



# Subotica

## Intercultural Profile

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### Background

The Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre describes Subotica as at 'the entrance to the European Union, and the limit to the Balkan region' and as 'an open-minded city, full of possibilities'. In the past 150 years it has been part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Hungary (twice), the two manifestations of Yugoslavia and its successor states, and now Serbia. Roads out of the city lead variously to Hungary, Romania, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, connecting hundreds of thousands of people of various nationalities and religions, immigrants and emigrants, relatives and mixed marriages.

Subotica has an unusual, in some ways unique, ambience. One explanation of the derivation of its Hungarian name, Sabatka, is that it means 'free place' and Subotica's citizens did buy their freedom in the 18<sup>th</sup> century from Maria Theresa of Austria. This has allowed of a history of individual liberty (and entrepreneurship) more conducive to the idea of intercultural tolerance than collectivistic, nationalistic ideologies. Thus the city always voted for opposition parties during the Milošević years and the nationalistic parties are barely represented in the City Assembly. The Subotica-born writer Danilo Kiš encapsulated the multi-ethnic city thus: 'Subotica: Kosztolányi, synagogue, baroque town hall ... multilingualism'.

The municipality has three official languages: Hungarian, Serbian and Croatian—although the latter two have their common root in Serbo-Croat. The demographic breakdown of Subotica is: Hungarians 38.5 per cent, Serbs 24.1, Croats 11.2, Bunjevci 11.0 per cent and 17.2 per cent comprising self-defined Yugoslavs, Montenegrins, Roma, Albanians, Ruthenians and others. There are many mixed marriages—for whose members 'Yugoslav' may well be a preferred identity—in which literally the children tend to adopt the 'mother tongue'. Celebrating the western as well as eastern Christmas festivities is commonplace.

Although Hungarians are the largest group, the fact that the city now is located within Serbia means the national dominance of the Serbian language has a local impact. The headships of five of the city's seven high schools are in the hands of members of national minorities but while all Hungarians learn Serbian, since 1995 Serb children have only learned Hungarian as a voluntary (and ungraded) option—at the municipality's expense, without support from the Ministry of Education.

The wars of the 1990s damaged the prior fabric of interethnic tolerance not only by increasing social distance and reducing opportunities for intercultural dialogue but also through the influx of refugees from elsewhere in Yugoslavia where that tradition did not prevail. Concretely, this weakened the multi-lingualism on which intercultural dialogue in the city fundamentally depends: many

Hungarians who would have learned Serbian and Croats who would have spoken Serbo-Croat left, while many Serbs without any Hungarian facility, as well as Roma speaking various languages including Albanian, arrived. In this more mistrustful context, ethnic distance increased, even without a language barrier, between Croats and Bunjevci. The general concern is that there has been a shift away from living *together* towards merely living side by side.

The passage at state level of the law establishing national community councils had an unintended effect in Subotica: with four of the national minority councils (for Hungarians, Croats, Bunjevci and Germans) housed in the city, it stimulated a tendency to a more ethnic, less civic, mindset. It encouraged community leaders to present themselves as exercising a monopoly in that role, tending to marginalise other intracommunal voices and those who would have identified themselves as 'others' (such as 'Yugoslavs') rather than persons belonging to particular communities. Alongside a loss of interest among most external funders as the wars of the Yugoslav succession receded into history, this favoured a reduction in interethnic NGOs.

Recent years have seen a further challenge—ironically the product of the liberalisation of Serbian politics in the project of EU integration, represented politically by the Democratic Party of the current president, Boris Tadic. As this is not a Serb nationalist party, it has a minority of members who are ethnically non-Serb and has become the leading party in the City Assembly (the current president is a Croat from the DP), thereby displacing the previously dominant Alliance of Hungarians of Vojvodina. A new intercultural equilibrium has in that context yet to be established, particularly since the breakdown of co-operation between the two parties in 2010.

This tension is understandable and by no means unique to Subotica. It is a tension, between liberal assimilation and communal multiculturalism, which has played out across Europe in recent times. The first perspective, associated with strong national parties, assumes that individuals from minority communities should simply absorb themselves into the national political discourse. The second, associated with parties drawn from minority communities, prefers such communities to be identified as communal actors, which a particular party should represent as such.

Both these perspectives have strengths and weaknesses. The assimilationist approach rightly treats all citizens as individuals in a democratic society but it does flatten the diversity of ethnic affiliations such individuals may embrace. The multiculturalist alternative has the opposite strength of embracing cultural diversity but at the expense of the opposite weakness of ethnicising the democratic system.

This readily lends itself to political misunderstanding and mistrust. And all the more so when there is also a 'double-minority' situation, as in Subotica—where Serbs comprise only the second largest community though dominant state-wide and Hungarians comprise the largest community while a national minority in Serbia as a whole. Hence intercommunal tension has been manifested between the Serb-dominated Democratic Party and the Alliance of Hungarians of Vojvodina.

The solution of such tension requires an understanding of the shift in thinking across Europe since the turn of the millennium away from the idea that diversity is best managed through one or other of these old models—assimilation or multiculturalism—to the new paradigm of intercultural

dialogue. This thinking underpins the Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue<sup>1</sup> of 2008 and the intercultural Cities Network, launched that year, of which Subotica is a member. Also in 2008, the Local Development Agency produced a handbook for councillors and council officials, which explained well what this new paradigm means in practice at the municipal level:<sup>2</sup>

The intercultural approach goes far beyond equal opportunities and respect for existing cultural differences, it opens up the perspective of democratic transformation of public space, it introduces the civic culture and institutions. Therefore, it does not recognise cultural boundaries as a fixed category, but as a constantly, ever changing state of art. An intercultural approach strives for facilitating the dialogue, interaction, exchange and reciprocal understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds. Local governments in urban communities therefore need to opt for local policies which prioritise development strategies based upon intersection points of diverse cultures, as opposed to the traditional, well-defined boundaries of recognised ethnic and cultural communities. In other words, city governments should promote interaction and communication across the cultural boundaries, thus opening up the space for cultural, social, and economic innovation. In line with this, the context of planning consultation becomes the public space for good intercultural governance to the benefit of all the citizens and diverse citizens groups, regardless of cultural and ethnic difference.

There are concerns and challenges for the future. The Serbian economy, whilst out of the hyper-inflationary maelstrom of the 1990s remains fragile and sluggish. Even though Subotica is economically more robust than the rest of the country it still experiences unemployment of almost 20%. When resources are scarce there is always a greater likelihood for people to compete for them on ethnic lines, and always scope for accusations that access to a limited labour market is subject to favouritism. In the 1990s Subotica lost many of its brightest and ablest people, who are now contributing to the economies of Germany or the United States rather than to Serbia. There is scarce chance of attracting them back at least until EU accession is achieved and even then it will take some time for the economy to stabilise. Serbia might take some comfort from the case of Ireland, which has thrived on the strength of returning migrants, but Ireland did not have to overcome social and ethnic divisions.

Subotica does have some strong economic assets, not least its central location and logistics alongside the main Balkan highway and, of course, its linguistic flexibility. For all these reasons, Siemens chose it as the location for one of its three worldwide plants for production of wind turbine engines. The town also has some higher education capacity, albeit as offshoots of the University of Novi Sad. Tourism might also be expected to grow once there is some political and ethnic stability with the town's impressive Secession architecture and easy-going life-style.

The town also has a strong foundation of non-governmental organisations, not all of them established on ethnically exclusive lines. Indeed it is impressive to find that the strength of

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<sup>1</sup> *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: 'Living Together as Equals in Dignity'* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2008, [www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper\\_final\\_revised\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_en.pdf))

<sup>2</sup> *Local Partnerships for Tolerance: Handbook for local elected and appointed councillors* (Subotica: Local Development Agency, 2008)

Subotica's bid to become a Council of Europe Intercultural City rests upon a partnership between the council and an NGO, the Local Democracy Agency, led by Stanka Parac.

One danger for Subotica is that if it becomes locked into a preoccupation with the past and the present it will fail to keep pace with future development, not least in regard to demography and migration. As it does integrate into the rest of Europe Subotica will, by virtue of its accessible location, attract new migrants. It certainly needs them because the birthrate is falling and the population aging and, as its economy improves, it will, paradoxically, face labour market shortages. In an ideal world, Subotica's long experience of tolerance and interethnic balance should stand it in good stead to welcome and integrate minorities from more distant parts of the world. On the other hand, if the town becomes locked into an extreme form of multicultural exclusivity in which 'traditional' groups only regard newcomers as a further threat to their own interests, Subotica could be in for a painful and counter-productive future.

There are two strong beacons of hope. Firstly those older people who still vividly remember a time in Subotica's past when co-existence and mutual appreciation was the natural state of affairs, and who still have the passion to believe it can be created again. Secondly, those young people who are not old enough to have experienced the worst excesses of the war and who perhaps do not bear the suspicions and resentments the generation immediately before them. We visited the Centre for Youth Work (CZOR) which is the town's first example of a youth project not run on ethnic lines, and saw youngsters working together in many educational and cultural contexts. Roma youth co-operated with Hungarian and Serb in break-dancing, graffiti art and rap music. Of course, some might question whether the price of accepting global street culture as the stage on which unity can be built, is too high, ie the loss of local distinctiveness. Others would argue that if local folkloric traditions have become too closely associated with ethnic chauvinism then they might have to be sacrificed in pursuit of an alternative binding narrative.

### **Intercultural commitment**

The acquisition by Subotica of the status of royal free town in 1779 is celebrated every year on September 1<sup>st</sup>, the Day of the City, the central event being a ceremonial meeting of the City Assembly and the presentation of awards to citizens distinguished by their achievements. The fact that a Serbian and a Hungarian singer perform at the event is an important signal that civil pride does not come at the expense of diversity but represents the other side of the coin. This idea of an open city whose citizens say 'I am from Subotica' is what the municipality wishes to embody—not a city where everyone knows 'who is who'.

The City Council takes seriously its position – both physical and symbolic – at the interface between Serbia and the rest of Europe. Its enthusiasm to become part of the Intercultural Cities project reflects a wider ambition to enter Europe's political, economic and cultural mainstream. The Council is prepared to show leadership, and back this up with a large proportion of its scarce resources, in an attempt to move beyond multicultural essentialism and support activities which encourage cross-cultural understanding and new intercultural forms.

## Education

The city sees education at the heart of both its problems and opportunities. The separation of children into three main monolingual school systems threatens to create another generation of ethnic division and misunderstanding. The system is defined and imposed by central government, and unfortunately the city only has limited discretionary powers but within these limits Subotica is attempting to break down the sectarian divides. For example he is encouraging all schools to adopt a common history curriculum to address the misunderstandings that have sometimes fuelled tension. They have supported the writing of a new history of Yugoslavia in which Serb, Croat and Bosnian historians have collaborated. The best example of good practice in education has been the inter-school quiz competition 'How Well Do We Know Each Other?' To win, school teams must answer questions on both general knowledge and about the cultures other than their own. It is sponsored by a large telecoms company and is screened on regional TV so it is widely known and is keenly competitive, with the four winning schools receiving large cash prizes and foreign excursions.

Roma children are concentrated in three schools in Subotica because of the vicinity of cheap housing—this demarcates Roma as a minority from the relatively dispersed residence of other ethnic communities in the city. A 2010 law, for which the Roma Education Centre had lobbied, allows schools with marginalised children to apply for support, which the centre had already piloted with Roma pedagogical assistants in Subotica, thus avoiding the risk of Roma children being decanted into 'special' classes or separate schools as has happened in neighbouring Sombor. A key goal now for the municipality will be to get Roma children into the pre-school system and to stop drop-out from education at secondary level.

The Roma Educational Centre is doing impressive work. It has become the interface between Roma parents, teachers and non-Roma parents to overcome mutual suspicion, establishing parents' councils in schools in which Roma are represented. REC has also pressed for the training of Roma teachers and non-teaching assistance and for their employment in local schools and kindergartens. They have also raised money to help repair derelict parts of schools so that new, cross-cultural, facilities can be provided. In 2005 the city of Subotica formed a Team for the inclusion of Roma children in the school system consisting of experts, the members of the Roma Educational Centre and two Roma high school students. This team prepared the Strategy for the inclusion of Roma children in the school system. According to the data of the Roma Educational Centre (REC) from 2006 already 61% of Roma children between the age of 7 and 14 (primary school) were included in the school system, what is a great achievement both of the REC and of the local government.

## Arts

In Subotica with the support of the local government the Moonlight Programme started in 2006 and the idea came from the "Club 21 - for Positive Communication": to propose the youth between 14 and 18 an other kind of entertainment in the evenings, and especially during the weekends, instead of going to clubs and dancing bars to drink, smoke and use drugs, etc. The Moonlight Clubs propose sport activities, mostly table-tennis in a civilized environment with the surveillance of volunteering teachers in the evening hours from 8 till midnight.

What moving from multiculturalism to interculturalism entails can be seen in terms of the Interetno festival, which has run since 2002. Interetno has at one level a traditional, folkloric character, implicitly accepting the idea that one can still speak of 'national-popular cultures' even in an individualised and globalised society. But the festival is open to the world and brings dancing troupes from Argentina and Venezuela, Spain and northern Cyprus, as well as Serbia, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The public square in front of the City Hall, renamed 'Etnopolis' for the duration of the festival, is the venue for the events, allowing perhaps more than 20,000 people to think of themselves as 'citizens of the world' during its five days. And a trilingual 'Republic of Etnopolis' mock passport, providing information on the festival, symbolises this idea of hospitality and of citizenship detached from national boundaries.

Two principally Hungarian-language initiatives are also very important in this regard. The first is the Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre, whose work is represented in all the major festivals in Hungary and Serbia 'and organically links to the local and global reality'. It sees itself as 'Hungarian theatre from Serbia'—some presentations are subtitled—and it stresses its experimental and networked character, sometimes confounding some in the Hungarian community who do not think the theatre portrays them as it should. It organises itself an annual international theatre festival, Desiré Central Station, reflecting this strong sense of being a key geographical node of the transport of cultural ideas across the region—the first three festivals, from 2009 to 2011, respectively themed 'West', 'North/South' and 'East'. The municipality already supports the theatre which, while respecting its creative independence, needs further support to realise its marketing and networking ambitions.

The second is Pannon TV, which broadcasts on television and radio to about half of Vojvodina from its Subotica base, having been established five years ago. It aims to be 'a little bridge'—to the Serbian community through sub-titled programmes, from Vojvodina to the European Union and to Croatia, Romania and of course Hungary. It wants to make more programmes 'closer to the European spirit' in advance of Serbian EU accession—for example, having run a programme called 'Connections' on the economic and European integration. The station, mainly supported by the Hungarian government though also by all levels of government in Serbia, would like to produce more programmes on tolerance, introducing members of different communities to one another—acting thereby in the opposite manner to the fragmentation along nationalistic lines of television audiences in Yugoslavia in the Milošević era.

The oldest cultural institution in Subotica is the 121-year-old library, which provides materials in the three official languages, including by purchases from Hungary and Croatia with the support of the national community councils. There is also provision for German-speakers and the small Jewish community. The service has 8,500 members across its 12 branches, which are also used for exhibitions, recitals and authors' talks. There are workshops only for children, to socialise them into the multi-ethnic culture. The library service is engaged in a programme of digitisation but is under-resourced. The municipality will ensure that the library network is fully utilised as a public space for intercultural events.

## Language and multilingualism

Many people believe that Subotica has been an intercultural city in the past, is not one at present, but could be again in the future. Until the break-up of Yugoslavia, it was common practice for many residents to be fluent in the three major languages of the city and often several more. This encouraged greater interaction in schools and developed mutual knowledge and understanding of each others' cultures through attendance at theatres, accessing different media sources etc. The immediate effects of the war was to encourage a large number of Croat and Hungarian speakers to leave town and emigrate abroad, perhaps never to return. This was followed by an influx of over 10,000 Serbs, displaced from homes in other parts of the former Yugoslavia as well as Roma people with a variety of languages and faiths.

The war also widened and deepened the distinction between Croats and Bunjevacs in the town. The nature of this distinction remained a source of some puzzlement throughout our stay in the town. With an almost identical language, Catholic faith and very similar cultural traditions, it seemed the only distinction we could discern was that self-identification of a Bunjevacs ethnicity had grown rapidly during the 1980s in parallel to the worsening of relations between Serbs and Croats. It was in effect a defence mechanism, Bunjevacs believing they would be spared the persecution being meted out by Serbs to those who declared themselves Croat.

In some respects, the Bunjevacs question is a prime symbol of how far Subotica moved from its interculturalism of two decades ago. Bunjevacs expressions of difference and separateness, their demands for minority group rights equivalent to the Croats and Hungarians, and their clearly expressed frustration at not receiving them are symptomatic of the current mood in the town. To a greater or lesser extent, all ethnic groups are concerned with defining and policing the borders which distinguish them from others, either to protect what they hold or to put right perceived wrongs. Indeed in some cases one suspects the maintenance of sensitivities to real or perceived threat or insult from others is a primary motivating factor in their lives. Add to this that some of those charged by their ethnic groups to act as 'community leaders' were raised in the bureaucratic structures and behaviours of a communist system, and one has the ingredients for an intransigent stand-off amongst ethnically defined cultural and media organisations.

Of course if any individual or group is receiving discrimination or persecution because of their ethnic background, they should be able to rely upon the full protection of the police, judiciary, the council and other institutions, but beyond this there would seem to be a need to play down ethnicity as the defining factor in the social and political discourse of the town. There is a desperate need to identify issues and longer term goals which draw upon the common human characteristics, aspirations and anxieties of the residents, such as doing well in school and getting on in life, feeling safe, secure and well housed and enjoying shared sporting and cultural celebrations.

## Media

The local media play a key role in engendering a feeling of a common public sphere. At the forefront here is Radio Subotica, founded by the city council in 1968 and still 80 per cent funded by the municipality, broadcasting to the public a diet mainly of information, all day every day in the three official languages and weekly in Bunjevac and German. The staff are mixed and do not cover particularly their 'own' community issues. The station is concerned that a Serbia-wide media

strategy supporting withdrawal of the state from the media could lead to privatisation. The municipality will defend the principle of Radio Subotica as a public-service broadcaster to all.

The private Yu-Eco is also however a part of this civic media fabric. Established as a radio station in 1992 to address the previously marginalised issue of the environment, it has focused on everyday issues—for instance, it ran a series on tolerance, funded by Norway. Adding TV in 2001, it is now the most popular broadcaster in the city and region. It broadcasts in Serbian but with specialised programmes in Hungarian and Croatian. *Subotica's Newspaper* is a weekly going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, published in Serbian with Hungarian pages, and *Croatian Word* is a weekly magazine.

## Mediation and conflict resolution

Mediation and conflict resolution is still a new concept in Serbia but is expected to grow rapidly. With support from the GTZ Centre in Belgrade the city has been running training for 27 young people of mixed backgrounds involving 40 hours tuition in mediation. They hope to expand this and do more work in neighbourhoods and in support of the Roma community

## International policy

Subotica, perhaps ahead of any other Serbian city, has always considered itself an international city. There are already strong links between the city and Szeged in Hungary, one of those with which it is twinned. Every two years, there is a common assembly meeting, there is a memorandum of understanding between the two cities and they engage in common economic and cultural projects. There is a more recent twinning relationship with Osijek in Croatia, as well as cities in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania. There has also been co-operation with Munich in exhibition at the trade fair and with Berlin in terms of the United Games youth exchanges.

It seems to have done as much as it possibly could within the restrictions of limited finance and periodic disapproval from central government. Now that there are signs that a more benign regime in Belgrade, the city should update its policy. For example whilst NGOs such as LDA have a sophisticated understanding of European institutions and programmes, the general level of understanding amongst politicians and city officials is still very low and must be rapidly improved if the city is to take advantage of opportunities.

## Intercultural competence

There is much work to be done in this regard. Intercultural competence is concentrated in only a very few hands at the moment. It may be necessary for a widespread programme of staff (and politician) training and awareness-raising. Many of the basic tools are available through the work conducted by LDA and others mentioned above



## Governance

Civil society plays a critical role in the delivery of any intercultural strategy. The key interlocutor in Subotica with civil society is the Local Development Agency, one of several such agencies established with the support of the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The Subotica LDA, established in 1993, aims *inter alia* to promote intercultural dialogue and tolerance. It benefits from being part of the Europe-wide Association of Local Development Agencies established in 1999 by the CLRAE. In that capacity it was able to take part in a Regional Partnerships for Intercultural Exchange project in 2009 with colleagues from other LDAs in Osijek and Mostar, as well as a media centre in Wolverhampton (UK).

The municipality and the LDA have long co-operated and the agency should be a key partner in the intercultural strategy--just as, *vis-à-vis* the Roma community, the Roma Education Centre is a key interlocutor for the municipality. This combination of municipal focus and NGO partnership is a good model of how the intercultural strategy should work.

LDA has set up training courses for local elected representatives and staff and it has developed a best practice toolkit: Local Partnerships for Tolerance - Handbook for local elected and appointed councillors. Five districts have been selected for case studies for different forms of participation and conflict resolution. The most impressive example involves the Roma Educational Centre in the Peščara district which created multi-ethnic teams of residents to tackle the bad state of local roads, which broke down separation and built trust.

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