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Vojvodina: where the Danube meets diversity



# Serbia, Autonomous Province of Vojvodina

## General overview

As part of Serbia, the Region of Vojvodina is defined as the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. Translated from Serbian, “Vojvodina” means “a territory governed by a duke”. Dating back to 1848; “Vojvodina” has been used as its official name since 1945. Covering an area of 21 614 km<sup>2</sup>, which represents 27.9% of the country, Vojvodina extends across the Pannonian Plain. According to its geographical characteristics, the region belongs largely to Central Europe. It borders Hungary to the north, Romania to the east, Croatia to the west and Bosnia and Herzegovina to the southwest. Its southern boundary, mainly delineated by the Danube and Sava Rivers, represents the administrative border with Central Serbia. The administrative centre of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina is Novi Sad. According to the 2022

census, the population comprises 1 740 230 inhabitants, of which 894 491 are women and 845 739 men. The gross domestic product per capita is US\$ 13 524 (2024).

Geographically, Vojvodina consists of three regions — Banat, Bačka and Srem. It is recognized as a multiethnic, multicultural area, home to around 26 ethnic groups and six official languages.

With 84% of its territory covered by fertile land, Vojvodina is the agricultural heartland of Serbia. Its economy is predominantly based on agriculture and agribusiness, with approximately 32 000 active enterprises that significantly contribute to growth of the GPD in the country (1).

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## Regional activities linked to the WHO European Programme of Work

The following activities are linked to the three core priorities of the European Programme of Work (EPW): (i) moving towards Universal

Health Coverage (UHC); (ii) promoting health and well-being; and (iii) protecting against health emergencies.



### Moving towards UHC

#### *Structure of the health system in Serbia and the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina*

The organization of health care in Serbia is structured into three levels of care: primary, secondary and tertiary/private sector. The Provincial Secretariat for Health functions as the governing authority responsible for establishing, funding and supervising all health institutions in Vojvodina at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Vojvodina has 44 primary health care (PHC) centres, which ensures that every local self-government unit has an organized PHC service. This system model, inherited from the period before the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, has proven to be an effective mechanism for delivering health services. This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic response. In addition to primary care, Vojvodina provides secondary-level services through 9 general hospitals and 10 specialized hospitals, while tertiary-level services include 5 institutions, along with 6 institutes of public health on the local level and the Institute of Public Health of Vojvodina on the regional level (2).



### Promoting health and well-being

#### *Better and more equitable health for all citizens*

To improve and implement public health measures in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, the Provincial Secretariat for Health performs executive, professional and developmental functions. It supervises and monitors the implementation of regulations within its scope of work and oversees the performance of health institutions established by the authorities of the Province.

The Secretariat introduces new procedures and adopts special health-care programmes for specific population groups or diseases characteristic of the Province for which no dedicated programme exists at the national level. It also adopts special public health programmes for the territory of Vojvodina. These are aimed at strengthening preventive health care, reducing health inequalities and enhancing the resilience of the provincial health system (3).



### Protecting against health emergencies

The Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, through the Provincial Secretariat for Health, organizes and oversees the implementation of measures aimed at eliminating the causes and consequences of epidemics and pandemics. The provincial authorities and health institutions cooperate closely with the Institute of Public Health of Vojvodina in the surveillance and prevention of, and the response to, infectious diseases.

Vojvodina also participates actively in the development and implementation of action plans that define procedures for responding to and managing natural and other disasters, as well as emergency situations across the province. Emphasis is placed on ensuring intersectoral coordination, timely public communication and the continuity of essential health services (4).

Through this integrated approach, Vojvodina contributes to achieving the objectives of the European Programme of Work 2020–2025: “United Action for Better Health in Europe” (the EPW) in protecting populations from health emergencies and strengthening the resilience of the health system.

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## Actions linked to the EPW flagship initiatives

(The Mental Health Coalition; Empowerment through digital health; The European Immunization Agenda 2030; Healthy behaviours: incorporating behavioural and cultural insights.)

The EPW provides a strategic framework for strengthening health systems and improving well-being across the WHO European Region. Within this framework, four flagship initiatives guide regional priorities and collaborative action.

1. The **Mental Health Coalition for the WHO European Region** aims to promote mental well-being, reduce stigma and improve access to quality mental-health care. In Serbia, this is in alignment with ongoing reforms in community-based mental-health services and the integration of mental health into primary care.
2. **Empowerment through digital health** supports the digital transformation of health systems, enabling better use of data, interoperability and equitable access to e-health services. Serbia participates actively in digitalization efforts through its national e-health platform and telemedicine initiatives, strengthening continuity of care and health-information systems.
3. The **European Immunization Agenda 2030** focuses on maintaining high vaccination coverage and addressing vaccine hesitancy. Serbia continues to align with regional immunization goals by sustaining strong routine immunization programmes and public communication strategies to build trust in vaccines.
4. **Incorporating behavioural and cultural insights** promotes the use of evidence-based behavioural science to design effective public health policies and communication. Serbia applies these insights in campaigns on tobacco control, COVID-19 vaccination, and preventive screening uptake, supporting health literacy and population engagement.

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## Promotion of mental health and healthy lifestyles in local communities in Vojvodina

Within the framework of the EPW and its focus on mental health, equity and community resilience, Vojvodina has developed a strong regional initiative centred on the promotion of mental health and healthy lifestyles at the local level. The Institute of Public Health of Vojvodina coordinates intersectoral activities, involving schools, municipalities and PHC institutions to improve mental well-being, reduce substance abuse and prevent chronic noncommunicable diseases. Through campaigns such as, *Mentalno zdravlje za sve* (Mental health for all) and *Zdravi stilovi života* (Health lifestyles), as well as the use of digital awareness tools and youth engagement programmes, the initiative reflects EPW priorities on community empowerment, behavioural insights and digital innovation. It also contributes to reducing health inequalities between urban and rural populations, strengthening Vojvodina's role as a model of regional cooperation in public health in Serbia (5).

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## The three most important topics for collaboration within the Regions for Health Network

These are:

1. RHN collaboration strengthens youth mental health support and promotes prevention and destigmatization.
2. Through collaboration, RHN can enhance digital health systems and expand equitable access.
3. Through collaboration, RHN can strengthen NCD prevention and promote healthy living.

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## Main partners and collaborators

These are:

- The Government of Serbia
- The City of Novi Sad
- The Provincial Government, Autonomous Province of Vojvodina
- nongovernmental organizations
- The Ministry of Health of Serbia
- The WHO Country Office in Serbia, and
- The Provincial Secretariat for Health Care
- International networks, including the WHO Regions for Health Network.

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