
Serdarships as Protoregions of Central Serbia

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Abstract

Since the restoration of Serbian statehood in 1804, throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, the area of modern Central Serbia has been territorially fragmented into a number of local (self)government units of the third degree, which were initially called nahiyas and later districts. The only exception during the existence of the modern independent state of Serbia was made in 1834 with the formation of five larger regions composed of several districts, which were named serdarships. The paper aims to determine, above all, the territorial scope of the then established serdarships, as well as to provide an answer to the question of whether these regions could be considered protoregions of Central Serbia. Given the short duration of this administrative-territorial division, which lasted less than a year, the lack of studies that would address specific issues, which means the lack of basic data on the geographical distribution of these regions, in this study we will try to locate the space and boundaries of these five serdarships. We will also try to determine their historical foundation, as well as the potential practical use value in today's context of the process of political decentralization and statistical regionalization.

Keywords: Serdarship, regions, decentralization, district, Serbia

Serdarships as Protoregions of Central Serbia

Restored Serbia, whose liberation process lasted throughout the 19th century, inherited a territorial organization from the Ottoman Empire. It meant the division into villages, *knežinas*, *nahiyas* and sandjaks. Thus, before the beginning of the First Serbian Uprising, the Smederevo Sanjak, as the nucleus of the renewed Serbian state, was divided into twelve *nahiyas*, which consisted of several *knežinas*. This territorial division was maintained during both uprisings, as well as during the so-called dual powers, until 1830. At the time of receiving Hatisherif, the *knežinas* were renamed captaincies, and after a few years, the captaincies were renamed *srezes* (Ljušić, 2004, pp. 236-238). However, during the entire 19th century, until the formation of the Yugoslav state, the Serbian state did not know territorial entities of a larger geographical scope than the *nahiyas*, ie districts. The only exception was made during the reign of Prince Miloš Obrenović in 1834. At the Assembly convened in 1834 on the occasion of the proclamation of the Hatisherif from 1833, Prince Miloš achieved the division of Serbia into serdarships, i.e. large regions. Each serdarship included three to four districts.²

At that time, five serdarships were established: Raška, Podunavlje, Mačva, Timok and Rasina. Great serdars came to their foreheads. Their powers were twofold. At the same time, they supervised the work of the district as part of their serdarship, but they were obliged to send a report to Prince Miloš every week on what was happening in serdarship and on its border. The great serdars were the highest representatives of the central government in the local government. They were appointed personally by the prince, and they exercised police, administrative and judicial power. After the assembly decision on the establishment of serdars, the serdars received the so-called solemn diplomas on the dignity of great serdars (Svirčević, 2011, pp. 97–

² The *nahiyas* will later become districts, and the captaincies will be called *srezes* (Ljušić, 2004, pp. 238–240).

98). Jovan Obrenović was appointed Serdar of Raška, Joksिम Mihailović was appointed Serdar of Podunavlje, Vule Gligorijević became Serdar of Mačva, Steva Stojanović of Timok became Serdar, and Mileta Radojković became Serdar of Rasina (Petrović, 1901, pp. 645–646). This administrative division of the country lasted a very short time. These serdarships were abolished as early as 1835, when the Sretenje Constitution was adopted. There were no people's self-government bodies in the districts and captaincies. *Ispravnicestva* was established in the districts, which aimed to strengthen the centralization of local government in order to prevent any attempt to disturb public order. Former nahiya's elders were most affected by this local government reform. With them, Prince Miloš completely diminished the importance, position, rights and duties (Svircević, 2011, p. 98).

Although the formation of large regions was supposed to aim at a stronger centralization of the country, as well as diminishing the importance of prominent district elders, it seems that it ultimately produced an opposite effect. Namely, Prince Miloš tried to maintain his authoritarian position through his trusted people, whom he appointed as great serdars. However, one of the mentioned serdars, Mileta Radojković, was the leader of one of the biggest revolts against Prince Miloš. This revolt, which was initially launched as a struggle against administrative centralism, eventually gained importance in the struggle for the adoption of the constitution (Jovanović, 1991, p. 65). However, regardless of the short duration of the existence of these large regions, and the motives that led the Serbian prince to form them at that time, we will pay special attention in this paper to the territorial scope of serdarships in the Principality of Serbia. The reason for dealing with this phenomenon lies in the fact that our official science did not deal at all with the issue of geographical distribution of the mentioned regions, which in their scope could certainly represent the embryo of future regions.

Serdarships of the Principality of Serbia

As there have been no serious attempts at cartographic reconstruction

of the then serdarships so far, we will try for the first time in Serbian science to do so on the basis of available data. Namely, it is not known from the available material what the territorial scope of the mentioned serdarships was. Having in mind, first of all, their names, which have a geographical and historical foundation, as well as the planned administrative centers, we can roughly sketch the then territorial organization of the Principality of Serbia. In this process, it is worth looking back at the previous administrative division, but also the one that replaced the division into serdarships. As we have already mentioned, the then Principality of Serbia included twelve nahiyas of the former Sanjak of Smederevo in addition to the territory,³ that is, the Pashalik of Belgrade and the area of the so-called *Six nahiyas*, which were formally returned to her by the Hatisherif from 1833. At the time when Serbia was granted autonomous status within the Ottoman Empire in 1830, its borders coincided with the borders of the Pashalik of Belgrade. However, after the second Hatisherif in 1833, the first territorial expansion of the Principality of Serbia took place. Then, the so-called *Six nahiyas*, which had previously become part of Revolutionary Serbia during the First Uprising.⁴ In that way, the Serbian autonomous principality definitely shaped its territory, which will remain unchanged until the formal acquisition of independence at the Berlin Congress in 1878 (Svirčević, 2011, p. 98). As for the internal organization, as we have already mentioned, the country was divided into nahiyas and knezinas, which were later renamed districts and captaincies /srezes. The only exception was made in 1834 with the formation of five larger regions. If we keep in mind that in the same year, 1834, the Principality was divided into fifteen districts, then we can determine the boundaries of the regions with respect to their borders, with considerable precision. Namely, based on the census conducted that year, we know that Serbia was organized

³ These were the following nahiyas: Sabac, Valjevo, Belgrade, Smederevo, Pozarevac, Soko, Uzice, Cacak, Rudnik, Kragujevac, Jagodina and Cuprija, while Grocka and Porec nahiyas were abolished just before the uprising (Stojancevic, 1981, pp. 67, 136).

⁴ These were the following nahiyas: Krajina, Crna Reka, Paracin, Krusevac, Stari Vlah and Podrinje.

in the mentioned fifteen districts and sixty-one captaincies. Having in mind the number of serdarships, it is clear that on average one serdarship had to cover three districts.

The districts at that time were: Šabac, Valjevo, Podrinje, Užice, Rudnik, Belgrade, Podunavlje, Požarevac, Kragujevac, Jagodina, Ćuprija, Kruševac, Krajina, Crna Reka and Banja. Only a little later, in 1836, the Čačak District was formed, which was separated from the Rudnik district, while the former Banja District will be divided into the Aleksinac and Gurgusovac districts. Taking into account the fact that in the same year there were districts (recorded in the census) and serdarships, which were personally formed by the Prince himself, it is clear that the borders of the former conditioned the territorial scope of the latter. Analyzing the names of serdarships, we can assume which districts were part of which serdarship. First of all, the Serdarship of Mačva had its headquarters in Šabac, and we can say with certainty that it included the territory of three districts, Šabac, Valjevo and Podrinje, which had its center in Loznica. Then, the Serdarship of Podunavlje with its headquarters in Belgrade, in addition to the Belgrade one, had to include the neighboring districts. Next to the Smederevo District, which was almost certainly part of this region,⁵ the question arises as to which other neighboring district would be part of this region. Having in mind the geographical determination, the size of the then Rudnik District, Kragujevac as the capital of Serbia, which would disqualify both districts in this case, the only candidate would be the Požarevac District. This conclusion is derived from the fact that at that time there was almost no serious connection between the Braničevo and Timok historical regions, so it is difficult to assume that the Požarevac District was part of the Serdarship of Timok. Also, it is even harder to assume that this district was part of the Serdarship of

⁵ The reason for this assumption lies in the fact that for almost the entire second half of the 19th century, there was an hour of merging of the Belgrade and Smederevo districts, and an hour of their separation.

Rasina, having in mind that the latter was named after the main river of the Krusevac District, and the center was in Jagodina. Therefore, primarily for geographical reasons, this possibility would be eliminated. That is why we concluded that the Serdarship of Podunavlje also included the Požarevac District, which fits into the scheme where one region includes three districts.

The Serdarship of Timok was named after the river Timok, and the seat of this region was in Negotin. Therefore, it is not difficult to determine that the Krajina and Crna Reka districts were part of this region, with the centers in Negotin and Zaječar, respectively. Having in mind the circumstances at the time, the geographical connection, but also the importance of Gurgusovac (today's Knjaževac), which was located in the Banja District, to assume that this district was also part of the Serdarship of Timok. However, if you look at the territorial scope of the Banja District, whose spread coincided with today's municipalities of Ražanj, Aleksinac, Sokobanja, Knjaževac, Svrlijig and partly Boljevac, the option of belonging to this district is much more likely than the neighboring Serdarship of Rasina. Thus, this serdarship follows the previously presented unwritten rule according to which three districts form one region. However, it seems that the most problematic in this case is to determine the territorial scope of the remaining two serdarships, Raška and Rasina, as well as their mutual border.

In order to solve the previous dilemma, it is necessary to first establish the facts that we can take as indisputable. First, as we concluded earlier, the Serdarship of Rasina had to include the area after which it was named, and that is the Rasina region, which coincides with the then Kruševac District. Also, it had to include the Jagodina District, for the simple reason that Jagodina was marked as the center of this region. Taking into account the geographical position of the then Ćuprija District, and its leaning on Jagodina, it can be said with almost certainty that this district was also part of the Serdarship of Rasina. On the other hand, when it comes to the Serdarship of Raška, it is clear that it included the Rudnik District, which at that time included Čačak, as the designated seat of the serdarship. Having in mind the geographical

position of the Užice District, its lack of connection with the Macva region, the only remaining possibility is that this district was also part of the Serdarship of Raška. However, the most headache for our research was the determination of the territorial affiliation of the Kragujevac District. Namely, at that time, Kragujevac was the capital of the Principality of Serbia, where Prince Miloš Obrenović himself was sitting. Therefore, it is worth bearing in mind the potential possibility that the extremely centralist Prince kept this area under direct control, and that it did not belong to any serdarships. On the other hand, two more options come into play. Either the Kragujevac District was part of the Raška or Rasina serdarship. Regardless of the affiliation of this district, and if the relations between the prince and the great serdars are taken into account, the most probable conclusion would be that Kragujevac District was only formally part of one of the two serdarships, and that the ruler excluded direct power over it. The reason to think that the Kragujevac District was part of the Serdarship of Raska starts from the assumption that each of the five serdarships was composed of three districts. In that case, Raška would be composed of Užice, Rudnik and Kragujevac, while Rasina would consist of Jagodina, Čuprija and Kruševac districts. However, such an assumption cannot be supported by a valid argument. There is no available document to support this assumption. On the other hand, the demographic and geographical aspects are more in favor of the thesis about the affiliation of this district to the Serdarship of Rasina. At that time, the Kragujevac District had 49.981 inhabitants. Užice and Rudnik together have 123.579, while Jagodina, Čuprija and Kruševac together have only 109.537 people (Cvijetić, 1984, pp. 110–114). Therefore, it is demographically more logical that the Kragujevac District belonged to the Seradrship of Rasina as a demographically weaker, but also geographically smaller area.

Serdarships as protoregions

When we look at the then serdarships as the embryo of the protoregion of Central Serbia, it should be reminded that the term Central Serbia does

not mean the territory of today's Republic of Serbia outside its autonomous provinces, but a rather smaller area. At the time when Prince Miloš formed these five regions, the Principality of Serbia covered only half of today's national territory. Namely, after the annexation of the *Six Nahiyas* in 1833 (Ćorović, 2005, p. 579), The Principality of Serbia stretched between the Drina in the west and Timok in the east, the Sava and Danube in the north and Aleksinac in the south. It still did not include the regions of Southern Serbia, which will be liberated in 1878, as well as parts of the Raska region and Kosovo and Metohija liberated in 1912–1913, i.e. Vojvodina and parts of Sopluk, which joined it only after the victory in the First World War. Specifically, it is about 43.555 km² (Dva veka razvoja Srbije: Statistički pregled, 2008, p. 42), which included the areas of today's twelve administrative districts: Mačva, Kolubara, Podunavlje, Braničevo, Bor, Zaječar, Pomoravlje, Šumadija, Rasina and Moravica as a whole, as well as Zlatibor and Raška for the most part. To this should be added a part of the territory of the capital Belgrade, as well as the municipality of Aleksinac and the Mačva part of the City of Sremska Mitrovica, which is located south of the Sava. Today, this territory is administratively divided into twelve districts and the territory of the City of Belgrade, and in 1834 it was divided into fifteen districts, ie five serdarships.

The Serdarship of Mačva is named after the historical Serbian land of Macva, which has its roots in the thirteenth century and the formation of the Banate of Mačva in 1247, whose territory was completely indefinite, but which stretched between the Sava, Drina and Kolubara (Hardi, 2009, p. 66). For most of its existence, this banate covered the area of the later Serdarship of Mačva. These are the three districts of that time, Šabac, Valjevo, and Podrinje. Today, this area is organized in two administrative districts, Mačva and Kolubara, with centers in Šabac and Valjevo. Therefore, we can observe the historical continuity of the existence of the Mačva mesoregion through Miloš administrative reform. The Serdarship of Podunavlje included those historical Serbian lands that were marked as Kučevo and Braničevo

throughout the Middle Ages (Andrejić, 2011a, pp. 38–41). This area almost completely coincides with the borders of the Podunavlje and Braničevo administrative districts, and for the most part the City of Belgrade.⁶ Serdarship of Timok, although named after the most important river in this area, in a broader context, has its roots in the medieval Principality of Timok, which was inhabited by the Serbian tribe of Timocani. That is why it is not surprising that the area of this region covered the present territory of the Bor and Zaječar administrative districts, with the exception of the two then captaincies, Ražanj and Aleksinac (Cvijetić, 1984, pp. 28 & 32), which almost completely coincide with the area of the two present-day municipalities of the same name, and which then only by chance became part of the said serdarship, bearing in mind that they were part of the wider, Banja District. The remaining two serdarships were formed on somewhat different grounds. Namely, although the Serdarship of Raška was named after the central medieval Serbian country, its territory differed somewhat from the former scope of Raška, but also from the modern understanding of this historical country.⁷ In addition to parts of the Raška land, the Serdarship of Raška also spread to the territories of the former land of Moravica (Andrejić, 2018b, p. 78) and the Rudnik part of Šumadija. In today's framework, the Serdarship of Raška would include the entire Moravica administrative district, as well as the predominant parts of the Zlatibor and Raška administrative districts.⁸ And finally, the Rasina Serdarship included somewhat smaller mesoregions, Rasina, Resava and the central and southeastern parts of Šumadija. Specifically, these areas were part of the Principality of Moravia in the early Middle Ages (Andrejić, 2017, p. 23), but later almost always belonged to different territorial

⁶ With the exception of today's urban municipalities that stretch north of the Sava and Danube.

⁷ In recent times, during the 19th and the very beginning of the 20th century, it marked the territory that separated the two Serbian states, Serbia and Montenegro, and which remained part of the Ottoman Empire until the First Balkan War in 1912.

⁸ But without the municipalities of today's municipalities of Priboj, Prijepolje, Nova Varoš, Sjenica, Novi Pazar and Tutin. On the other hand, today's Municipality of Gornji Milanovac was part of this serdarship.

entities, i.e. administrative areas. In modern terms, it would be the approximate territory of the Pomoravlje, Rasina and Šumadija administrative districts, with the exception of the municipalities of Gornji Milanovac, Ražanj, and Čičevac.

When we compare the then and current administrative division of these areas, it is clear that a large number of captaincies, later renamed srezes, territorially coincide with today's municipalities and cities, while the then districts largely coincide with the areas of today's administrative districts. Of course, after almost two hundred years, there are partial differences, both in the atriums of individual villages and in the municipal borders, but they are not drastic. Also, Loznica, Čuprija and Sokobanja are no longer district centers. However, if we analyze the specific areas of the territorial entities in administrative terms, for the past two centuries there have been no major deviations in the observed part of Central Serbia.

However, what particularly attracts our attention in this research is the question of the importance of serdarships for the further development of the concept of administrative–territorial division of Serbia in the later period. Namely, in the above-described area of Central Serbia throughout the existence of the Serbian state, ie. until 1918, there were no larger units of local (self)government than the district. That is, during the entire existence of the modern Serbian state until its drowning in the wider, Yugoslav community, the district was territorially the largest unit of the vertical organization of state power. After the formation of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, as early as 1922, the entire country was divided into areas, but those in the mentioned area of Central Serbia almost completely coincided with the earlier districts. After the introduction of the dictatorship on January 6, the mentioned areas were abolished and much larger entities were created, which were called banovinas.⁹ Finally, after the Second World War, Serbia was renewed as a federal unit of the new socialist Yugoslavia, with many

⁹ Some authors see the beginning of the regionalization of Yugoslavia in the formation of banovinas (Pavlović, 2012, pp. 503–512).

changed borders. In the new circumstances, a territorial reorganization was carried out to further centralize the state (Ivančević, 2021, p. 166). At the beginning of 1949, a decision was made to form an area, ie to introduce a new, regional level of administration on the entire territory of the FPR of Yugoslavia. The reform was initiated by a decree of March 24, passed by the Presidium of the National Assembly of the FPRY, and was implemented through the adoption of new laws and other regulations in federal units, including Serbia, which in addition to AP Vojvodina areas in its central area. Specifically, it was about Belgrade, Titovo Užice, Kragujevac, Timok and Niš regions (Petranović, 1998, p. 230). When we compare the map of the then established regions with the map of Milos era serdarships, we can state the following. First, the territory of the Belgrade Region included almost completely the territories of the two former serdarships, Mačva and Podunavlje. The Timok Region mostly coincided with the area of the former Timok Serdarship, but it was somewhat smaller. The Kragujevac Region included the territory of the former ubicated Rasina Serdarship, but also parts of the Raška Serfarship, while the Titovo Užice Region mostly coincided with the said Serdarship of Raška.

After only two years, the areas were abolished, and with the adoption of the General Law on the Organization of Municipalities and Srezes from 1955, the phase of building a new – *communal system* of local self-government began (Djurđjev, 2007, pp. 13, 16). Only in 1963, the number of srezes was reduced to fourteen, of which nine in the territory of Central Serbia, so they somehow replaced the former regions. The communal system allowed for the possibility of regionalization at the republican and provincial levels, primarily in terms of cooperation and connecting municipalities. Forms of regionalization have developed through inter-municipal cooperation and the association of municipalities into urban and regional communities. The 1974 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Serbia unites municipalities into regional and urban communities in order to achieve lasting cooperation, planning, development and harmonization of their own and to adopt joint

plans and programs, as well as to achieve other common interests. The association of municipalities into new communities in the province is regulated by their constitutions. Eight inter-municipal regional communities were formed in Central Serbia at that time, Podrinje–Kolubara with 14 municipalities, Podunavlje with 11 municipalities, Titovo Užice with 10 municipalities, Šumadija and Pomoravlje with 12 municipalities, Kraljevo with 15 municipalities, Zaječar with 8 municipalities, Niš with 15 municipalities and South Moravia with 13 municipalities (Djurđev, 2007, p. 17). Inter-municipal regional communities had a self-governing character, and on the territorial level, they were to some extent limited by the old borders of the serdarships. Thus, the Podrinje–Kolubara IRC almost completely covered the area of the former Mačva Serdarship, while the Podunavlje IRC, together with the territory of the capital, spread in the area of the Serdarship of Podunavlje. IRC Zaječar mainly covered the area of Timok Serdarship. The only serious changes were seen in the area of Raška and Rasina serdarships, where three inter-municipal regional communities were formed, Šumadija and Pomoravlje, Kraljevo and Titovo Užice.

Conclusion

Based on the previous analysis, we can report the following conclusions. Namely, on the basis of available data, we tried to locate the position and territorial distribution, as well as the borders of the five serdarships, which were formed by Prince Miloš in 1834. Without a doubt, we have shown the size and borders of the Mačva, Podunavlje and Timok serdarships, and after confronting various arguments, we managed to define the areas of the Raška and Rasina serdarships. We also presented the later division into areas from the socialist period, which was very reminiscent of the serdar's territorial organization from Miloš era. It seems that the later territorial regionalization of Central Serbia in the socialist era was largely conditioned by the short-lived administrative-territorial exception from the period 1834–1835. Therefore, we should keep in mind these historical facts in the context of the debate on the territorial reorganization of Central Serbia, above all, in the context

of its eventual regionalization. Although it did not leave a deeper mark in the development of the territorial organization of Serbia, Miloš administrative division into the above-mentioned serdarships had its historical foundation, but also practical application. However, in the conditions of the legacy from the Ottoman period, as well as the tradition of the French Revolution, such a division in a relatively small, but extremely egalitarian state, such as Serbia at the time, could not take deeper roots. However, in today's circumstances of the development of the concept of territorial decentralization, it is worth recalling such traditions of administrative-territorial organization among Serbs.

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Appendix

Map 1.

Division of the Principality of Serbia into captaincies in 1834



Note. Authors: Dušan Dačić and Dušan Ilić

Map 2.

Division of the Principality of Serbia into districts in 1834



Note. Authors: Dušan Dačić and Dušan Ilić

Map 3.

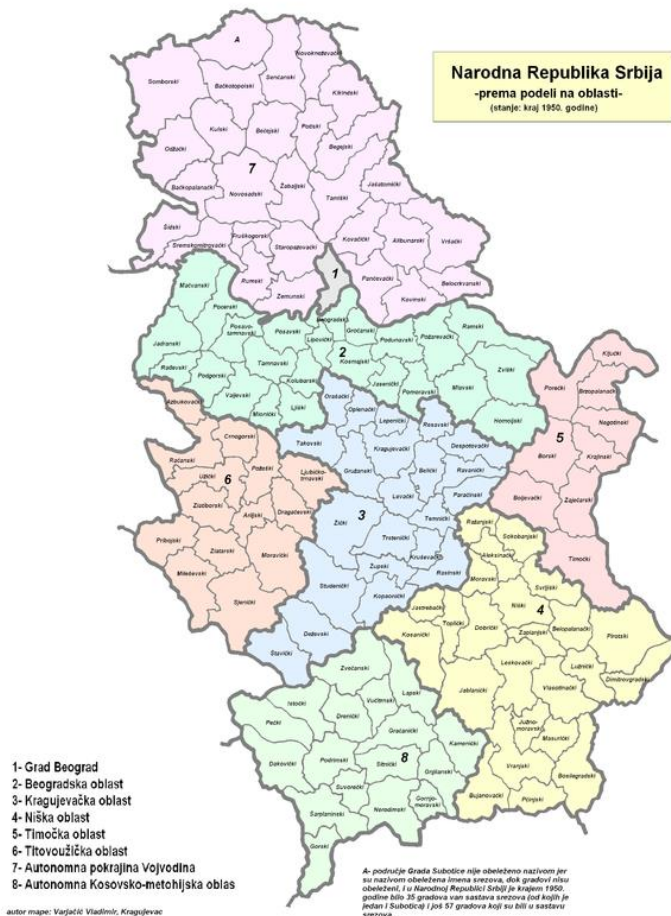
Division of the Principality of Serbia into serdars in 1834



Note. Authors: Dušan Dačić and Dušan Ilić

Map 4.

Division of the People's Republic of Serbia into srezes and redions 1949–1951.



Note. Author: Vladimir Varjačić,

<https://sr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%94%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B0:AdminSRB49.PNG>

Map 5.

Division of SR Serbia into Inter-municipal Regional Communities 1974–1990



Note. Author: Vladimir Varjačić,

<https://sr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%94%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B0:AdminSRB75.PNG>

Serdarstva kao protoregioni Centralne Srbije

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Sažetak

Od obnove srpske državnosti 1804. godine, tokom čitavog XIX i u većem delu XX veka, prostor savremene Centralne Srbije teritorijalno je bio fragmentisan na veći broj jedinica lokalne (samo)uprave trećeg stepena, koji su u početku bile nazivane nahijama, a kasnije okruzima. Jedini izuzetak tokom postojanja moderne samostalne države Srbije učinjen je 1834. godine formiranjem pet većih oblasti sastavljenih iz više okruga koji su dobili naziv serdarstva. Rad ima za cilj da utvrdi, pre svega teritorijalni opseg tada ustanovljenih serdarstava, kao i da pruži odgovor na pitanje da li bi se navedene oblasti mogle smatrati protoregionima Centralne Srbije. Imajući u vidu kratkotrajnost ovakve administrativno-teritorijalne podele, koja se zadržala nešto manje od godinu dana, nedostatak studija koje bi se bavile konkretnom problematikom, što podrazumeva nedostatak elementarnih podataka o geografskom prostiranju navedenih oblasti, u ovom istraživanju ćemo pokušati da lociramo prostor i granice ovih pet serdarstava. Takođe, pokušaćemo da utvrdimo njihovu istorijsku utemeljenost, kao i potencijalnu praktičnu upotrebnu vrednost u današnjem kontekstu procesa političke decentralizacije i statističke regionalizacije.

Ključne reči: serdarstvo, regioni, decentralizacija, okrug, Srbija