimensional phenomenon through self-assessment of religiosity (0–10), frequency of going to religious services and frequency of prayer outside of services (1–7), whereby the last two indicators are mapped to a scale of 0–10 for comparability. Indicators were constructed and derived: the gap between private and institutional practice (prayer-rituals) and the composite index of religiosity (unweighted average of three dimensions). The findings indicate that subjective religiosity in all regions exceeds institutional practice, while regional differences are more strongly manifested as differences in “styles” of religiosity. There are private-oriented profiles (Belgrade and Vojvodina) versus balanced profiles (Šumadija and West; South and East). Due to the aggregate level of the data, the conclusions are descriptive and serve as a basis for future micro-analyses.

Keywords: religiosity, European Social Survey, regional distribution, Serbia

¹ nikola.jocic@gef.bg.ac.rs (corresponding author)

Nikola Jocić (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6614-2480>)

Nataša Jovanović-Ajzenhamer (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3151-9732>)

Introduction

In the contemporary sociology of religion, it is increasingly difficult to talk about religiosity as a unique and coherent phenomenon. Empirical research in the European context persistently shows that formal affiliation, subjective experience of religiosity and religious practice do not necessarily coincide but often appear in different combinations. At the same time, religiosity is not exclusively an individual characteristic but is also shaped in concrete social and spatial contexts: local norms, religious landscapes and different patterns of public and private piety. That is why the regional perspective is especially useful in societies that seem homogeneous at the level of declarative belonging, because then the differences are less seen in the question of “who belongs”, and more in how belonging is lived and practiced.

Starting from that, the goal of this paper is to, based on the data of the European Social Survey (*European Social Survey*, 2018), provide a comparative insight into the patterns of religiosity in Serbia through the prism of regional distribution. Although the existing analyzes have already offered important sociological interpretations of the general trends of religiosity in Serbia, regional differences in the types and configurations of religiosity have remained underexplored. In other words, although we know relatively well what Serbia looks like compared to other European societies, we know less whether, and how, there are stable regional patterns within Serbia itself that separate subjective religiosity from institutional and private practice.

The main contribution of the paper is that it does not treat religiosity as a single indicator, but operationalizes it through several dimensions and then compares them at the regional level. Specifically, the following are analyzed: (1) self-assessment of religiosity (subjective religiosity), (2) frequency of going to religious services outside of special situations (institutional religiosity), and (3) frequency of prayer outside of services (praxeological religiosity). It is thus possible to identify regional “profiles” of religiosity, e.g. configurations in which private piety is more pronounced than institutional practice, as opposed to configurations in which these dimensions are balanced. This approach allows regional differences to be interpreted as differences in religiosity styles, and not necessarily as large differences in the “total level” of religiosity.

Methodologically, the work relies on quantitative indicators from the ESS, which enable a standardized comparison and overview of the wider population. Although a qualitative perspective would be valuable for a deeper understanding of the meaning and motivation of religious practices, the purpose of this work is primarily descriptive-analytical: mapping regional patterns and situating them in relevant theoretical debates on the differentiation of religiosity, privatization of practice and spatially rooted religious cultures. At the same time, due to the aggregate level of data and the limited number of regional units, the conclusions are presented cautiously and are aimed at identifying patterns that can serve as a basis for future research at the micro level.

In the continuation of the work, the theoretical and contextual framework is presented, with an emphasis on the multidimensionality of religiosity, the transformation of religion in modern societies and the importance of the spatial perspective. Then the data and the way of operationalizing the variables are presented. This is followed by a presentation of the results through regional profiles and derived indicators (the private and institutional practice gap and the composite index). In the final part, the findings are

discussed in relation to the existing literature and indicate limitations and directions for further research.

Theoretical and Contextual Framework

Religiosity in contemporary sociology is most often approached as a differentiated and internally heterogeneous phenomenon rather than a unified system of belief and practice. It is therefore analytically useful to distinguish between multiple dimensions of religiosity – personal belief (or subjective religiosity), denominational (church) identification, and religious practice – which do not necessarily coincide in modern societies (Hamilton, 2001). This differentiation, however, is not merely an analytical convenience; it reflects a deeper transformation of religion itself. What may appear as inconsistency at the empirical level, such as the coexistence of strong religious identification with weak religious practice, can instead be interpreted as a structural feature of modern religiosity.

Within this framework, debates on secularisation have played a central role in shaping sociological understandings of religion in modern societies. Classical secularisation theory interpreted modernisation as leading to a decline of religion, particularly in its institutional forms (Berger, 1967). Later revisions, however, emphasised that contemporary societies are better characterised by pluralisation and transformation than by simple decline (Berger, 1999). This shift relocates the analytical focus: instead of asking whether religion is disappearing, the question becomes in what forms it persists and how its internal structure changes under conditions of modernity.

These transformations are especially visible in the growing divergence between religious identification and religious practice, a pattern widely observed across Europe. Grace Davie conceptualised this as “believing without belonging,” pointing to the persistence of belief alongside declining institutional participation (Davie, 2002). At the same time, religion increasingly takes the form of a “chain of memory,” sustained through cultural continuity rather than regular practice (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). These perspectives suggest not only that religiosity becomes more individualised, but also that its dimensions become unevenly distributed across social groups and places. From this viewpoint, indicators used in large-scale surveys can be read not simply as measurements, but as traces of broader transformations. They allow researchers to identify different types of religiosity even in societies that appear highly homogeneous at the level of formal affiliation.

Recent work in the geography of religion conceptualises religiosity as a spatially embedded phenomenon rather than solely a function of individual attributes or macro-level secularisation processes. Regions, in this view, are not merely administrative units but socially and historically constituted contexts in which distinctive religious cultures are produced. These contexts shape local understandings of what counts as being religious, the acceptable degree of public religious expression, and relationships to religious institutions. Spatial variation matters not only because of the material infrastructure of religion – such as the density, accessibility, and visibility of churches, temples, mosques, and related institutions – but also because of symbolic landscapes that include local traditions, festivals, rituals, and forms of public commemoration. Regional variation should therefore be interpreted not as residual heterogeneity, but as the outcome of differently configured religious landscapes (Knott, 2010; Macey & Carling, 2011; Slatter, 2023; Woods, 2019).

Urban religiosity in Europe is often described through an older secularisation lens, yet more recent literature cautions against equating cities with irreligiosity. McLeod's (1978) classic framing notes that the topic has long been dominated by "the relationship between urbanisation and secularisation," while Casanova (2013) argues that a "new world" paradigm of religious innovation and pluralisation may be more adequate than the older European paradigm of decline. The empirical pattern is mixed: large European cities are often more secular than their surroundings, yet they are also spaces in which new religious movements, migrant congregations, and public religious visibility tend to cluster. Henkel's (2014) review captures this duality by noting that cities are "where secularisation has been strongest" and also "where new religious movements can and do grow." McLeod's (1998) town-country comparison adds an important caveat: while urban-rural differences are real, contemporaries and historians have often exaggerated them. Urban Europe tends to be less church-attending and more religiously diverse, but not simply "less religious."

With regard to post-socialist societies, there was a clear increase in religious visibility, and in some cases religiosity, after 1989, but no uniform "urban rebound." Tomka (2011) describes post-communist Europe as experiencing "a spectacular religious revival after 1989," whereas Pollack's (2019) overview is more uneven: Russia, Romania, and Ukraine saw increases; East Germany, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic declined; and Poland and Croatia changed only modestly. In urban settings, change often appears less as a return to routine churchgoing and more as pluralisation and re-publicisation: Prague, for example, developed "new sacral structures" and a "post-secular rapprochement," while Moscow's church-building boom raises the question of whether this reflects revived practice or a cultural-national assertion (Havlíček & Klingorová, 2018). Yet the trend is not universally upward: research on two Hungarian socialist "new towns" found only slight increases followed by stagnation (Berki & Sivadó, 2018).

These analytical perspectives are particularly relevant for Serbia, where high levels of formal religious affiliation coexist with more differentiated patterns of belief and practice. Historically, religiosity in Serbia has gone through several phases. Before the Second World War, the state church and religion were deeply integrated into everyday life, both politically and privately. The socialist period in Yugoslavia introduced an official secularisation project: regardless of the extent to which religiosity persisted privately, atheism became the only publicly desirable stance. During the 1990s, Serbia experienced a process commonly described as retraditionalisation, which included a rise in religiosity, especially at the level of church identification. Increasing numbers of people declared themselves Orthodox (or affiliated with other faiths), and the praxeological dimension began to re-emerge: the celebration of *slava* became publicly visible again, attendance at liturgies increased, and religious rites surrounding weddings and funerals returned more strongly to public and everyday life. This desecularisation was also shaped by war and conflict, during which religion carried significant identity and mobilising potential, even if the conflicts cannot straightforwardly be characterised as "religious wars" (Blagojević, 2015; Blagojević & Jovanović-Ajzenhamer, 2021; Vukomanović et al., 2013).

Since the 2000s, Serbia has witnessed what may be described as a stabilisation of the believers' structure: church affiliation remains very high, while subjective and praxeological dimensions are somewhat lower but still relatively strong – indeed, higher than in many other European societies. According to ESS 2018, 90% of respondents belong to the

Serbian Orthodox Church, 5% are Roman Catholic, 2.1% are Muslim, and 1.1% are Protestant (Blagojević & Jovanović-Ajzenhamer, 2021, p. 322). The 2022 Census reports somewhat different figures: 81.1% Orthodox, 3.9% Catholic, 0.8% Protestant, and 0.9% belonging to other Christian churches or declaring themselves simply as Christian, with 4.2% Muslim. Additionally, around 2.5% exercised their constitutional right not to declare religious affiliation, 1.1% identified as atheists, and around 0.1% as agnostics (Republički zavod za statistiku Srbije, 2023). Despite these differences – stemming from methodological contrasts and a four-year time gap – Serbia remains a highly religiously homogeneous society overall, which makes a geographical perspective especially valuable. Our aim is therefore to observe differences in the levels and forms of religiosity across Serbia's four main regions, even though we expect those differences to be relatively small in a society with such high overall affiliation.

Finally, it is worth recalling several additional indicators of religious practice and subjective religiosity. The largest share of respondents report attending church only on special occasions (43.1%), while the proportions who attend more regularly are considerably smaller. Yet in comparative perspective Serbia still ranks high in terms of praxeological religiosity, even though affiliation far exceeds regular practice. A similar pattern holds for subjective religiosity: most respondents describe themselves as moderately religious, but it is notable that 74.7% place themselves between 5 and 10 on the religiosity scale, while only 8.8% describe themselves as not religious at all (Blagojević & Jovanović-Ajzenhamer, 2021, pp. 320–326).

Methodology

The analysis is based on aggregated data on the attitudes and practices of the population in the Republic of Serbia, presented at the level of four NUTS regions: Belgrade, Vojvodina, Šumadija and Western Serbia, and Southern and Eastern Serbia (European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC), 2018). The data includes three indicators of religiosity: (1) self-assessment of religiosity on a scale from 0 to 10 (0 = not at all religious, 10 = very religious), (2) frequency of going to religious services outside of special situations and (3) frequency of prayer outside of religious services, where the last two indicators are measured on an ordinal scale from 1 to 7. To facilitate interpretation, the frequency measures were reverse-coded prior to analysis. Whereas the original scale ranged from 1 (“every day”) to 7 (“never”), the recoded variables are oriented so that higher values represent more frequent attendance/prayer.

In order to enable direct comparability of the indicators, the variables of the frequency of going to rituals and prayers (1-7) were mapped to a scale of 0-10 according to the formula: $(x-1)/6 \times 10$.

In this way, three measures were obtained on the same metric basis (0–10), which enables the creation of regional profiles of religiosity through the comparison of dimensions of subjective religiosity, institutional practice (rituals) and private practice (prayer). In addition to the individual measures, two derived indicators were constructed: (a) the “gap” of private versus institutional practice, defined as the difference between the rescaled frequency of prayer and the rescaled frequency of going to rituals, and (b) the composite index of religiosity, calculated as the unweighted arithmetic average of the three rescaled dimensions.

Given that the available data are aggregated at the level of four regions, the analytical approach is primarily descriptive. The goal is not inferential testing of differences or modeling of individual determinants of religiosity, but identification and interpretation of regional patterns and “styles” of religiosity, especially the relationship between the identity dimension of religiosity and different forms of practice (institutional and private). This approach enables a comparative overview of regional profiles, with the clearly highlighted limitation that the conclusions refer to the regional level and cannot be directly transferred to the individual level without micro-data.

Results

After reverse-coding the ESS frequency items for intuitive interpretation and rescaling them to a common metric on the 0-10 scale, we computed region-level indicators for all four NUTS regions in Serbia, covering subjective religiosity, frequency of attending religious services, and frequency of prayer outside religious services (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Because the analysis relies on aggregates for only four regions, the results are interpreted descriptively.

Table 1. Subjective, Institutional, and Praxeological Dimensions of Religiosity in Serbia's Regions

REGION	Subjective	Institutional	Praxeological
Belgrade	5.90	3.17	4.67
Vojvodina	5.50	2.83	4.67
Šumadija & Western Serbia	6.40	3.50	3.50
Southern & Eastern Serbia	5.80	3.00	3.00

Subjective religiosity

Observed by region, average subjective religiosity varies within a relatively narrow range (5.5–6.4). The highest value was recorded in the region of Šumadija and Western Serbia (6.4), while the lowest was in Vojvodina (5.5). Belgrade (5.9) and Southern and Eastern Serbia (5.8) are located between these two poles. These results indicate that the self-perception of religiosity is relatively uniform at the level of the NUTS region, with a slightly more pronounced maximum in Šumadija and Western Serbia.

Institutional practice: going to religious ceremonies

After rescaling to 0–10, the frequency of going to religious ceremonies shows lower values in relation to subjective religiosity in all regions, which indicates a discrepancy between the identity dimension of religiosity and institutional practice. The highest value of ritual practice was registered in Šumadija and Western Serbia (3.5), followed by Belgrade (3.17) and Southern and Eastern Serbia (3.0), while the lowest was in Vojvodina (2.83). Although differences between regions are present, they are less pronounced than in the case of subjective religiosity, with Vojvodina standing out as the region with the lowest level of institutional practice.

Private practice: prayer outside the ceremony

Prayer outside of rituals, also rescaled to 0–10, is noticeably higher than going to rituals in Belgrade and Vojvodina, while in the remaining two regions, private and institutional practices are equal. The highest values of private practice were recorded in Belgrade and Vojvodina (4.67 each), while they were lower in Šumadija and Western Serbia (3.5) and lowest in Southern and Eastern Serbia (3.0). This pattern suggests that in the northern and more urbanized parts of the country (Belgrade and Vojvodina), religious

practice is manifested relatively more often through private forms, while in Šumadija and Western Serbia, as well as in Southern and Eastern Serbia, private piety is more closely aligned with institutional presence. Religious practice in these two regions can be observed as balanced.

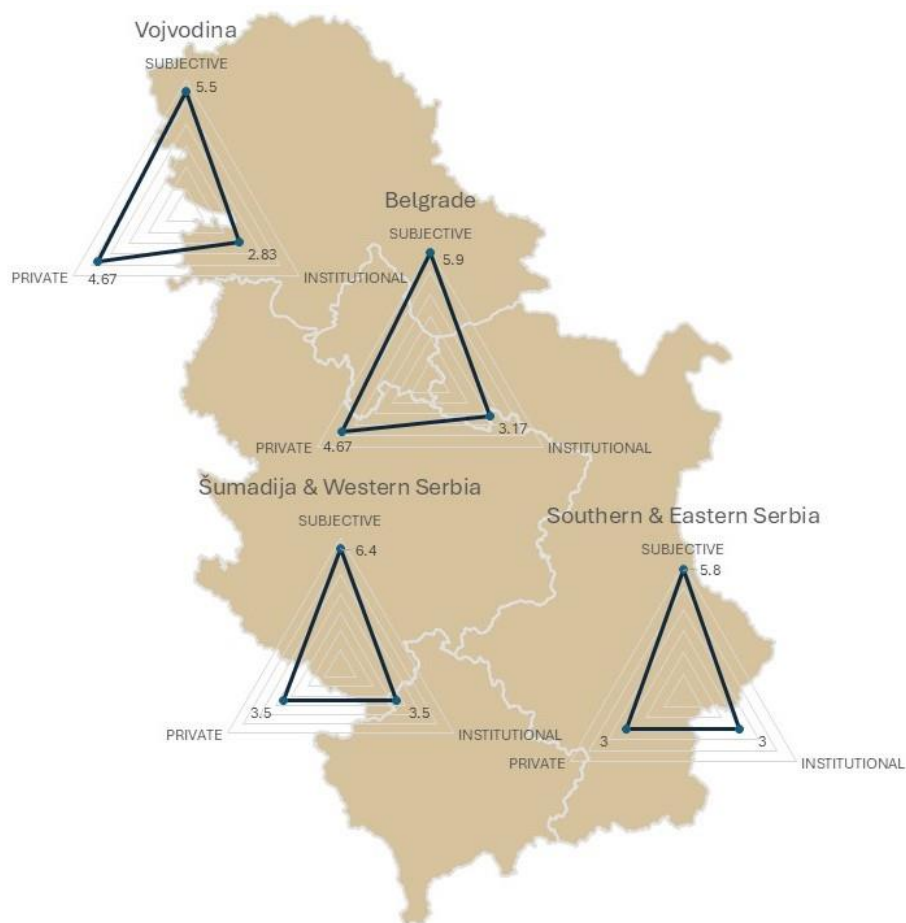


Figure 1. Three levels of religiosity in the regions of Serbia

Relationship between private and institutional practice: “gap”

In order to see more precisely the difference between private and institutional dimensions of religiosity, a gap indicator was calculated: $\text{Gap} = \text{prayer (0–10)} - \text{rituals (0–10)}$. Positive values indicate greater private practice compared to institutional practice.

The gap is most pronounced in Vojvodina (+1.84), followed by Belgrade (+1.50), which indicates that in these two regions, private piety (prayer) is more pronounced than going to rituals. In contrast, in Šumadija and Western Serbia (0.00) and in Southern and Eastern Serbia (0.00), private and institutional practice are in balance. This finding suggests the existence of two different regional configurations of religiosity: (1) profiles with more emphasized private piety (Belgrade and Vojvodina) and (2) profiles in which private and institutional practices correspond (Šumadija and Western; Southern and Eastern).

Composite index of religiosity

Finally, a composite religiosity index was constructed as an unweighted average of three dimensions on a scale of 0–10: subjective religiosity, rescaled religious attendance, and rescaled prayer. The index shows the following ranking of regions:

- Belgrade: 4.58
- Šumadija and Western Serbia: 4.47
- Vojvodina: 4.33
- Southern and Eastern Serbia: 3.93

Belgrade records the highest composite level of religiosity, very close to Šumadija and Western Serbia, while Vojvodina occupies the third position. The lowest index values were registered in Southern and Eastern Serbia. It is important to emphasize that the differences in the index are relatively moderate, which is in line with the findings by individual dimensions: regional variations exist, but they are mainly manifested through different “styles” of religiosity (the relationship between private and institutional), rather than through dramatically different overall levels.

The results indicate three consistent patterns: (1) subjective religiosity in all regions exceeds the level of institutional practice, (2) private practice is particularly emphasized in Belgrade and Vojvodina in relation to going to rituals, while in the remaining two regions these dimensions are balanced, and (3) the composite index suggests moderate but systematic regional differences, with Belgrade and Šumadija and Western Serbia standing out as regions with the highest aggregate level of religiosity.

Discussion

The results indicate three consistent patterns of regional religiosity in Serbia. First, subjective religiosity is higher than institutional practice in all four regions, which confirms that the identity dimension of religiosity and regular participation in rituals do not necessarily coincide. Second, regional differences in the “overall level” of religiosity are moderate, but the differences are clearer when religiosity is viewed as a configuration of dimensions. Third, the most striking finding is the existence of two profiles: in Belgrade and Vojvodina, private practice (prayer) exceeds institutional practice (going to rituals), while in Šumadija and Western Serbia, as well as in Southern and Eastern Serbia, private and institutional practice are balanced (“balanced” profile). This pattern supports the initial thesis that geography is particularly useful as an analytical “magnifying glass” in societies that are highly homogeneous in terms of formal affiliation: regional differences are then moved from the question of “who belongs” to the question of “how it belongs” and “how it is practiced”.

One plausible explanation of the private-oriented profile in Belgrade and Vojvodina is the connection of regional patterns of religiosity with urban-rural and wider modernization differences. In European literature, more urban environments are often associated with more individualized forms of religiosity and less dependence on institutional routines. This, however, does not necessarily mean “less religion”, but a different form: religion can exist as a personal belief, private routine and selective practice, with less frequent participation in institutional rituals. In this sense, the positive gap (prayer > rituals) in Belgrade and Vojvodina can be interpreted as an expected pattern of a context in which daily rhythms, lifestyles and social heterogeneity are more pronounced, so it is more likely

that religiosity is “moved” into the private sphere, instead of being stably incorporated into regular ritual cycles.

This interpretation is further strengthened by the introduction of the “lived religion” approach, which observes religiosity through everyday practices, habits, emotions and family routines. In this framework, prayer is not treated exclusively as a formal religious act, but also as a personal practice that can have the functions of emotional regulation, dealing with uncertainty, moral self-reflection or maintaining continuity with family tradition. Thus, private practice acquires the status of a separate dimension of religiosity, which can be high even when institutional practice is moderate or low. This approach is compatible with theses about the individualization and privatization of religiosity (e.g. “believing without belonging”), as well as with the idea that religious tradition is maintained as a cultural memory (“chain of memory”), so differences between regions are expected rather as differences in the structure of religiosity than as simply “more or less religion”.

In contrast, the balanced profile in Šumadija and Western Serbia, as well as in Southern and Eastern Serbia (prayer $\approx$ rituals), may indicate a more traditional connection of private and institutional piety. Such a pattern does not necessarily mean a greater “intensity” of religiosity in the absolute sense, but a greater correspondence between the private and public-institutional manifestation of religion. In societies where religion has historically been strongly entangled in collective rituals and local calendars (holidays, rites, “special occasions”), institutional practice may be more closely aligned with private forms of piety. In other words, in these regions religiosity can be manifested as a more “conventional” or “integrated” configuration of practice, where private and institutional are not in tension, but in mutual reliance.

An important part of the discussion also refers to the fact that in societies with a dominant church and a strong historical connection between religion and national identity, high church identification often has the character of cultural affiliation. Such identification does not necessarily imply regular practice, but may be related to tradition, family heritage and social expectations. In the Serbian context, where high denominational affiliation often appears together with lower levels of institutional practice, the concept of “cultural religion” helps to interpret the discrepancy between self-assessment of religiosity and ritual practice not normatively as “inconsistency”, but as a typical pattern of contemporary European religiosity. This framework is also useful for understanding regional differences: a region can have higher subjective religiosity without proportionally more institutional practice, which points to the profile “strong in identity, but moderate in praxeology”.

Additionally, the regional perspective in Serbia is also justified through the spatial concentration of minority confessions: Catholics and Protestants are more prominent in Vojvodina, while Muslims are more concentrated in parts of Southern Serbia. Although this analysis does not go into denominational differences because of the aggregate level, it is important to emphasize that “homogeneity” at the state level can mask regional heterogeneity. Minority religious communities may have different practice patterns and normative expectations, which may influence regional averages and contribute to specific “styles” of religiosity. This is particularly relevant for the interpretation of Vojvodina, where a private-oriented profile may be the result of a combination of urbanity, a more plural confessional landscape and specific regional cultural patterns.

Finally, the limitations of the research should be clearly pointed out. Since the analysis is based on aggregates at the level of four regions, the conclusions are necessarily descriptive: statistical testing of differences, control of sociodemographic factors (age, education, gender, urban/rural) or examination of mechanisms at the individual level is not possible. In addition, there is a risk of environmental error, i.e. wrong transfer of patterns from the regional to the individual level. Nevertheless, this is precisely the value of this work: the mapping of regional profiles of religiosity provides an initial heuristic for the next steps, which should include micro-data (e.g. ESS individual data) and lower territorial levels (districts/municipalities), as well as analyses that explicitly include urbanity, denomination and socioeconomic determinants. Such a continuation would allow the patterns observed here – private-oriented versus balanced configurations – to be verified and explained by more precise models, while maintaining a spatial perspective as a key analytical framework.

Conclusion

This paper showed that regional differences in religiosity in Serbia, observed at the level of four NUTS regions, are not manifested primarily through large differences in the overall level of religiosity, but through different configurations between subjective religiosity, institutional practice and private piety. In all regions, subjective religiosity exceeds institutional practice, which is consistent with broader European findings of a growing separation of identification and ritual participation. At the same time, two regional profiles stand out: Belgrade and Vojvodina show a private-oriented pattern (prayer is relatively more frequent than going to rituals), while in Šumadija and Western Serbia, as well as in Southern and Eastern Serbia, private and institutional practices are balanced. This confirms the heuristic value of the spatial perspective in religiously homogeneous societies: geography helps to notice differences in “styles” of religiosity, and not only in declarative affiliation.

Although the analysis is limited by aggregate data and a small number of observation units, the findings represent a starting point for further research at the micro level and finer territorial scales, with the inclusion of sociodemographic factors, urbanity and denominational structure. Future research could test whether the profiles identified here are maintained when individual controls are introduced, as well as whether regional differences are better explained by modernization differences, confessional plurality, or specific local religious landscapes.

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