

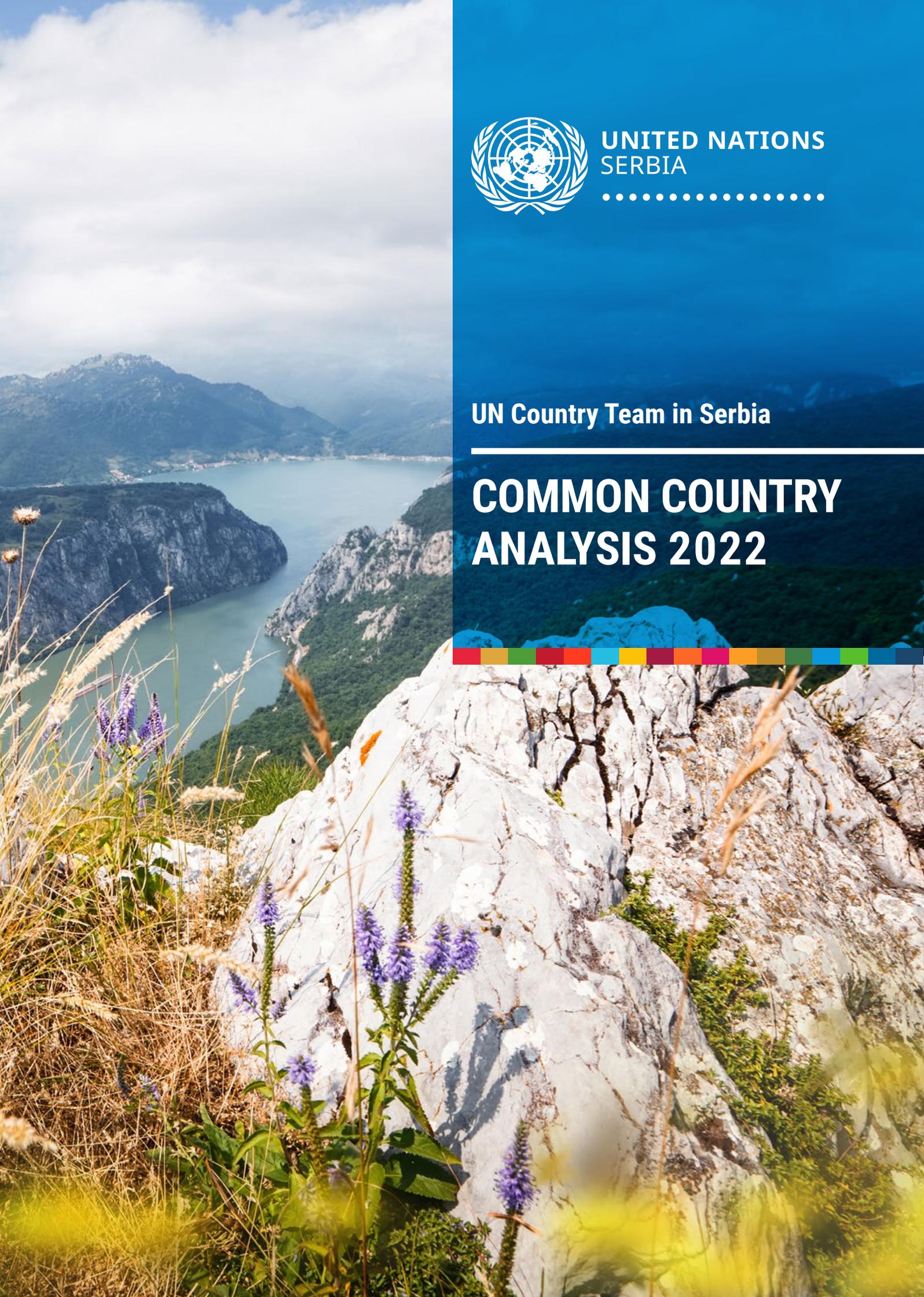


**UNITED NATIONS  
SERBIA**



**UN Country Team in Serbia**

# **COMMON COUNTRY ANALYSIS 2022**



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# FOREWORD

by the UN Resident Coordinator & Country Context

2022 was a tumultuous year. We learned once again that our strength, as humanity, lies in our capacity to sustain rapid changes, adapt, and respond to multiple crises and to some extent, manage uncertainties. 2022 also reminded us that we need to accelerate fundamental transformations in our economic and social models, anticipate risks and take robust preventive actions. The global nature of the polycrisis that we are facing - from the Covid19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and its impact on food security, as well as the cost of energy, the renewed nuclear threat, climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution - has contributed to increased inequalities within countries, and between countries.

In 2022, Serbia showed a high degree of resilience to multiple stresses. While inflationary trends increased, the country remained self-sufficient with local food production. Rising energy costs were mitigated by local coal production (still 70 per cent of the energy mix), as well as supportive measures by the government. These had a favourable impact on costs for households and businesses in the areas of power, heating, production, and transport. Legislative changes and innovations continued, although at a slower pace than in 2021. Ahead of the COP27, Serbia endorsed its updated National Determined Contribution, laying the ground for more dedicated actions to fight climate change. With the development and publication of the Leave-No-One-Behind (LNOB) tool<sup>1</sup> that will be mainstreamed through all legislation, Serbia made a strong commitment to one of the key principles of Agenda 2030, as an attempt to fight inequalities more systematically. The most vulnerable and invisible segments of the population still face hardship in many areas of life, including housing conditions, access to decent work, and specialised social protection services. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew at 2.3 per cent<sup>2</sup> and the fiscal situation of the country remains stable overall. Foreign investments increased, in both traditional industries (agrobusiness) and high technological ones (biotech in particular). The construction sector expanded with both large public infrastructure projects and real estate development in the main cities.

The European Union (EU) facilitated dialogue on the normalisation of relations with Pristina continues with meetings at the leaders and chief negotiators' level. Divergent positions on the degree of implementation of previously concluded agreements, including on Freedom of Movement and the Community/Association of Serb-majority municipalities, produced significant renewed volatility during the latter half of 2022, notably with a dispute on car number plates which prompted renewed interethnic violence.

At the regional level, initiatives to facilitate mobility, trade and investment have moved forward but have been shadowed by divisive narratives across the region.

The protracted election proceedings, which started late in January 2022 with candidates' campaigns and ended by October with the appointment of a new cabinet, was an impediment to the reform process in several sectors. Coupled with the energy crisis, this slowed down legislative and implementation actions across several sensitive or complex issues, including green transformation and other environmental related challenges, such as air pollution. At the same time, citizens' main concerns shifted away from environmental and public health matters and focused mostly on the rising costs of living generated by global trends, as well as by the influx of foreigners, primarily in Belgrade and Novi Sad.

Serbia consistently condemned Russian actions at the United Nations (UN) general assembly and in the UN human rights council but stopped short of full alignment with the EU foreign policy, most specifically in regard to the economic sanctions. This political position was shaped by dissenting and polarised opinions in country about the war in Ukraine, pragmatic security and energy concerns, a tradition of non-alignment, and the absence of a tangible timeframe for EU accession. Tensions between Belgrade and Pristina rose throughout the second half of the year, culminating in late December, and posing new challenges to the EU-facilitated dialogue. Confrontations on the ground, withdrawals of Serbs from public institutions, and other symptoms of instability diverted some political energy and attention away from other priorities, including sustainable development. Looking forward, Serbia remains at the centre of diplomatic efforts to secure improved regional stability and cooperation.

Mixed migration movements increased in 2022. The number of estimated refugees and migrants who entered Serbia doubled from 2021, reaching over 124,000 with many transiting towards the EU. Hosting conditions are adequate in country and opportunities exist for integration, whereas the fair and fast asylum procedures will require further investment. High-risk crossing paths continue to pose a threat for individuals and families, with a persistent risk of trafficking and exploitation of those most vulnerable. Serbia has significantly augmented and aligned its legislation related to human rights, discrimination, gender equality and gender-based violence with EU and UN standards. Yet incidents challenging EU and UN standards of fundamental rights and freedoms and inciting hate have taken place throughout the year with little condemnation.

In this complex environment, the UN in Serbia accelerated its own pace of action on the three strategic priorities agreed with the government of Serbia: the green transformation, building on human capital, and strengthening the Rule of Law and Human rights agenda. Together with our national counterparts, we will continue to advance the full realisation of Agenda 2030 with a people-centred approach to development, and to promote values of solidarity, unity, and equity. More than ever, a renewed commitment to multilateralism is essential to tackle global and regional threats, restore peace, adjust, and guide the course of our common destiny, with hope and perseverance.

<sup>1</sup> Government of the Republic of Serbia 2022a.

<sup>2</sup> National Bank of Serbia 2023.



# METHODOLOGY

The current version of the Common Country Analysis (CCA) is a light update of the 2021 edition. It is fully gender mainstreamed, as a result of the comprehensive review conducted by the Gender Thematic Group and UN Women. Like the original report, this update benefitted from consultations held throughout the UN Sustainable Development Coordination Framework (UNSDCF) cycle by the UN Country Team (UNCT) and the Resident Coordinator's Office (RCO), under the leadership of the Resident Coordinator and Results Group Chairs. These included the institutions and partners of the Government of the Republic of Serbia (GoS), in both bilateral and group settings; civil society organisations (CSOs); international financial institutions (IFIs); the EU; and international development partners.

The main sources used in the CCA update are the rich analytical work carried out by the UNCT during the year to date, in cooperation with the Government of the Republic of Serbia and other partners, along with national and international reports, including by IFIs, official national statistics and non-traditional data sources. In view of the centrality of the process of the accession of Serbia to the EU to the country's national development priorities, the EU Serbia 2022 Report<sup>3</sup> was also a key reference.

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3 European Commission 2022.



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# 1 PROGRESS ON AGENDA 2030

Serbia's development priorities are aligned with the 2030 Agenda, as well as with the strategic goal of EU membership, building on the strong synergies between the two processes. The Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between Serbia and the EU has been in progress since September 2013. To date, 22 out of 35 chapters have been opened, including all chapters in Cluster 1 on the fundamentals and all chapters in Cluster 4 on the "Green agenda and sustainable connectivity". Two chapters have been provisionally closed. Since 2021, Serbia has accepted the Europe Union's revised enlargement methodology.

After the endorsement of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, Serbia established a national mechanism for its implementation: the Inter-Ministerial Working Group (IMWG) for the Implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The IMWG - comprised of representatives from 27 line ministries and other institutions - helped develop the 2018 Mainstreaming, Acceleration, and Policy Support (MAPS) report, and coordinated the first Voluntary National Review for Serbia in 2019. Following the elections of June 2020, and more recently those of April 2022, the IMWG has not been re-established. Currently the responsibility for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda is entrusted to the Ministry of European Integration (MEI), and a new coordination mechanism is currently being designed. Enhanced capacity for working across silos and pulling together different stakeholders will be especially important in following up to Serbia's commitments in key multilateral frameworks – including most recently the outcomes of COP15, COP27, the Sustainable Food System Summit and the Transforming Education Summit.

While challenges remain, Serbia is making overall progress towards the achievement of Agenda 2030 in several key areas, as evidenced by the:

- Analysis by the Serbian National Statistical Office (SORS) showing progress in 43 indicators and increased distance from agreed targets in 15 others (see Figure 1 below).<sup>4</sup>
- The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) gives Serbia a score of 75.9, exceeding the regional average by over 4 per cent and the EU average by 3 per cent. The report underscores progress as regards poverty reduction (see Section 3.1), and a backslide in environmental related indicators.<sup>5</sup>

The statistical capacity of the country to monitor progress towards the Global Goals is well developed, and progress in data collection and availability is visible in the increased number of regular surveys, the alignment of national statistics with European best practice, and the active collaboration with Eurostat, the UNCT and the Regional Commission. Recently, focused efforts on enhancing monitoring and reporting on the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda has resulted in 8 new indicators being added to the national database.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1 Progress towards the SDGs (as measured in comparison between available baseline and latest measurement)

Source: SORS 2022d.

SDG	INDICATORS															
SDG 1	12.1	12.2	13.1	14.1	15.1	15.2	15.3	15.4	1a.2							
	↑	↑	↑	×	×	↑	×	×	↓							
SDG 2	2.1.2	2.2.1	2.2.2	2a.1												
	↑	↑	↑	↑												
SDG 3	3.1.1	3.1.2	3.2.1	3.2.2	3.3.2	3.4.1	3.4.2	3.7.1	3.7.2	3.8.1	3.9.3	3b.1	3c.1			
	✓	↑	✓	✓	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓			
SDG 4	4.1.2	4.2.1	4.2.2	4.3.1	4.5.1	4.6.1										
	×	↑	↓	↑	×	↓										
SDG 5	5.1.1	5.2.1	5.2.2	5.3.1	5.4.1	5.5.1	5.5.2	5.6.1	5.6.2	5a.2	5b.1					
	×	×	×	↓	×	↑	↑	×	×	×	↑					
SDG 6	6.1.1	6.2.1	6.3.1	6.3.2	6.4.1	6.4.2	6a.1	6b.1								
	↑	×	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	✓								
SDG 7	7.1.1	7.1.2	7.2.1	7.3.1												
	↑	×	↑	↑												
SDG 8	8.1.1	8.3.1	8.4.2	8.5.1	8.5.2	8.6.1	8.7.1	8.10.1								
	↓	↑	↑	×	↑	↑	×	↑								
SDG 9	9.1.2	9.2.1	9.2.2	9.4.1	9.5.1	9.5.2	9c.1									
	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑									
SDG 10	10.1.1	10.3.1	10.4.1													
	×	×	↑													
SDG 11	11.5.1	11.5.2	11.6.1	11.6.2	11b.1	11b.2										
	×	↑	×	×	×	×										
SDG 12	12.1.1	12.2.2	12.5.1													
	✓	↑	↑													
SDG 13	13.1.1	13.1.2	13.1.3													
	×	×	×													
SDG 14	14b.1															
	×															
SDG 15	15.1.1	15.1.2	15.2.1	15.6.1	15a.1	15b.1										
	↑	↑	↑	×	↓	↓										
SDG 16	16.1.3	16.1.4	16.2.1	16.2.2	16.3.1	16.3.2	16.5.1	16.6.1	16.9.1	16b.1						
	×	×	↓	↓	×	↓	×	↑	✓	×						
SDG 17	17.1.1	17.3.2	17.4.1	17.6.1	17.8.1											
	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑											

4 SORS. 2022d.

5 Sachs, J., Lafortune, G., Kroll, C., Fuller, G., Woelm, F. 2022.

6 See UN Serbia 2022.



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## 2 HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE RULE OF LAW

Serbia's legal framework is mostly harmonised with international human rights standards.<sup>1</sup> There are important improvements delivered through legal and policy development processes, that have brought valuable results. A stronger focus should be given to the enforcement of these changes and tackling the visible system apathy, as well as people's behaviours and beliefs.

Human rights and the rule of law are also shaped and assessed through the EU accession process and addressed specifically in the relevant EU Acquis chapters. They are considered foundational and given utmost priority in the negotiations.

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<sup>1</sup> Fundamental human rights and freedoms are enshrined in the Constitution. Serbia is bound by eight of the nine UN core human rights treaties, the European Convention on Human Rights, and numerous Council of Europe (CoE) conventions. A list of signed CoE conventions is available on the website of the Council of Europe. Except for the "International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families", the ratification of optional protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is pending. Annex 1 provides a list of UN human rights treaties, ILO Conventions, and other conventions to which Serbia complies.

## 2.1 PROGRESS AND OUTSTANDING CHALLENGES IN KEY PRIORITY AREAS

### UN Human Rights Mechanisms

The Republic of Serbia has continuous cooperation with, and submits regular reports to UN Human Rights Mechanisms, including Treaty bodies and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). It engages regularly with UN Special procedures and facilitates field visits.<sup>7</sup> Civil society and independent institutions also have active and regular cooperation with UN Human Rights Mechanisms within their mandates.<sup>8</sup>

### Judiciary

**Constitutional changes affecting the judiciary** were approved in a referendum in January 2022. There were concerns about the short time in which the referendum was organised, with legislation regulating the referendum having changed a few days before it was implemented. The declared intention of the Government of Serbia was to improve constitutional provisions to prevent political influence over the judiciary. Amendments resulted in improvements with respect to the independence of judges, through changes in the election and composition of the High Judicial Council. The process of the development of additional laws and by-laws to complete the judicial reform process is ongoing and is inclusive of Venice Commission Opinions<sup>9</sup> which stressed that these recent constitutional amendments have the potential to bring about significant positive change in the Serbian judiciary and the prosecution service. According to the two most recent opinions on the draft laws implementing the constitutional amendments on the judiciary and on the prosecution service, the Venice Commission welcomed the efforts made by the State, particularly regarding the draft laws on the judiciary, stating that the majority of recommendations were implemented in the final version of the laws.<sup>10</sup> Regarding the prosecution services laws, the Venice Commission raised concerns (1) regarding the presence of the two ex officio members in the High Prosecutorial Council – the Prosecutor General and the Minister of Justice, and in particular by the effect their presence may have on the balance of power between the prosecutorial and lay components of the Council, and the effective functioning of the Council, as well as (2) regarding a necessary mechanism of appeal against the unfounded or illegal instructions of higher prosecutors.<sup>11</sup>

Instances of **direct referencing and application of international human rights standards** by the judiciary have been recorded

before different jurisdictions and in a variety of thematic areas. The process of developing and applying case law markers to measure the progress in this regard is ongoing.

The Law on **Free Legal Aid** entered into force in 2019, and according to data from the Ministry of Justice on the results of the implementation in the first two years show an insufficient familiarity of citizens with the system of free legal aid.<sup>12</sup>

### Independent institutions

**The Protector of Citizens** is Serbia's National Human Rights Institution (NHRI). The institution was re-accredited with A status by the Sub-Committee on Accreditation (SCA) of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) in 2021.<sup>13</sup> During the re-evaluation, GANHRI-SCA noted that the process of selection and appointment of the Protector is not fully participatory. Similar concerns were raised by the UN Committee against Torture in its latest Concluding Observations on Serbia,<sup>14</sup> specifically about reports on the compromised independence, effectiveness, and visibility of the Protector of Citizens. The new Law on the Protector of Citizens,<sup>15</sup> adopted in 2021, extends the Ombudsman's term in office to eight years and prohibits her/his re-election. In a welcome step, the NHRI is now also defined as "a special body that protects, promotes and advances the rights of children", with a dedicated Deputy Ombudsman for Children. The mandate of the current Protector of Citizens expired in mid-2022, and the process of the appointment of the new Head of the institution is still pending.

The **Commissioner for the Protection of Equality** continues in an active and timely manner to respond to discrimination cases. A significant number of opinions, recommendations, and initiatives<sup>16</sup> have been issued in various areas including gender inequality, discrimination of persons with disabilities, elderly people, the Roma population, LGBTI people and children. In addition, prior to the EuroPride2022, the Commissioner called upon all relevant State authorities to undertake all necessary measures to secure the EuroPride event and secure the human rights to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression of the LGBTI community in the Republic of Serbia without any discrimination.

### Fight against corruption and organised crime

The fight against **corruption** and **organised crime** are recognised Government priorities.<sup>17</sup> The legal and institutional framework is in place to address corruption, and Serbia is a party to the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). The country actively participates in its review, focusing on the prevention of corruption and recovery of assets. The fifth evaluation round of Serbia under the Group of States against Corruption

7 Serbia has had a standing invitation to Special Procedures since 2005.

8 Through their regular monitoring and reporting on the implementation of human rights standards, as well as through communication with special procedures or treaty bodies in individual cases. For more information, see [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org).

9 Venice Commission, 2022a, Venice Commission 2022b and Venice Commission 2022c.

10 Venice Commission, 2022c.

11 Venice Commission, 2022b.

12 YUCOM 2021.

13 Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) 2021.

14 See UN Committee against Torture 2021.

15 Government of the Republic Serbia 2021b.

16 See: Commissioner for the Protection of Equality: [Opinions and recommendations](#)

17 Government of the Republic Serbia 2022f.

(GRECO),<sup>18</sup> published in July 2022, focused on preventing corruption and promoting integrity in central government and law enforcement agencies, including detailed recommendations, specifically on further measures to prevent corruption in respect of persons with top executive functions. The implementation of the recommendations will be assessed by GRECO in 2023 through its compliance procedure. Corrupted or ineffective practices in public procurement in both national and local institutions are rampant, particularly in transactions related to the construction sector and real estate development, although not properly documented.

Serbia is a State party to the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC), which is the main international instrument in the fight against transnational organised crime. Serbia also ratified three UNTOC Protocols – the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants, and the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms. More new investigations were opened and final convictions made in 2021 compared to 2020, while the number of indictments and first instance convictions was lower. Serbia should move from a case-by-case approach to a strategy against criminal organisations, and from focusing on cases of low or medium importance to high profile cases, aimed at dismantling big internationally spread organisations and seizing assets.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond its borders, Serbia actively participates in the implementation of the **Regional Illicit Finance and Anti-corruption Roadmap**, to which the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) acts as a Secretariat. The implementation of this Roadmap will result in the delivery of tangible improvements to the implementation of existing national anti-corruption/anti-illicit finance measures, and international standards and recommendations. This includes recommendations from the UNCAC Implementation Review and Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) and the European Commission's annual reports with respect to EU enlargement. Additionally, through the Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe, Serbia engages in subregional cooperation to fight transnational organised crime, including people smuggling and trafficking.<sup>20</sup>

### Public Finance Management

The Government continued to pursue the Public Administration Reform and Public Finance Management agendas at an accelerated pace and worked towards improving accountability and further rationalizing the use of public resources. The transformation of the Serbian Tax Administration was earmarked as one of the key priorities of the Government as the effectiveness

of revenue collection had a high impact on competitiveness and economic growth. The Government also invested efforts into combatting the shadow economy, raising the awareness of the citizens of Serbia that increased tax collection enables better social and healthcare services, as well as the delivery of public services. In order to underpin fiscal consolidation and strengthen governance, the Government committed to implementing structural fiscal policy measures as part of Public Finance reform, aiming to increase fiscal transparency, introduce fiscal impact assessments of new legislative initiatives, strengthen cash management, internal control, and external audit and to raise the efficiency of revenue collection by further strengthening Tax and Customs administrations. The new Public Finance Management Reform Programme for the period 2021-2025 was adopted by the Government of Serbia in late June 2021, and it complements the Public Administration Reform Strategy 2021-2030 of April 2021.

### Building local self-governments' capacities for sustainable urban development

Recognizing that more efficient local administration is essential to resilience and dynamic local development, the GoS is committed to expanding the competencies, capacities, knowledge management, and financial autonomy of local authorities. A new "Program for the Reform of the Local Self-Government (LSG) System from 2021 to 2025" was adopted in July 2021 and its implementation progressed in 2022 through various initiatives. These included: i) strengthening electronic administration in the work of LSGs; ii) establishment of inter-municipal cooperation to overcome the lack of capacity of some LSGs; and iii) introduction of the "One Stop Shop Management Information System" in selected LSGs.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, partnerships between LSGs and the private sector were scaled up as part of the "Making Cities Resilient" (MCR) 2030 initiative, aimed at weaving the priority of disaster risk reduction in the work of LSGs.

### Civic Space

Concerns regarding the **freedom of expression and information** remain high.<sup>22</sup> Threats - and in some cases physical attacks on premises and individuals - against CSOs, human rights defenders, journalists and activists continue to be recorded, mostly against those working on transitional justice, media freedoms, LGBTI rights, and climate change. Reportedly, these attacks have not been thoroughly investigated and the perpetrators have not been prosecuted. Female journalists are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence including sexist, misogynistic, and degrading abuse, threats, intimidation, and harassment, and being exposed to editorial and financial pressures.<sup>23</sup>

18 GRECO 2022. Serbia has been a member of GRECO since 2003 and has so far undergone four evaluation rounds.

19 See: European Commission 2022.

20 By November 2022, 57 victims of human trafficking (VoT) were recognised by state authorities (44 women and girls, and 13 men and boys) in 2022. Women and girls were trafficked in almost all cases for the purpose of sexual exploitation (29), which is a predominant form of human trafficking among the recognised victims, showing a strongly gendered human trafficking dimension. Of 116 human trafficking referrals, most were received from the Ministry of Interior, social welfare, and civil society, indicating low level of awareness on trafficking among broader structures, especially at community levels.

21 As [announced](#) by the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self Governments.

22 For more information, please refer to the Concluding observations of UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies, as well as UPR recommendations available at [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org), as well as European Commission 2021 and European Commission 2022.

23 Commissioner for Protection of Equality 2022, page 163.

Inadequate **media pluralism** and a lack of transparency of **media ownership** are key concerns, along with inequality in media financing. The overall quality of media reporting is low, and it reflects in a lack of substantive knowledge and debate and/or credible sources in reporting, resulting in a low level of public trust in the media (48 per cent of respondents to an IPSOS Survey have no trust at all or mainly do not have trust in any media outlet).<sup>24</sup>

Independent institutions such as the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) do not fulfil their role as intended by law, fail to take prescribed measures and thus fail to improve the situation in the electronic media. State media and tabloids are being provided with greater opportunities to report on information of public interest, compared to other media. State officials often refuse to give interviews to the independent media.

**Hate speech and incitement** are legally prohibited. Yet they remain frequently used in public discourse and the media, including social media, and are also rarely adequately followed up on. Hate speech and decisive narratives mostly occur around sensitive topics, such as reconciliation and dealing with the past and Kosovo.<sup>25</sup> It also targets specific groups including national, religious and ethnic minorities, migrants, human rights and environmental activists, the Roma, LGBTI, and women. Even so, the degree of tolerance and trust of Serbian citizens towards members of other cultures is relatively high, amounting to 72.9 per cent. The greatest tolerance is shown towards members of another race (78.9 per cent), while the least tolerance is shown towards immigrants - 64.8 per cent. Tolerance towards other cultures is certainly shaped by the fact that the Republic of Serbia is a multi-ethnic country with a diversity of national minorities, represented by 23 National Councils of National Minorities. When it comes to mutual trust, 16.3 per cent of Serbian citizens agreed that most people can be trusted. Within the framework of perceptions of gender equality, 65.7 per cent of the citizens of the Republic of Serbia have a positive attitude towards gender equality.<sup>26</sup>

**Freedom of assembly** is well recognised in the legal framework, including in the Constitution and Law on the Freedom of Assembly. Protests against the glorification of war crimes, environmental rights, assemblies related to the war in Ukraine, labour rights and LGBTI continue to occur. Some of protests were peaceful, and some underwent important restrictions. During environmental protests in November and December 2021, individuals, some masked, attacked a number of protesters. The Youth Initiative for Human Rights rally in Belgrade, protesting the glorification of a convicted war criminal, Ratko Mladić, was banned by the police who cited the threat of physical conflict with counter-demonstrators. Pro-Russian demonstrations, as well as anti-war demonstrations, were permitted following Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

## 2.2 KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN 2022

### United Nations Human Rights Mechanisms

- In late December 2021, the **UN Committee against Torture** adopted its Concluding observations<sup>27</sup> on the third periodic report of Serbia, stating improvements as well as providing a set of recommendations, including the necessary independent medical examination of detainees; the definition of torture; the investigation of threats to and attacks on human rights defenders, journalists, LGBTI persons and Roma; the independence of the Protector of Citizens; the effective implementation of legal safeguards for detained persons; detention conditions; health care in prisons; impunity; the introduction of life-imprisonment; the treatment of persons in social care and psychiatric institutions; non-refoulement; political influence in judicial appointments and gender-based and domestic violence.
- In April 2022, the **UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** adopted its Concluding observations<sup>28</sup> on the third periodic report of Serbia, outlining improvements as well as providing a set of recommendations regarding the ratification of the Optional Protocol, the potential political influence on the work of the prosecution, free legal aid, data collection, NHRI, Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), austerity measures, corruption, identity documents, the position and rights of refugees and migrants and persons with disabilities, gender equality, the right to work, trafficking in persons, the right to social security, child marriage, poverty, adequate housing, the right to health, climate change, and education.
- **The Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparations and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence** conducted a country visit to Serbia in late 2022. The End of Visit Report<sup>29</sup> was published, jointly with a Press Statement,<sup>30</sup> on the last day of the visit with preliminary observations. It was stated that the unsolved fate of missing persons is a tragic legacy of the 1990s conflicts and remains critical for post-conflict recovery in Serbia, Kosovo<sup>31</sup> and the rest of the region, as well as that Serbia and Kosovo must end politicised tactics that hamper truth, justice and reconciliation efforts.
- The UNCT Serbia submitted a Report to the Human Rights Council (HRC) for the 4th **UPR** of the Republic of Serbia in October 2022 stressing important improvements such as the establishment of a Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, improvements to the anti-discrimination framework, the referendum on constitutional

24 See Southeast European Network for Professionalisation of Media 2021.

25 All references to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of UN Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

26 UNESCO Culture 2030 Indicators in Serbia, 2022 (unpublished)

27 UN Committee against Torture, 2021.

28 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 2022.

29 Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence, 2022.

30 UN Human Rights Team Serbia 2022.

31 All references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

changes in the area of the judiciary, the development of the draft law on same-sex unions, legal and policy developments regarding national minorities, gender equality and persons with disabilities. The main challenges listed in this UNCT human rights analysis included the necessary improvements of the legal and policy framework and strengthening its enforcement and implementation, the disaggregated data collection, the meaningful participation of all interested stakeholders in State-led processes, judicial independence, NHRI, freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, investigation and prosecution of higher-level perpetrators of war crimes, and reparations to victims of war crimes, the rights of persons with disabilities, Roma and Internally Displaced People (IDPs), inclusive education, combating child labour, gender gaps and the protection of victims of Gender-based Violence (GBV), asylum procedure and travel documents for persons granted international protection, the prevention of torture and respect for the principle of non-refoulement, combatting human trafficking, enforced disappearance, anti-corruption, and climate change. The UPR session of the HRC for Serbia is scheduled for August 2023.

## Elections

The local, presidential, and early parliamentary elections were held in April 2022. Elections took place in a fundamentally democratic process, with most irregularities occurring before the election day, including longstanding issues related to media accessibility, accountability, and transparency in elections, as well as a strong functionary campaign and the dominance of one political party in the media. The political landscape remains polarised and is dominated by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), as well as by the incumbent President.

According to available information, 63 per cent of the polling stations did not provide independent access for persons with physical disabilities and in 27 per cent of polling stations, the layout was not suitable for such voters.<sup>32</sup> A strong discriminatory narrative was represented by several right-wing parties, both towards the LGBTI population and towards women, assigned a traditional role in the family. In general, minority groups were not the focus of political outreach programs.

Due to the inability to form polling stations in the municipalities of voters residing in Kosovo, these voters' polling stations were set up in the municipalities of Bujanovac, Kuršumljija, Raška, and Tutin.

## EuroPride2022

Since 2014, Pride Parades have been successfully held in the Republic of Serbia, without major incidents, with a large police presence and high-level political participation. Belgrade was selected as the organiser of the EuroPride2022, scheduled for September 2022. Several weeks prior to the event, high State representatives announced that EuroPride2022 would be can-

celed, and five days before the Pride Parade the Ministry of Interior issued a ban on the route, while the night before the Parade, the Administrative Court confirmed this decision of the Ministry. As a new, shorter route was subsequently registered by the organisers and was not forbidden, the EuroPride2022 Parade took place on 17 September 2022, with several thousand participants and approximately 5,200 police officers securing the event. As reported, a few incidents did occur: the perpetrators were sports fans or members of certain religious movements. 64 persons were arrested, while 10 police officers were injured. These developments raised serious concerns from the international community and developing partners, as they may signal the deterioration of the level of rights and freedoms achieved in the previous period.

**Key legal and policy frameworks** adopted in 2022, include:

- Constitutional changes affecting the judiciary, approved in a referendum in January 2022;
- The Strategy to create a stimulating environment for the development of civil society in the Republic of Serbia from 2022 to 2030 is being developed, although 24 prominent human rights CSOs have declined to participate, alleging an overall shrinking of civic space;
- The Air Quality Protection Program until 2030 with an Action Plan for the period 2022-2026<sup>33</sup> – directly affecting Human Rights for a clean environment was approved, the first strategic document for the area of air quality protection.

32 OSCE 2022.

33 Government of Serbia 2022I.



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# 3 LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND (LNOB)

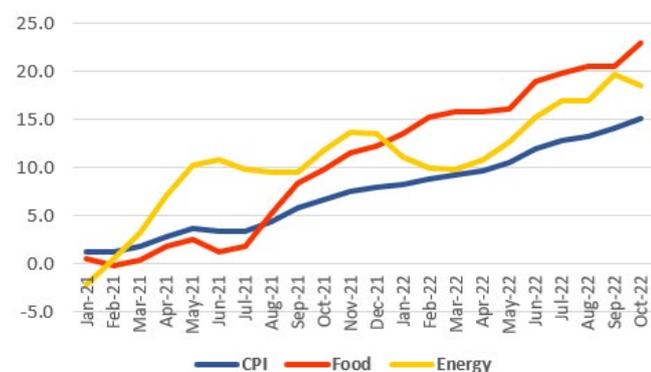
The Leave No One Behind principle of the 2030 Agenda requires that policies and programmes prevent discrimination and reverse inequalities, by identifying vulnerable and marginalised groups that are left behind and developing effective measures to address the root causes for their omission.

## 3.1 LONG-TERM PROGRESS TOWARDS PEOPLE-CENTRED DEVELOPMENT

### Poverty

The **at-risk-of-poverty rate has slowly been decreasing** in the past 6 years and was 21.2 per cent in 2021, (SORS), 0.5 per cent lower than in 2020. The social exclusion rate declined to 28.5 per cent in 2021, 1.3 per cent lower than in 2020 but still much higher than the EU average of 21.7 per cent.<sup>34</sup> The contraction in poverty rates in 2021 and previous years follows the trend observed in all Balkan countries and puts Serbia's poverty rates in alignment with the region's average. This long-term declining trend indicates that Serbia has made significant progress towards the achievement of SDG 1.2. Still, Serbia remains among the top ten least equal countries in Europe. In 2021, the Gini coefficient for income was 33.3 per cent, stable for the last three years and above the EU-27 average (30.0 per cent). The income of the richest 20 per cent of the population was six times higher than that of the poorest 20 per cent, against 5.24 in EU-27 (SORS, 2022).

Consumer prices, growth rates in %



As in previous years, there is **more poverty in rural than in urban areas**. The at-risk-of-poverty rate shows that individuals up to 18 years of age were the most exposed to this risk (24.2 per cent), as well as individuals aged from 18 to 24 (23.6 per cent). For 2020, 46.1 per cent of the population self-identified as poor (a slight decrease from 47.7 per cent in 2019), one of the highest rates among European countries conducting Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC). Populations in rural areas face higher poverty rates than those in urban areas, especially in South Serbia and eastern Serbia, the poorest districts according to both absolute and relative poverty lines.<sup>35</sup> The percentage of men owning agricultural land is twice as high as women owners: 84 per cent of women do not own agricultural

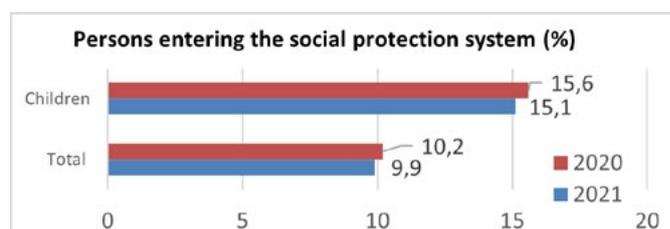
land, whereas 12 per cent of rural women own houses in rural areas. Only 17 per cent of agricultural holdings are registered to women. Women comprise 55 per cent of the unemployed rural population, and 74 per cent of women are unpaid and supporting household members (UN Women 2017).

Even before the invasion of Ukraine, **food price inflation** in January 2022 was at 13.5 per cent year-on-year, rising to 24.3 per cent in December 2022 year-on-year, and as much as 43.3 per cent for dairy products specifically.<sup>36</sup> Rising inflation is particularly affecting the lowest income decile households, who already spend more than 75 per cent of their disposable income on food and energy.<sup>37</sup> Families with lower incomes are reported to have had to compromise on food quality as well as the heating of their homes, which can be expected to result in a higher rate of the population being at risk of poverty or exclusion, unless measures to shield the population from the cost-of-living crisis are scaled up.

Populations in rural areas also **tend to have poor infrastructure**, a lack of social services or poorer quality social services (e.g. education and health care), and an absence of cultural and social resources. In the context of a higher risk of extreme events due to climate change, risks that are not sufficiently mitigated at local, national and global levels, and populations living in rural and remote areas are particularly vulnerable and exposed to disasters triggered by natural hazards.

### Social protection

Social protection systems through its four pillars (social assistance, social services, social insurance and employment and labor market programs) aim to reduce poverty and social inequalities. Overall, the **total social protection expenditure is low in Serbia** both in terms of per capita expenditure (totaling EUR 1,211.56 in Serbia, against EUR 8,518.28 in the EU-27 in 2021)<sup>38</sup> and as a percentage of GDP (it was at 21.9 per cent of GDP in Serbia in 2020, far below the EU-27 average of 31.8 per cent).<sup>39</sup>



**A mild decrease in the number of people entering the social protection system** continues to be observed (see Chart). Despite this trend, the pressure on the social protection system remains, as the number of staff employed by the system continues to decrease, and in 2021 the total number of professional staff was 18.8 per cent lower than in 2014.<sup>40</sup>

34 See: SORS 2022c. and EUROSTAT 2022e.

35 See: UNDP 2018.

36 See: SORS 2022a.

37 Data from a UNDP internal assessment on the impact of the Ukraine crisis on poverty in Serbia. (UNDP, mimeographed).

38 See Eurostat 2023a.

39 See Eurostat 2023b.

40 Republic Institute for Social Protection 2021.

Social assistance - as one of the four pillars of social protection – has seen important shifts towards categorical programmes of social assistance,<sup>41</sup> especially those focusing on pro-natal benefits, which are overtaking poverty-targeted programmes as the largest social assistance programmes.

Looking only at poverty-targeted programme spending, Serbia spends under a third of the European average,<sup>42</sup> with both inadequate population coverage and a low amount of social security benefits leading to the ineffectiveness of the social security system in reducing poverty<sup>43</sup> which affects progress towards SDG 1.3. The adoption of a new **Strategy for social protection** and amendments to the **Law on social welfare** are still pending.

### The Roma

The Roma face difficulties in almost all aspects of inclusion particularly education, employment, housing, and health care. The poorest sections of Roma in substandard settlements, in particular, still lack access to basic infrastructure and necessities like electricity, safe water, and sanitation.<sup>44</sup>

In 2021, the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue established a new **Coordination Body** to coordinate state administration activities on the social inclusion of Roma, chaired by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia.

Although informal **employment** is decreasing, it continues to be high among the Roma. Employment measures, such as progressive labour income taxation, have yet to be put in place and low educational attainment remains a barrier. In 2022, **26 Roma were employed in 20 local self-government units**, following an initiative by the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue<sup>45</sup> to employ at least 100 highly educated Roma in public institutions.

**Roma's access to adequate housing** is also lacking. Residents of over 700 substandard Roma settlements live in constant fear of forced evictions in unsafe living conditions. Although the adoption of the Law on Housing and Building Maintenance improved the legal framework relevant to evictions, coordination between different local and national authorities in resettlement procedures is still challenging. In some cases, it leaves persons affected by the eviction homeless, or without sufficient support from the institutions for social protection.<sup>46</sup> Beneficiaries of social housing are additionally financially burdened by paying property taxes, even though this is property that does not represent their private property.<sup>47</sup>

The **educational attainment of Roma children** remains starkly

subpar to that of their peers. Only 85.4 per cent of Roma children enrol in primary school, while the primary school completion rate is 64 per cent. Only 28 per cent of children living in Roma settlements enrol in secondary school, while the number of girls enrolling in secondary school is significantly lower than the number of boys. Although this shows progress compared to previous years, the difference between the secondary school coverage of the children of Roma nationality and children from the general population is extremely high, and this gap is not closing as quickly as desired.<sup>48</sup>

Rates of **child marriage among girls and young women** from Roma settlements also remain exceptionally high. Over half (56 per cent) of women aged 20 to 24 were married before the age of 18, and 16 per cent were married before the age of 15.<sup>49</sup> The National Coalition for Ending Child Marriages, established in 2019, continues supporting all interested parties in responding to child marriage in Serbia and specifically supports the Roma with coordinated action and targeted advocacy to change this practice. In 2021, the Coalition advocated for the amendments of three laws to secure a full ban on child marriage (Family Law), better protection of victims (the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence) and more adequate sanctioning of perpetrators (the Criminal Code).

### National minorities

According to the 2011 Census, there are **21 national minorities** in the Republic of Serbia, accounting for about 13 per cent of the population.<sup>50</sup> The legal framework for respecting and protecting minorities and cultural rights is broadly in place. Their status is regulated by the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, ratified international and regional treaties, including the Council of Europe (CoE) Framework Convention on National Minorities, the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, the Law on National Councils of National Minorities, and the Law on the Official Use of Languages and Scripts. In 2016, Serbia adopted the Action Plan for the Realisation of the Rights of National Minorities under EU Negotiating Chapter 23, and in 2021, Serbia initiated the drafting of a new action plan based on the ex-post analysis of the previous one.

In the 2022 parliamentary elections, of the 12 lists that passed the threshold and entered the new Parliament, **five were lists of national minorities**. A new Parliament was constituted on 1 August 2022 and out of seven initially appointed Deputy Speakers two belong to the national minorities. In the new government appointed in October 2022, the Minister of Human and Minority Rights belongs to the Croat minority. On 13 November 2022, elections for members of 23 National Minority Councils were held. Members of the councils of 19 national minorities were elected in direct elections, while four minorities - Gorani, Macedonian, Croatian and Montenegrin - were elected through the electoral assembly.

The Fund for the **National Minority Councils** for 2022 remained

41 Categorical targeting consists in selecting individuals belonging to a certain category of people using observable characteristics that do not require the collection of a large amount of data.

42 UNICEF 2022a page 10.

43 UN Economic and Social Council, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 2022 page 9.

44 SIPRU 2020.

45 Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue 2022.

46 UN Economic and Social Council, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 2022, page 10.

47 Government of the Republic of Serbia 2021i.

48 SORS and UNICEF 2020.

49 Ibidem.

50 SORS 2012a and SORS 2012b.

the same as in 2021. Their effective functioning is still missing, due to the lack of a clear understanding of their mandate and powers, as well as the insufficient capacity of the Councils to carry out their mandate.<sup>51</sup>

**Local councils for inter-ethnic relations** exist in all 73 municipalities where such an obligation is stipulated by the law; however, the full implementation of their mandate has yet to materialise as council members have not always been nominated or councils often do not meet.

Despite the legal obligation to consider the ethnic composition of the population, **national minorities remain underrepresented in public administration**. In line with the amended Law on civil servants, preparations were completed for setting up a register of public employees, with the voluntary option of declaring national affiliation for statistical purposes. The national statistical office and professional organisations still do not collect ethnically disaggregated data.

As part of the 2022 “Population, household and dwellings census”, census questionnaires were translated into the 20 languages of national minorities and awareness-raising campaigns were conducted, particularly on the right to multiple affiliations, in line with the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe.<sup>52</sup>

### Persons at risk of statelessness – IDPs – Refugees from former Yugoslavia

Serbia has made significant progress addressing problems faced by persons at risk of statelessness in the last ten years by introducing systemic changes. Protection was offered and followed by the implementation of solutions for the majority of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, including through the [Regional Housing Project](#). According to government data from 2021, there are still 25,048 persons registered as refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH) and Croatia. The National Strategy for Resolving the Issues of Refugees and IDPs 2015-2020, targeting refugees from former Yugoslavia and IDPs, expired at the end of 2020 and should be renewed, and followed by the adoption of an action plan.

In total there are 194,700 IDPs out of which 68,500 have displacement-related needs and are without a durable solution and some 2,000 persons, mainly belonging to the Roma national minority, still face problems with personal documents, including birth registration and are therefore considered at risk of statelessness.<sup>53</sup> Roma IDPs represent one of the most vulnerable groups in society and face problems in accessing socio-economic rights due to an unharmonised practice of registration of their permanent residence. They mostly live in deplorable conditions in informal settlements lacking basic infrastructure. The Serbian authorities have intensified efforts

to eradicate statelessness, including through cooperation with UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and civil society and working towards the fulfilment of the #IBELONG campaign goal to eradicate statelessness globally by 2024.<sup>54</sup>

### Persons with disabilities

In 2020, around 700,000–800,000 persons in Serbia live with disabilities (Government of Serbia 2020). **Persons with disabilities**, particularly persons with mental (intellectual and psychosocial) disabilities, are **largely excluded from almost all aspects of social and economic life**, due to, amongst other reasons: the physical accessibility of public spaces; the reliance on medicalised approaches, difficulty accessing the labour market; insufficient prioritisation in the legal framework; and deficiencies in independent living, legal capacity, political participation, and decision-making. Because a person with disabilities earning more than the combined value of care benefits and allowance for caregivers would no longer be eligible to receive them, these persons are disincentivised from seeking employment.

**Women with disabilities** are consistently among the most vulnerable at the intersection of forms of discrimination on the grounds of gender and disability. Recommendations need to be addressed and implemented on the sexual and reproductive rights of disabled women in residential institutions, and on their rights related to their gender roles, sexuality, marriage, family relations and parenthood.

In the past 10 years, significant progress has been made in improving the legal framework for **children with disabilities** in Serbia, but barriers to inclusion remain. Particularly invisible are children with disabilities who also face other vulnerable situations (e.g., when they reside in institutions; have intellectual, mental and multiple disabilities; live in poverty; are unaccompanied; work in the streets; and/or are in transit). Discrimination is most often experienced in the education system and overall, 29 per cent of children with disabilities have been unable to use public services due to inaccessible facilities or inadequate conditions, while 26 per cent have been discriminated against.<sup>55</sup> Yet over 90 per cent of the population believes children with disabilities can make great achievements if adequately supported (UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and GoS. 2017).

A new [National Strategy on Persons with Disabilities](#) (2020), is in line with standards in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the first [Action Plan](#) (2021) provides a roadmap for its successful implementation.

Basic Internet services in Serbia include special measures to facilitate access for persons with disabilities and vulnerable groups, including ensuring that telephone services are provided on a technologically neutral basis, of necessary quality and available at an affordable price. Furthering digital inclusion and

51 UN Economic and Social Council, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2022, page 12.

52 The National Minorities Councils and the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue were both involved, in support to the Statistical Office of Serbia.

53 UNHCR 2018.

54 Also, with Reference to the United Nations Secretary General Action Agenda for IDPs 2022.

55 Forty-five per cent of parents state that either they or their children have experienced insults, degrading treatment, or harassment due to a child’s developmental disabilities. See: UNICEF and Government of The Republic of Serbia 2017.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) accessibility requires enhanced awareness and strengthened capacities – particularly by teams in charge of municipal digital services. The universal service fund derived from telephone bills for inclusion initiatives could also be applied to initiatives that promote ICT accessibility or digital inclusion.

## LGBTI

LGBTI people are one of the most stigmatised groups in Serbia according to public perception surveys.<sup>56</sup> The Commissioner for Protection of Equality has observed a slight decline in the number of discriminatory statements against the LGBTI population in the media, although stigmatizing and discriminatory speech on social networks and in the public space persist, and members of this population are still exposed to attacks and incidents motivated by homophobia and transphobia. The Serbian Orthodox Church also plays a role in shaping public opinion.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, transgender persons have complained of problems they have faced when registering the change of first name or sex designation in various documents and certificates, which has prompted the Commissioner to issue a recommendation of measures to all local self-government units.<sup>58</sup>

The Law on Same-Sex Unions and the Law on Gender Identity are still pending, following strong negative reactions and comments from politicians, right-wing organisations, religious leaders and groups, and activists. Hate crimes against LGBTI people frequently occur and are not adequately prosecuted and sanctioned. Transgender persons are often pathologised, and a lack of necessary and adequate hormone therapy medications is widely reported. Obstacles to sex change include overly bureaucratic procedures and a lack of knowledge by competent state officials. Intersex persons remain largely invisible, although new amendments to the Anti-Discrimination Law include discrimination on the grounds of intersex status.

## Youth

In 2022, 14 young MPs were elected to the National Assembly, which is a decrease compared to 2021 (22) and 2020 (28). There are no young ministries in the Serbian Government. In line with the new Law on Amendments to the Law on Ministries,<sup>59</sup> the Department of Youth is no longer part of the Ministry of Sport, but the Ministry of Tourism.

Organisations of and for youth have, for the first time, submitted Youth Specific Alternative Reports to the UN Mechanisms<sup>60</sup> and issued youth-specific recommendations.<sup>61</sup>

56 Commissioner for Protection of Equality, [Public Perception Surveys](#).

57 See for example the support by the Serbian Orthodox Church for the ban on the organisation of EuroPride, as reported in the media: [e.g. Europride in Serbia: success and defeat](#).

58 [Commissioner for Protection of Equality 2022](#).

59 Government of the Republic Serbia 2022d.

60 National Youth Council of Serbia 2022.

61 UN Economic and Social Council, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 2022, paragraph 39.

## Ageing and ageism

In Serbia, one in five citizens is older than 65.<sup>62</sup> Ageism, or discrimination based on age, impacts older women the most. In Serbia, 16 per cent of older women aged 65 to 74 experienced some form of violence after reaching the age of 65. This type of violence is quite covert, and victims rarely decide to report it. Older women choose to live with violence for various reasons, out of fear, shame, economic dependence and in the context of strong patriarchal patterns.<sup>63</sup> Among older women, **Roma older women are especially vulnerable**, because they face multiple forms of discrimination. Research findings about perceptions and attitudes of older Roma women towards gender-based violence shows that even though 87.3 per cent of surveyed older Roma women recognise gender-based violence, less than half consider that it should be reported, either because they consider violence to be a part of their regular life, or because they do not believe they would get needed support.<sup>64</sup>

Older persons are also more likely to live in poverty. In 2018, the last year for which disaggregated data was available, the home help service supported 16,678 users on average per month, of which 90.25 per cent were persons older than 65 years. The coverage of older persons with this service (1.24 per cent of the total population of persons 65+ years) is low, especially compared to developed countries, and particularly insufficient in rural areas.<sup>65</sup>

One important initiative to reduce ageism is intergenerational solidarity through raising awareness of the potential of mutual cooperation, understanding and coexistence among different generations, including by designing innovative solutions and testing new strategic approaches in social protection that bring together children, young people and the elderly.<sup>66</sup>

## Violence against women

Elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls (SDG Target 5.2), remains a key challenge: 22 per cent of women experienced some form of violence by an intimate partner.<sup>67</sup> While the number of femicides showed no decline from past trends,<sup>68</sup> GBV appears to have increased in frequency and intensity during the pandemic.<sup>69</sup> Women from marginalised groups, including women with disabilities, older women, Roma women and

62 UNFPA 2021.

63 UNFPA and Red Cross of Serbia, 2022.

64 UNFPA 2022a.

65 Commissioner on the Protection of Equality and UNFPA 2021, p. 78.

66 See [Visegrad Fund](#), various reports.

67 According to a statistical survey, conducted in September-October 2021. See: SORS 2022e.

68 Until end October 2022, 25 femicides have been committed in Serbia. See: Autonomous Women's Centre 2022. The women led CSO "FemPlatz" recently called for the establishment of a body to monitor femicide.

69 Two-thirds (66.7 per cent) of healthcare professionals encountered GBV cases in their practice at least once a year before the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost one in three healthcare professionals (31.1 per cent) reported a higher frequency of suspicion of GBV among their patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. See: UNFPA 2022b. These findings are particularly striking as the attention of the health system was focused on the treatment of COVID patients and vaccinations at the time of the research.

girls are particularly vulnerable. Compounding the problem, the number of **safe houses** is insufficient:<sup>70</sup> twelve districts do not provide the service, and cases of refusal of reception of Roma women were reported,<sup>71</sup> while the **capacity of healthcare professionals and health institutions to respond to GBV** is lacking.<sup>72</sup> Key recommendations to rein in GBV include: forming a single central and integrated system for collecting and monitoring cases of violence and harmonizing the Criminal Code with the Istanbul Convention regarding the redefinition of the criminal offense of rape.<sup>73</sup>

A national survey on GBV in **public spaces**, the first of its kind in Serbia, shows that public spaces are gender insensitive and not adapted to the needs and safety of women and girls. In 70 per cent of cases when women experienced violence in a public space, others present did not react.<sup>74</sup> GBV in **virtual spaces** is concerning: a survey with girls aged 18-19 shows that more than 78 per cent of respondents do not feel safe online.<sup>75</sup> Media and social media **reports of gender-based violence often contain sensationalist or stereotypical expressions**,<sup>76</sup> while reporters have repeatedly violated the journalists' code and laws, including by revealing the identity of the victim.<sup>77</sup> In response, the group "Journalists against Violence against Women" has published a revised version of Guidelines on Media Reporting.<sup>78</sup>

Media reports of verbal, physical and psychological **violence against women in gynaecological and obstetric institutions** emerged again in 2022.<sup>79</sup> The media coverage caused outrage and was followed by the publication of a "Report on Obstetric Violence", based on 200 women's testimonies on treatment received in several care institutions, showing "violations of all international and domestic regulations", which should form the basis for "comprehensive measures to eliminate obstetric violence".<sup>80</sup>

### Asylum and mixed movements of refugees and migrants

Since 2015, Serbia has been faced with increased numbers of persons arriving within the mixed movement flow of refugees

and migrants. Serbia continued to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to refugees and migrants in nineteen reception and asylum facilities, where more than twice as many new arrivals were registered during 2022, compared to 2021.<sup>81</sup> The majority of refugee and migrant children were enrolled in the education system (over 85 per cent) and provided with significant support. Essential social services were provided to 3,934 unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), and migrants in vulnerable situations, covering approximately 80 per cent of the identified migrant population in need.<sup>82</sup>

Serbia established its **national asylum system in 2008**, putting in place the legislative and institutional framework for refugee protection and developing its reception capacities with donors' support that included national-level aid and local integration services. While the system is gradually aligning with EU and international standards, further steps are needed, e.g., as regards the issuance of travel documents, access to citizenship and naturalisation, and the provision of state funded legal aid. The implementation of the asylum legislation also needs to be strengthened by building authorities' capacity, adopting missing bylaws and harmonising other relevant laws with asylum law to ensure effective access to rights for asylum-seekers and persons accorded international protection, allowing for full inclusion and integration. Since the establishment of the asylum system, a total of 240 persons have been granted international protection in Serbia. Persons granted international protection receive support in the integration process by the state as well as from civil society organisations financed by international donors. Enhanced engagement with the private sector has led to increased job opportunities for all interested refugees including refugees with disabilities in 2022.

Without legal migration pathways to continue their journey onwards, many refugees and migrants resort to smugglers. The cumulative effects of situations in their countries of origin and along migration trajectories, dependence on smugglers and traffickers, situations of irregularity and lack of legal status, all increase the vulnerabilities of refugees and migrants, especially women and unaccompanied minors who face violence, exploitation and abuse, including trafficking. Of the 13 migrants referred for identification, five people were identified as victims of trafficking in 2022.<sup>83</sup> While in the other cases, the identification process is still underway, the identification of Victims of Torture (VoTs) among migrants remains low.

Return management currently remains underdeveloped, and right-based return initiatives are still largely missing, due to the absence of return and readmission cooperation with the top countries of origin. Assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) remains one of the few regular migration pathways and protection mechanisms for migrants unwilling or unable to stay in Serbia. During this year, 120 migrants returned home through the AVRR program in a safe, regular and dignified manner.

70 According to data presented in: Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs 2021 and UNFPA 2022c.

71 Only half of the 33 municipalities/cities during the research provided information regarding access to services for Roma women and girls.

72 According to a survey conducted in 2022 by UNFPA (See UNFPA 2022b), among the 1,686 healthcare professionals, 60 per cent of respondents stated that they had never before attended a lecture, training or seminar related to GBV/domestic violence/intimate partner violence/VAW. More than half of the respondents assigned relatively low scores when self-evaluating their preparedness to recognise and respond to GBV in their practice, awarding scores of 1-3/5.

73 European Commission 2022.

74 According to a survey on violence against women and girls in public spaces (See: FemPlatz 2022a). The survey was conducted within the UN Women project "Safeguarding Women and Girls in Serbia", funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

75 More information is available in the report: UNFPA 2022d.

76 See: BeFem 2019.

77 A particularly controversial episode was the publication of an interview with a convicted serial rapist in a tabloid, which prompted civil rights groups led by the Women's Solidarity collective to stage five protests (see media coverage in [rs1info](#) and [Vreme](#)).

78 See: Journalists against Violence against Women 2022.

79 See, amongst others, press articles in the Masina newspaper of [February 2022](#) and [September 2022](#).

80 See Marina Mijatović et al 2022.

81 [IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix](#), based on [KIRS](#) periodical statistics.

82 IOM [project reports](#), January-August 2022.

83 Centre for Protection of Victims of Trafficking monthly reports, January-November 2022.

## 3.2 KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN 2022

In response to refugees from Ukraine, the Serbian authorities introduced a temporary protection regime for an initial period of one year for Ukrainian nationals and all third country nationals who had legal residence in Ukraine, also allowing for their facilitated entry into Serbian territory. In 2022, more than 1,100 persons were granted temporary protection.

Persons under the temporary protection regime are granted access to all basic socio-economic rights, including temporary residence, personal documents, healthcare, access to the labour market, primary and secondary education, legal aid, freedom of religion, accommodation etc. They also have the right to seek asylum at any time. Accommodation in line with international standards is provided to Ukrainian refugees in a specially designated centre in Vranje, which has benefitted from private sector funds. While access to health care is being provided on an ad hoc basis, in practice systemic access to health care needs to be strengthened by harmonising the relevant laws regulating health protection with the law on asylum and temporary protection.

In September 2022, the **Tool for the Introduction of the leave no one behind principle into legislative and strategic acts of the Republic of Serbia**<sup>84</sup> was created as a joint activity of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, the United Nations in Serbia, CSOs, academia, and other relevant actors. Thus, the Republic of Serbia became the first country to develop a tool that provides clear guidelines to decision-makers in understanding and applying one of the major principles of the 2030 Agenda.

In cooperation with the Institute for Public Policy and German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), UN Women supported the development and adoption of the Gender Equality Test - which is now mandatory - with accompanying Guidelines for implementation to systematically measure the effect of the legal and strategic framework on gender equality.

The new Strategy for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination for the period 2022-2030 and its accompanying Action Plan were adopted in a highly inclusive process, respectively in February and September. In addition, the Action Plan 2022-2023 for the implementation of the Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2030 was adopted during 2022.<sup>85</sup> The revised **Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women until 2030**<sup>86</sup> was adopted in February 2022, following a process assessed as not being sufficiently inclusive. It foresees reducing poverty and fighting against Gypsyism, segregation, housing discrimination, labour, social protection, and health care. The **Strategy for Deinstitutionalisation and Development of Community Based Services**, which was adopted in January 2022, is a good

step in the right direction, especially as it also envisages a ban on the placement of children below 7 years of age in residential care. This will pose a challenge to the system, which needs to be ready and ensure that children and their families have access to quality services in places where they live. This is of crucial importance, as every day spent in institutional care can be detrimental to a child's development.<sup>87</sup>

The **Law on social cards**<sup>88</sup> aims at a fairer distribution of social assistance and at a reduction of abuse through the establishment of a single Social Card Registry, connecting various public databases and enabling an overview of the social and material status of beneficiaries. During the piloting phase of the Social Card Registry (Feb-Aug 2022) around 22,000 or more than 10 per cent of the beneficiaries, mainly of Roma nationality, were removed from the social protection system due to the shortcomings of the algorithms used. Thus, in November 2022, the members of the Economic Social Cultural Rights network submitted a Legal Opinion to the Serbian Constitutional Court calling for the assessment of the constitutionality of the Law on Social Cards.<sup>89</sup>

On 10 March 2022, the National Council of the Roma National Minority adopted the **Declaration on the Abolition of Child Marriage** thanks to the consensus reached by Roma leaders, taking a significant step towards the objectives set by SDG Target 5.3. This is the first time that a national representative body of the Roma minority in Serbia has issued such a declaration, calling on Roma leaders, men and women, as well as Roma associations, to reassess the practice.

Serbia prepared and submitted an **Addendum to the Voluntary National Report to the Status of Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)** for the period 2018-2022. During the First International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) in May 2022, Serbia emphasised its commitment, inter alia, to ensure the highest standards of migrant protection, reducing migrant vulnerabilities, as well as promoting inclusion and social cohesion.<sup>90</sup>

84 See: Government of Serbia 2022a.

85 See: Government of the Republic of Serbia 2022a.

86 See Government of the Republic of Serbia 2022i.

87 See: UNICEF, [Press Release](#), 13 July 2022.

88 Adopted on February 11, 2022, it entered into force on February 25. See: Government of Serbia 2021d.

89 See: A11 Initiative for Economic and Social Rights 2022.

90 [United Nations Network on Migration](#) 2022.



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# 4 HUMAN CAPITAL

Human capital in its different dimensions – health, education, skills, knowledge, equality and mobility – has proved resilient during the Covid19 pandemic, with the increased educational attainment resulting from the adoption of key reforms.

To capitalise on these developments, more investments are needed to address unfavourable demographic dynamics, ensure that health outcomes are resilient to successive crises, and that the skills provided by the education system are in line with labour market demands and are uniformly attained, country-wide. The following paragraphs will review demographic trends including low fertility, outmigration and immigration; the evolution of educational achievements; the health system and its resilience to overlapping crises and structural constraints along with developments related to children's health; the gender equality and key achievements and challenges of women's empowerment.

## 4.1 PROGRESS AND OUTSTANDING CHALLENGES IN KEY PRIORITY AREAS

### Demographic trends

Over the last eleven years, **Serbia's population contracted by 6.9 per cent** due to the decades-long phenomenon of sub-replacement fertility and outmigration.<sup>91</sup> It is estimated that the number of women of optimal fertility (aged 20–34) fell by 17.5 per cent between 2011 and 2020.<sup>92</sup>

Serbia is a transit and migrant-sending country. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 50,000 Serbian citizens emigrate each year to Western European countries.<sup>93</sup> Migrants are predominantly younger and of reproductive age and professionals who are in demand in both Serbia and EU labour markets (e.g., medical professionals, IT technicians, drivers, construction workers).

Serbia's population is projected to contract further by one fifth by the middle of the century, making Serbia one of the countries in Europe and the world that are losing their population the fastest, with parts of the country more intensely affected. Belgrade is projected to lose 3.8 per cent of its population and Vojvodina 19.8 per cent, while Western and Southeastern Serbia will lose 28.5 per cent and 40 per cent respectively. The population will shrink less in those parts of Serbia that can attract internal migrants (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Nis and Subotica) but also in parts of the country with a younger population and higher fertility rates.<sup>94</sup>

According to the common indicators of **population ageing**, Serbia is about or slightly above the EU-27 average in 2019, with a median age of 43.4 years. With a 21.4 per cent share of people aged 65+, it is not among the demographically oldest countries in Europe and overall similar to its neighbors, Croatia and Bulgaria.<sup>95</sup>

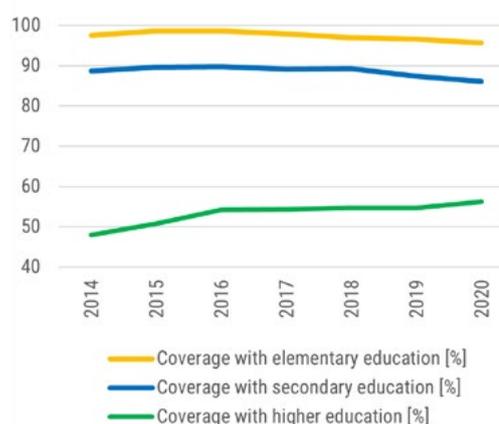
**Under the mixed-migration movements**, in the Jan-Dec 2022 period, authorities reported 124,127 new arrivals to governmental centres (compared to 60,407 in the same period in 2021). According to the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, Afghans make up 36 per cent of the arrivals, followed by arrivals originating from Syria (29 per cent), Pakistan (12 per cent), Morocco (8 per cent) and India (4 per cent). 4,102 refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants were counted in Serbia on 31 Dec 2022, of which 3,530 were accommodated in governmental centres.<sup>96</sup> Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, over 137,500 of Ukrainian citizens transited through Serbia, while a total of 2,739 refugees from Ukraine were recorded at the end of the year, with 83 being accommodated in the Vranje asylum centre.<sup>97</sup> Based on Ministry of Interior data in

2022, a total of 155,000 Russian citizens registered their residence in Serbia, but the exact number of Russian immigrants remaining in the country is not known.

### Education

The process of making education more inclusive in the Republic of Serbia gathered pace in 2009, with the entry into force of the Law on Foundations of the Education System, and many visible results have been achieved since then. The average years of total schooling for the population aged 25 and above in Serbia has been consistently rising, leading to the convergence with other countries in the region. The Human Capital Index of the World Bank indicates that Serbia's level of human capital grew in recent years,<sup>98</sup> reflecting an increase in both the expected years of schooling as and the quality of learning. Serbia now ranks higher than average for the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region, and higher than average for other upper-middle-income (UMI) countries.

Coverage with elementary, secondary and higher education (%)



The **coverage rate in the compulsory preparatory preschool program, primary and secondary education** during 2020-2021 was 96.4 per cent, 95.7 per cent and 86.1 per cent respectively, each slightly less than the previous school year (see Chart, source Statistical Office), and below the target set by SDG Target 4.1. In the school year 2021/2022, 121 migrant and refugee children were enrolled in primary and secondary education.<sup>99</sup> While 99 per cent of pupils continue education after primary school, there is significant drop-out of pupils after enrolment.<sup>100</sup> As regards preschools, the coverage of children aged 3 to 5.5 years, which had shown a growing trend during recent years, decreased to 63.7 per cent in 2020-2021. Although conditions are in place for children from vulnerable groups to have equal access to education in the Republic of Serbia, there is still more work to be done on their full inclusion. Equity of access also remains a challenge: only 10.5 per cent of children from the poorest quintile and 7 per cent of children from the Roma population were enrolled.<sup>101</sup>

91 Based on the preliminary results of the [2022 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia](#).

92 SORS 2022 f.

93 According to: OECD 2022a. It should be noted that reliable statistics on international migration are unavailable, and estimations differ significantly.

94 UNDP and UNFPA 2022.

95 Ibidem.

96 UNHCR 2022.

97 Vranje Asylum Centre is specifically designated for Ukrainian refugees. See: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

98 See: World Bank Human Capital Index showing an increase from 0.7 in 2010 to 0.8 in 2018.

99 IOM program data, 2022.

100 SORS 2022g, p. 109.

101 SORS and UNICEF 2020.

Young people attending **faculties and higher schools** in 2021 accounted for 56.2 per cent<sup>102</sup> of the total generation, with a notable reversal of the gender gap in tertiary education, similar to OECD countries.<sup>103</sup> 40.5 per cent students are financed from the national budget and 59.5 per cent are self-financing students ([SORS data-base](#)). The number of secondary vocational education and training (VET) graduates that enter higher education continue to increase, reaching 63.6 per cent in 2020 from 59.7 per cent in 2019.

Serbia participates in **international assessments**, including PIRLS, ICCS, PISA, TIMSS, ICILS, and TALIS. The results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests (performed by children aged 15) are below the average of OECD and EU countries in three measured dimensions (reading, mathematics and science). In that respect, Serbian students are 1.5 years behind their peers from the OECD countries. Significantly better results have been achieved on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) test, which is conducted in the fourth grade of primary school, and this difference might be explained by more adequate support from teachers in lower school grades.<sup>104</sup>

The ongoing orientation of new curricula in preschool, primary, secondary and vocational education towards learning processes and outcomes, and ultimately towards development of competences rather than subject content, is a key reform that requires further support from all elements of the education system, in addition to completion of the digital transformation of the education system. The focus on inclusive and competences-based education system reform was one of the key commitments by the Ministry of Education at the 2022 **Global Transforming Education Summit** organised during the 77th UN General Assembly, in line with both the SDG4 framework and the country's aspirations for joining the EU.<sup>105</sup>

The **Education 2030 Framework for Action** has set two key finance benchmarks for governments. The first is to allocate at least 4 per cent to 6 per cent of GDP to education. Serbia's expenditure on education was below this target having contracted to 3.7 per cent of GDP, compared to 4.7 per cent in the EU27. The second is to allocate at least 15 per cent to 20 per cent of public expenditure to education. In 2018, the latest year for which complete data were available, Serbia was also below target, having spent 9.3 per cent, slightly less than the average for the EU27 of 9.9 per cent.<sup>106</sup> Although the overall level of public spending on education has declined, the number of students has declined at a faster rate, and the school network is only gradually keeping pace with this change, which has produced some modest increases in per-student spending at the primary and secondary education level.<sup>107</sup>

Global citizenship education and Education for sustainable development (EDS) are very well mainstreamed in national education policies: in 2021, the Ministry of Education adopted an Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030 to implement sustainable development goals in the field of education and training. Secondary education is still optional, but this document

foresees the introduction of compulsory secondary education, which might contribute to better mainstreaming of EDS among youth.<sup>108</sup>

A special feature of the education system in the Republic of Serbia is education in the languages of national minorities. In the Republic of Serbia, 11 languages of national minorities (Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Macedonian, Romanian, Russian, Slovak, Croatian, Montenegrin and Czech) are in official use, which together with the Serbian language gives the information that there are 12 in official use in Serbia. Among the foreign languages taught in primary schools in the Republic of Serbia are English, French, German, Russian, Spanish and Italian, while small number of students learn another foreign language (e.g. Chinese, Japanese...). With this in mind a result of 94,7 per cent and 95,5 per cent of instruction hours dedicated to multilingualism in primary and lower secondary education, respectively, does not surprise.<sup>109</sup>

### Health outcome and health resilience

The Serbian **health system has made significant progress** over the last decade and coped relatively effectively with the Covid19 pandemic. Outcomes have improved and more services are delivered at lower cost. At the same time the system faces major challenges, due to the aging of the population, the introduction of new pharmaceuticals, and the development of new technologies.

Serbia produces more health workers than the OECD-average, but many medical doctors are leaving – due to calls and incentives from EU countries – leading to gaps in specialists. According to estimates, over 10,000 doctors have left Serbia in the past 20 years, with Germany the most popular destination for Serbian health professionals.<sup>110</sup> Despite the contraction of the health workforce (Institute for Public Health Batut, 2001 and 2021), the **number of doctors and nurses per 100 000 population in Serbia** – and similarly the number of hospital beds - has been stable since 1990, largely due to negative demographic trends. The numbers of doctors and nurses working in the system **remain above the average** for the World Health Organisation (WHO) European region and the EU, with variations across the country. The medical workforce tends to be concentrated in urban areas with better infrastructure, medical universities and highly specialised medical centres, and Serbia is still missing a comprehensive health workforce strategy. Since the outbreak of the Covid19 pandemic, a total of 3,800 health professionals<sup>111</sup> were newly employed by the health system throughout the country.

Universal health coverage (UHC) is attained in line with SDG Target 3.8 through the mandatory health care insurance of the whole population. **Out-of-pocket expenditures** are very high at 37 per cent of current health expenditures in 2019<sup>112</sup> compared to the EU average

102 SORS 2022g, p. 109.

103 For the 2020-21 school year, female enrolled students were 57.5 per cent of total. Ibidem, p. 125.

104 UNDP 2022c p. 24.

105 Government of the Republic of Serbia 2022k.

106 UNICEF, 2022a p. 38.

107 Ibid, p. 59.

108 UNESCO Culture 2030 Indicators in Serbia, 2022 (unpublished)

109 UNESCO Culture 2030 Indicators in Serbia, 2022 (unpublished)

110 In January 2016, faced with critical lack of workforce, Germany introduced the 'Western Balkans Regulations'. This gives citizens of the Western Balkan countries, including Serbia, the chance to take up employment in Germany, provided that they have a binding job offer and the approval of the Federal Employment Agency. This regulation, initially valid until the end of 2020, was extended to the end of 2023. In 2020 the number of Serbian-trained physicians in Germany surpassed 1,500. See: UNDP 2022c, p. 112.

111 For comparison, the total number of employees in the health sector prior to Covid-19 pandemics was 118,000.

112 WHO [Global Health Expenditure Data Base, Serbia](#), 2019.

of 15.4 per cent, which raises important fairness and effectiveness concerns. Medicines are the main driver of out-of-pocket spending, especially for the poor. Public health expenditure in Serbia has been steadily increasing in recent years, but mortality and morbidity rates from Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs) remain high. A more systematic, higher-quality data collection, better monitoring of service delivery, a sustainable health financing policy as well as assessing the performance of providers are needed to improve the health system. At the same time, the budget for tackling some of the major risk factors has been constantly decreasing, impairing the implementation of activities on NCDs prevention.

**Chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs)** account for 94 per cent of all deaths in Serbia, while 1 in 5 (19.5 per cent) are NCD deaths of those under the age of 60. Considered together, cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) and cancers account for two-thirds of all mortality. Serbian citizens tend to have unhealthy lifestyles, with low engagement in sport and recreation. Serbia made limited progress in tobacco control, and the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is not fully implemented and inadequately enforced. Use of tobacco in public places is not aligned with EU recommendations; there is no ban on smoking in the hospitality sector, and the collateral environmental pollution is severe. The new law and strategy on tobacco control was drafted and remains to be adopted.

Regarding **communicable diseases** the burden of tuberculosis (TB) has decreased significantly due to the consistent implementation of the National TB Programme in line with the WHO TB strategies, which resulted in the reduction of the TB notification rate by 80 per cent to 9/100,000 in 2019, strengthening Serbia's position among the low TB burden countries in Europe. According to the latest IPHS data, the TB notification rate in 2021 was 3.75/100,000 indicating incomplete case registration due to the Covid19 epidemic, similar to 2020 when the TB notification rate was 5/100,000.

Latest IPHS data<sup>113</sup> shows that in 2021, Serbia had registered 172 **HIV** cases, 49 new AIDS cases, and 14 AIDS deaths. Most new cases were in the age group of 30 to 49 years, and related counselling and testing has now bounced back to pre-pandemic levels.

The **impact of the Covid19 pandemic** can, among other factors, be inferred from the latest mortality data. According to data reported by Serbia to Eurostat, life expectancy at birth was 76.0 years in 2019 and declined to 74.5 years in 2020 (Eurostat, 2022), most likely due to the direct and indirect effects of the Covid19 pandemic. Excess mortality, that is, those deaths over and above what would normally be expected in a country over a specific time period, increased markedly in 2020 and 2021, and is estimated to have peaked in December 2020 (WHO 2022). In response to the pandemic, Serbia started **mass vaccination** in February 2021, sourcing large volumes of vaccines itself, in addition to doses secured by the EU and through COVAX. By mid-2022, 48.1 per cent of the population was fully vaccinated. Serbia is the only middle-income country in the WHO European Region that was selected for mRNA knowledge transfer, and activities to strengthen capacities of the National Regulatory Authority (NRA) were planned to prepare Serbia for full knowledge and technology transfer of safe vaccines, medicines,

blood, and blood products in line with WHO and EU directives.

**Mental health of adolescents** is an issue of growing concern in Serbia due to the adversities that increase risk for mental health problems, as well as the limited services for psychosocial support for this age group. According to data, both the number of children and adolescents hospitalised for psychosocial disabilities, and the number of diagnoses per child patient has been steadily increasing, while the number of doctors and mental health professionals providing mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) is decreasing.<sup>114</sup> MHPSS services in Serbia are generally not well connected with other related services such as social welfare or education, making it challenging to provide timely and adequate prevention, early detection, response, and referral to prevent the deterioration of cases of mental health issues.

The first epidemiological study of the **prevalence of mental disorders** in Serbia was conducted in 2022, targeting the adult population.<sup>115</sup> Among people aged 18-25, the diagnosis of a disorder related to the use of alcohol was three times more common compared to older respondents: as many as 19 per cent of young people used alcohol in a way that required the immediate intervention of the health service, while in the 26-65 age group the percentage was around 6 per cent. Disorders from the anxiety spectrum were diagnosed in about 6 per cent of young people, and disorders from the depression spectrum were found in about 4 per cent.

Further attention in the health sector should be given to effective, sustainable financing of disease-specific strategies, while also focusing on strengthening public health services to revert the trends in NCDs through tobacco control, enhanced attention to diet, physical exercise, and mental health. Measures related to environmental health should be strengthened. Additionally, efforts should be made to identify the main drivers and barriers toward immunisation (routine and Covid19 vaccination) and plan activities to support awareness of vaccination benefits in general and vulnerable populations<sup>11</sup>.

### Children's health

During the last ten years the **neonatal mortality declined progressively** to 4.7 per 1000 live births in 2021, similar to the EU average, achieving the global target of SDG Goal 3.2.<sup>116</sup> The under-5 mortality rate was 5.6 per 1,000 newborns (UNICEF). The maternal mortality rate which had been declining since 2012, marked an increase in 2021 to 22.5 per 100,000 live births, attributed to the Covid19 pandemic, still below the target set in SDG 3.1.<sup>117</sup> Exclusive breastfeeding has increased since 2014 (by 13 per cent) but remains low (24 per cent), even if it is broadly on a par with EU averages.

114 Pejovic-Milovancevic, M. et al. 2018.

115 See GIZ 2022. The survey was conducted in 2022 on a sample of 1,000 citizens aged 18 to 65. A similar study targeting children and adolescents up to 18 in Serbia does not exist.

116 See: Institute of Public Health of Serbia Dr Milan Jovanovic Batut 2022. The Global Goal is 12 per 1,000 live births.

117 Defined as the number of women who died during pregnancy, childbirth, or the puerperium due to complications associated with these conditions (maternal deaths) per 100,000 live births. The global target is 70 per 100,000 live births. See: Institute of Public Health of Serbia Dr Milan Jovanovic Batut 2022.

113 Institute of Public Health of Serbia Dr Milan Jovanovic Batut 2022.

In terms of **vaccination rates**, Serbia traditionally outperformed some of its European peers, though it encountered significant challenges in the last few years. In 2021, 98.2 per cent of children were vaccinated against polio, and 90.8 per cent against diphtheria, tetanus pertussis, and poliomyelitis. MMR vaccination (second doses) was performed in 74.8 per cent cases. In June 2022, the HPV vaccine, which is recommended and not mandatory, became available free of charge (covered by the Health Insurance Fund) for both boys and girls aged 9 to 19. The continued education of health professionals, parents and teachers and promotional activities among the public are further needed to fully utilise benefits of high vaccination rates with the HPV vaccine.

**Access to services remains uneven across the population**, marking more limited progress towards universal coverage set by SDG Target 3.8. Access was not necessarily related to income poverty. For example, in four Serbian districts, more than 15 per cent of children had not received MMR or HepB3 vaccinations by the age of 1.<sup>118</sup> While the public health system has made significant progress in reaching out to the Roma population with antenatal and neonatal care (the percentage of Roma children aged 24-35 months who had received full vaccination increased from 44 per cent in 2014 to 63 per cent in 2019), Roma continue to lag behind the national average of 80 per cent (UNICEF 2022).

### Gender equality and women's empowerment

According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2022,<sup>119</sup> Serbia came in 23rd out of 146 countries with its best ranking in the domain of political power and participation of women in the Government and Parliament, as well as in education, while the field of women in the economy is one of the lowest ranked. Another global survey showed that Serbia is one of seven countries in Europe that have established a system for monitoring investments in gender equality. The survey is based on unified methodology on Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) under SDG 5c1, linking the policy and legal requirements for gender equality with resource allocations for their implementation.

The new Serbian Government - sworn in on 26 October 2022 - is headed by a female and openly gay Prime Minister who is continuing her third consecutive mandate. Out of 28 ministers, only 9 are women which is a setback compared to 2020 government which had 10 women out of 23 ministers. The ministries led by women are the Ministry of Culture; Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management; Environmental Protection; Mining and Energy; Justice; European Integration; Health; Family Welfare and Demography; and Science, Technological Development and Innovation.<sup>120</sup>

Following the parliamentary elections, the 13th convocation of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, constituted on 1 August 2022, comprises 36.4 per cent women (91 MPs out of 250).<sup>121</sup> The coordination Body for Gender Equality (CBGE) was re-established by government decision on 31 October, and it is led by

Deputy Prime and Minister for Culture Maja Gojkovic.<sup>122</sup> At the local level, women remain under-represented in leadership positions. The number of women who are municipal presidents or city mayors remains very low. In 2022, out of 145 municipalities in Serbia, 17 have women municipal presidents (11.7 per cent), while 5 out of 29 city mayors (17 per cent) are women.

The position of women on the labour market in Serbia remains unfavourable in comparison to the position of men. The employment rate for men (20-64 years old) is 14.9 percentage points higher and their activity rate 15.2 percentage points higher than those for women. Although the legislation grants both maternity and paternity leaves, gender-based stereotypical preconceptions persist about childcare and household work being a woman's responsibility. Women worked 2.5 hours more per day than men on care work for children and the elderly. This is one of the largest gaps in the field of 'time' (16.2 points) between the EU-27 and Serbia in the 2021 gender equality index.<sup>123</sup>

## 4.2 KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN 2022

In 2022, several key **strategic documents and rulebooks in the education sector** have been developed and adopted focusing on the quality and access to education, including for vulnerable groups. These include, amongst other measures, the organisation of final exams for students with disabilities in primary and secondary schools, measures for the prevention of dropout, support mechanisms for achieving full inclusion into secondary education, the development of career guidance and professional orientation for students at risk and provisions on the enrolment of Roma students.

The Government of Serbia adopted the **Action Plan 2022-2023<sup>124</sup> for the implementation of the Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2030** in August 2022, upon the constitution of the Parliament. The adoption of the Action Plan for the National Strategy for Combating Gender Based Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (2022-2025) is still pending. A working Group has been formed for the creation of the National Action Plan (NAP) III for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the NAP is expected to be produced in the course of 2023. The previous NAP II expired in 2020.

In February 2022, the new **Strategy for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination** was adopted for the period 2022-2030. Its accompanying **Action Plan** was adopted in September in a highly inclusive process.

The revised **Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women until 2030** was adopted in February 2022, following a process assessed as not being sufficiently inclusive. It foresees reducing poverty and fighting against Gypsyism, segregation, housing discrimination, labour, and social protection, and health care.

118 Estimates based on Serbian Health Indicators Database, Institute of Public Health (2018 data).

119 World Economic Forum 2022a.

120 See full list: Government of the Republic of Serbia 2022e.

121 National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia 2022a.

122 Government of the Republic of Serbia 2022b.

123 SIPRU 2021.

124 Government of the Republic of Serbia 2022i.



# 5 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Serbia is progressively integrating climate action and a green transition approach towards a low carbon economy in its policies and strategies, including through the implementation of three Rio Conventions,<sup>125</sup> and guided by the [EU Green Agenda for the Western Balkans](#). During the 2021/2022 period, the country focused on multiple legislative upgrades and innovations for energy transition, fighting climate change and pollution, and protecting the environment.

Trends in priority areas such as energy efficiency, the just transition, circularity, air and water quality and disaster risk reduction are reviewed below, along with main developments in 2022.

125 Namely: UNFCCC 2015, UNCCD 1994, and UNCBD 1992.

## 5.1 PROGRESS AND OUTSTANDING CHALLENGES IN KEY PRIORITY AREAS

Key laws and policy documents have been introduced in support of the green transformation, including the first [Law on Climate Change](#) (March 2021), providing the basis for the development of the national climate policy. While the strategy on Low-carbon development is yet to be adopted, the government has pledged to the progressive decarbonisation of the Serbian economy,<sup>126</sup> which currently satisfies most of its energy demand from fossil fuels (79 per cent), including more than 66 per cent from coal (see SORS [Statistical Pocketbook](#)). This priority has become even more urgent as energy prices soared in the wake of the ongoing global energy crisis.

The cross-cutting nature of the action to fight climate change and air pollution has yet to be holistically addressed by national and local institutions. Limited cooperation between ministries and administrations at different levels, inconsistent and insufficient capacities and knowledge within line ministries to effectively address and integrate climate and environmental topics in other relevant streams of work remain a concern.

Effective engagement with citizens will be important in ensuring acceptance of a deep transformation towards a greener society and economy. There is still limited awareness about the impact of personal lifestyle choices on environmental pollution and climate change.

### Tapping the potential of energy efficiency

The adoption of the Law on **Energy Efficiency** and Rational Use of Energy in 2021, as well as the establishment of the Energy Efficiency Financing and Incentives Authority, as a hub for the distribution of financial or other benefits in support of the implementation of energy efficiency measures are significant steps forward.<sup>127</sup> Funds were allocated to the Energy Efficiency Program within the Law on the Budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2022, including earmarked resources for the insulation of central government buildings, the uptake of renewable energy in district heating, and energy efficiency measures by Serbian municipalities, also with support by donors and implementing agencies.<sup>128</sup>

The challenge of improving energy efficiency and contributing to the achievement of SDG 7.3, remains daunting as in 2020,

the country used nearly four times as much energy as the EU average to produce one euro of GDP<sup>129</sup>. **Energy intensity** remains high primarily due to the low quality of Serbian housing stock and heating systems. There is a greater interest by citizens as well as businesses for the improvement of the energy efficiency of their households: more than half of the respondents to a recent survey had undertaken various energy saving measures, while a lack of funds was reported by others as the main obstacle for not taking such action.<sup>130</sup> In support, the GoS has introduced a program for improving energy efficiency in households, with an allocation of two billion dinars to cities and municipalities for 2022, intended for the replacement of carpentry, installation of insulation, boilers and furnaces, solar collectors and solar panels etc. While this is a welcome initiative, with added benefits to address poverty, air quality, and energy security, it is important that such measures are also designed in a more inclusive way in future. Because subsidies cover only half of the investment costs, poorer families are typically unable to cover the part remaining at their charge and decide to forgo the intervention.<sup>131</sup> This concern should be – at least in part – addressed with the Regulation on the energy-endangered customer entered into force in December 2022, aimed to support the citizens through a discount on electricity, gas and thermal energy prices.

### The need for a Just Transition

The definition of a strategy for coal phase out is yet to be articulated. The coal mining sector currently contributes about 0.2 per cent of total value added<sup>132</sup> and 0.7 per cent of total formal employment (see: [SORS 2022h](#)). A UNDP scenario analysis based on International Labour Organisation methodology carried out in 2020 shows that, overall, the economy-wide impact on employment of coal phase-out would be low, with overall positive effects and notably more jobs created than lost (job creation is estimated to range from 1.7 per cent to 2.5 per cent).<sup>133</sup> At the same time, mines and coal power plants are still fundamental to the economies of rural areas, specifically the Kolubara and Kostolac regions. It is then of key importance that a participatory and inclusive process of consultations be designed, to flesh out the details of a programme that focuses both on new employment opportunities for coal miners and the overall social and economic wealth of the affected communities. Equally important is to consider the specific needs of the energy poor (estimated at 20 per cent of the population before the current energy crisis). Additionally, the coal phase out should refer to the Gender Equality Strategy – which includes measures to reduce energy poverty as a necessary part of the just transition – recognizing that it affects women in different ways than men.

126 See: Ministry of Mining and Energy of the Republic of Serbia 2022. The document is in line with Serbia's international commitments including, amongst others, those under the Paris Agreement, and those that are part of Serbia's accession to the EU process, as well as the relevant regional level processes (e.g. the 2019 [Podgorica Statement on Clean Energy Transition](#), and Regional Cooperation Council 2020, and Regional Cooperation Council 2021).

127 In designing and implementing measures to promote energy efficiency, going forward, it is important that Serbia also integrates food system emissions, in view of its high share in the combined national GHG emissions. Food system emissions accounted for 24 per cent of total in 2019, up from 22 per cent in 2015 (see FAOSTAT "Emissions shares" database).

128 Ministry of Mining and Energy of the Republic of Serbia 2021 and 2022.

129 Source: [EUROSTAT](#) Measured in kilograms of oil equivalent (KGOE) per thousand euros, Serbia's energy efficiency stood at 424.23 KGOE/1000 euros against a EU average of 116.67.

130 The survey was conducted in August 2021 on a sample of 504 respondents from all over Serbia. See: Centar za unapređenje životne sredine 2021. With the increase in energy prices, energy efficiency is likely to be an even higher priority for citizens and firms at the current moment.

131 See Danas, [Economy and Serbia: Who are the energy-poor residents?](#), 7/11/2022.

132 SORS, 2022g, page 200.

133 UNDP 2020a.

### The impact of poor air quality on citizens' health

In Serbia, as elsewhere in the Western Balkans region, **air pollution is the number one environmental threat to health and is a direct result** of low-quality, high-emission solid-fuel-based heating devices, industrial emissions including from thermal power plants, congested urban road traffic, and frequent unsanitary landfill fires. A high percentage of households – 48 per cent in the general population and 88 per cent in Roma settlements – still use outdated technologies and fuels for heating, cooking, and lighting (SORS and UNICEF 2020). Even when new, these devices are inefficient, consuming disproportionately high amounts of fuel and emitting large quantities of polluting substances.<sup>134</sup> Waste burning practices, including those aimed to extract secondary raw materials (such as the burning of copper cables in informal settlements) further aggravate the situation.

Poor air quality was estimated to cause over 6,500 deaths in 2018,<sup>135</sup> and to contribute to increased morbidity, lower quality of life, and reduced productivity through working days lost. Among 41 ranked jurisdictions in Europe, Serbia has the second highest number of years of life lost per 100,000 inhabitants due to PM 2.5 exposure.<sup>136</sup> The impact is particularly acute for children and youth.<sup>137</sup> The implementation of the Air Protection Programme 2022-2030 – adopted in December 2022 – is now expected to be a key priority for the newly appointed Government.

The measures to reduce air pollution are directly linked to those recommended for energy transition and include the decreased use of solid fuels for household heating and cooking together with replacement of inefficient devices, the reduction of emissions from industrial sites, and a change to more sustainable mobility. Further areas for improvement include better planning to increase the energy efficiency of buildings and make cities greener and more compact but also more resilient to climate shocks, the increased use of low-emission fuels and renewable combustion-free power sources, and the implementation of strategies for waste reduction, separation, recycling and reuse. Lastly, citizens' awareness can be improved through increased communication about the risks, along with the enhancement of public health professionals' capacity to use contemporary methods for health impact assessment, environmental risk monitoring and to fill gaps in knowledge through better use of epidemiological and air pollution data.

### Serbia is still at the beginning of circular economy rewiring

Serbia has been laying the foundations for a transition towards a more **circular economy**. It was the first country in the Balkans

to adopt a Circular Economy Roadmap in 2020, identifying key roadblocks, which include: low fiscal allocations and investments, along with delays in the development of key legislative documents and low implementation capacity by public and private sector stakeholders. The use of “challenge calls” to incentivise the adoption of circular solutions by SMEs and local self-governments has delivered good results. The [Draft Programme for Circular Economy 2022-2024](#) was adopted in December, while work has been initiated on developing a roadmap for food loss and waste reduction and management. At the same time, the Chamber of Commerce launched the [Circular Economy Platform](#) (see below).

The adoption of the Waste Management Program for 2022-2031<sup>138</sup> (January 2022) is an important step towards a system based on waste sorting, separating, and recycling, as well as on non-recyclable waste treatment, and has the stated goal of increasing the recycling rate of municipal waste to a total of 25 per cent by weight by 2025 and 35 per cent by 2030, thereby contributing to the achievement of SDG Target 12.5. This reform is acutely needed as **waste generation** in Serbia has increased by over 50 per cent in the last decade, approaching the average of waste per capita in EU countries, while the rate of municipal waste that is recycled continued to stagnate at around 2 per cent of total waste generated by households, against 48 per cent in the EU.<sup>139</sup> This low recycling rate is due, amongst other factors, to low awareness and resistance to change, insufficient municipal waste collection coverage (86.4 per cent), landfilling as the only “treatment” of municipal waste, inadequate capacities for recyclable waste collection, low primary separation of organic waste, the overall disposal of waste at unsanitary landfills, and the lack of facilities for the treatment of hazardous waste and of construction and demolition waste. As one indicator of the consequences of these trends, in 2021 alone, 1,715 fires occurred in landfills across the country,<sup>140</sup> polluting the ambient air and calling for an urgent reflection on the waste management-air quality-health nexus. Serbia is in the bottom half of European countries in terms of **electronic waste** (e-waste) generated per capita,<sup>141</sup> but only about 20 per cent of e-waste is collected and recycled. Serbia adopted laws that closely mirror the EU Waste from Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive (2012/19/EU) which sets collection, recycling, reuse, and recovery targets for e-waste and Directive 2011/65/EU on the use of hazardous substances in Electrical and Electronic Equipment.<sup>142</sup>

### Insufficient progress in water quality management

An increasing proportion of the population has been connected to **wastewater treatment** thanks to important national and foreign investments<sup>143</sup> to tackle pollution of water bodies due

134 Of relevance to the specific challenges Serbia faces in reducing Air Pollution, the “Gothenburg Protocol” under the umbrella of the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution, together with related guidance materials, provide a range of abatement techniques and economic instruments for emission reduction in relevant sectors. While Serbia is a Party to the Air Convention, it has not ratified the Gothenburg Protocol yet.

135 WHO Regional Office for Europe 2019.

136 Source: European Environment Agency 2020.

137 UNICEF and Government of the Republic of Serbia 2021.

138 See: Government of the Republic of Serbia 2022h.

139 See: [SORS Statistics on Waste Generation](#) and EUROSTAT 2022c for comparative data.

140 According to the Ministry of Interior's Department for Emergency Situations, as reported [in the press](#).

141 ITU, 2020.

142 See European Union 2011 and European Union 2012.

143 Balkan Green Energy News 2022a.

to the disposal of untreated wastewater. However, a survey jointly conducted by WHO and the national health authorities shows that in 2021 only 10 per cent of all households, including 16.9 per cent of urban households and 8.6 per cent of rural households, met the criteria for safe management of sanitation facilities, significantly lagging EU averages.<sup>144</sup> As regards drinking water, in 2021, only approximately 67 per cent of city water supply systems provided drinking water of adequate quality, while 33 per cent was inadequate because of physio-chemical non-compliance, microbiological non-compliance, or both (IPH 2022), with no significant variations in recent years. To accelerate progress, the legal framework for the safe management of drinking water and sanitation will need to be strengthened including through risk-based approaches and on-site sanitation systems (UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) 2019).<sup>145</sup>

International cooperation and **transboundary water management** are also important, as Serbia depends on water resources originating outside its territory (90 per cent of the waters flowing through the country transit via the Danube, Sava and Tisa rivers and other waterways). Serbia is party to the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (“Water Convention”): albeit with limited human and financial capacities in transboundary water management.<sup>146</sup> Serbia participated to the second monitoring on SDG indicator 6.5.2, which covers the period of 2020–2021 and under the Water Convention. According to 2020 data, 89.65 per cent of its transboundary waters (river and lake basins and aquifers) are covered by operational agreements or arrangements for water cooperation (SDG indicator 6.5.2).<sup>147</sup> Serbia recently concluded new water agreements with Hungary and Romania and intensified its cooperation on the Sava and Tisza River basins.<sup>148</sup>

### Protecting biodiversity by establishing protected areas and improving forestry management

In its long-term commitment to protect **biological diversity**, Serbia has established different types of protected areas, which currently amount to 7.8 per cent of the national territory (against 18.5 per cent in the EU).<sup>149</sup> In line with its obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), of which it has been a party since 2002, Serbia has submitted six successive National

144 EU averages exceed 60 per cent in all countries where reliable data is available (source: EUROSTAT). It should be noted that while almost all structures (including housing, healthcare facilities, and schools) had improved sanitation facilities, including flush toilets connected to piped water (95 per cent), a much lower proportion had “safely managed” facilities meaning that excreta are safely disposed of onsite or removed and treated offsite.

145 It is essential that access is enhanced with due regard for geographical disparities, the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups, and affordability. Efforts to enhance access can be anchored under the Protocol on Water and Health to the 1992 Convention, of which Serbia is a part.

146 The Sava river basin cooperation and cooperation with Romania are affected by governance issues (responsibility for shared water; lack of implementing mechanisms; unexpected extreme events, etc.), while cooperation with Hungary suffers a lack of information and reliable forecasts, and no agreement on this issue exists with Kosovo\*.

147 UNECE, UNESCO on behalf of UN-Water 2021.

148 UNECE 2021a.

149 See [Institute for Nature Protection of Serbia](#) and [Eurostat](#).

Reports, and established an [online database](#) to monitor progress in the implementation of its Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020 and Aichi Biodiversity Targets.<sup>150</sup> It has additionally adopted the “Nature Protection Program for 2021–2023”, aligned with the 2018 Law on the Planning System as well as with the UN Strategic Plan for the CBD 2011–2020. Since June 2020, Serbia has become a member of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem (IPBES) aimed at connecting science and politics in the area of biological diversity and ecosystem services.

When optimally managed, **forests** also play a key role in protecting biodiversity. In Serbia, they cover 29.3 per cent of the country’s total area,<sup>151</sup> which is within the EU average but below the 41 per cent projected for 2050 by the national Law on Spatial Planning and the Land Degradation Neutrality Goals defined under the Target Setting Program. Additionally, while Serbia’s original forest coverage is characterised by genetic and ecosystem diversity, current forest conditions with a low percentage of high forest and a high percentage of coppice forests result in a lower productivity and consequently lower capability to act as a carbon sink. Better forestry policies and practices should be scaled up and additional resources earmarked to tackle the illegal extraction of timber, forest fires, and pressures from the agricultural, energy, and construction sectors. A key deliverable, expected by the end of 2022, is the new forest inventory process which, in combination with updated forest management plans, will create a basis for sustainable forestry management.

### The climate crisis and other hazards increasingly affect Serbia

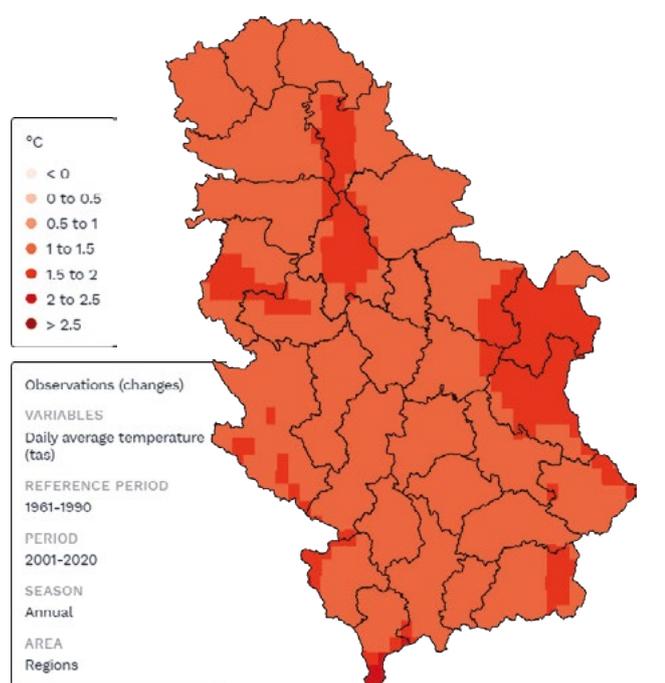
The “[INFORM](#)” [Global Crisis Severity Index](#)” places Serbia in the group of medium-risk and rather stable countries with an average score of 3 (out of 10). Nonetheless, **disasters increasingly pose risks to human lives and public health, affect Serbia’s environmental integrity and development opportunities**, including in the sectors of agriculture and cultural tourism.

A critical problem of the Serbian Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management System has been identified in the fragmentation of the institutional framework, procedures, and insufficient capacities at the central and local level for adequate prevention, preparedness and response to emergency needs of the communities and population. The recently launched [Disaster Risk Register](#) and the [Climate Change Atlas for Serbia](#), which bring together observed and projected climate change data and scenarios at the sub-regional and local level, are expected to support climate resilient planning and investment.

In the context of disaster risk reduction, it is important to leverage the potential of Nature-Based Solutions (NbS) which should be further integrated into and applied through the existing policy and institutional framework, and mainstreamed

150 Government of the Republic of Serbia 2019.

151 According to the National Forest Inventory conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management in 2006, published 2009.



Source: [Climate Change Atlas for Serbia](#)

into urban, rural, and agriculture development, among other key sectors.

Agriculture is one of the sectors most affected by extreme weather events. It is estimated that impacts will be exacerbated in future with a 22-52 per cent reduction in corn yields expected by 2071–2100 in non-irrigated areas. This is projected to impact farming-based livelihoods and the food security of the general population. Since poverty and vulnerability to disasters are closely linked, small-scale family farms in high-risk areas are particularly vulnerable, as they lack resources for mitigation, including both through risk insurance and technical measures. Additionally, cultural heritage has been impacted by an increasing number of climate-related hazards, posing new challenges to conservators and heritage managers and underpinning Serbia's strategy to protect cultural heritage from climate change.

Serbia is also vulnerable to **industrial accidents and technological disasters**, including those occurring in orphaned and abandoned mine sites, such as tailings. Enhanced capacity is needed for disaster risk reduction and emergency response, multi-hazard and multi-sectoral approaches, community resilience and cross-ministerial cooperation.<sup>152</sup> A comprehensive road map for the involvement of the health sector in the management of industrially contaminated sites is underway.

In the context of climate change and environmental degradation, along with the elderly, **children and young people** are also most affected.<sup>153</sup> The summer of 2022 ranked among the three hottest in Serbia since temperature recording began, which was a reminder of the importance of protecting children's

health during increasingly frequent, long-lasting, and intense heat waves.<sup>154</sup>

Young people tend to be more engaged into decision-making processes if they are aware of the problem and the role which they can play in solving it. In contrast, a recent survey administered to more than 800 young people<sup>155</sup> shows less than 20 per cent thought they had meaningful ways of conveying their opinions on climate policies.

## 5.2 KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN 2022

The early days of 2022 were marked by optimism, after the opening of Cluster 4 on the Green agenda and sustainable connectivity in the last days of 2021. The year was also marked by:

### Approval of the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC)

Serbia submitted its revised Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to the UNFCCC in August 2022, committing to an unconditional emissions reduction target of 13.2 per cent compared to 2010 levels, or 33.3 per cent compared to 1990 levels, by 2030. This represents an increase compared to the first NDC which aimed to reduce GHG emissions by 9.8 per cent by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. The newly submitted NDC represents an ambitious target for Serbia. Considering that over the period 2010-2019, GHG emissions in Serbia were reduced by just 2.6 per cent, efforts will be more than quadrupled during the next 8 years under the new commitment.<sup>156</sup>

### Increased environmental awareness by citizens and businesses

Environmental action by citizens continued in 2022 – albeit less intensively in view of other crises – around the themes of ongoing opposition to the lithium mine investments in Western Serbia, urban air pollution, and illegal dumpsites along the Danube. The protests were an important sign of increased awareness among citizens and a will to shape their future and contribute to both local and global environmental priorities. Citizens' activism led to the withdrawal of the spatial plan that included Rio Tinto's mine investment and the annulment of administrative acts related to Rio Tinto, even if there were claims that operations continued. The debate around the pros and cons of such controversial investment will continue as it does in other European countries, when the needs for lithium and other similar minerals are expected to grow exponentially in the years to come.

Business showed increased awareness about the urgency of the climate and ecological crisis. The Chamber of Commerce published the "[Declaration on the Green Economy](#)" and

152 UNECE 2021c.

153 UNICEF 2022c.

154 UNICEF 2022d.

155 UNICEF 2022b.

156 EU, Enlargement countries environmental statistics.

launched the [Circular Economy Platform](#) for direct communication between companies, as well as for presenting examples of good practice and new ideas, aimed at fostering new business partnerships, access to funds and investments, and the adoption of new global business trends in a faster, easier and more accessible way.

Serbia has introduced the EU Directive on non-financial reporting into domestic legislation with the new Accounting Act. This law entered into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021, obligating all companies operating in Serbia with over 500 employees to publish non-financial reports for the previous year, i.e. 2020. Non-financial reporting (or as it is also called sustainability reporting or corporate responsibility reporting) is expected to bring more transparency on the environmental, economic, and social impact of business practices in Serbia.

### Summer 2022 heat wave and drought

It is characteristic of the complexity of the current crisis, that while acting on the root causes of the climate emergency, Serbia must simultaneously tackle the consequences of a changing climate. One notable example of this conundrum was the protracted heat wave and drought during the summer of 2022, which resulted in the loss of hydroelectric power,<sup>157</sup> reduced agricultural production by 20-30 per cent, and created health hazards which particularly affected the elderly and most vulnerable.

### Approval of key policy documents at the end of 2022

In December 2022, key policy documents were adopted including the [Air Protection Program in Serbia until 2030](#) with a related Action Plan for the period until 2026, the [“Circular economy development programme in Serbia until 2024”](#) and the Regulation on vulnerable energy customers. The air protection program is a long-awaited first of a kind public policy document which establishes a clear link between air pollution and human health, while proposing a set of measures to reduce air pollution and providing a basis for further development and adoption of by-laws and continued application of European legislation in areas of air protection. The Circular Economy programme defines the priorities for the next three years and lays the groundwork for the further development of the circular economy and the creation of a stimulating environment for the development of the green transition in Serbia. Finally, the regulation on vulnerable energy customers defines the categories of those citizens who exercise the right to reduce their monthly obligation to pay for electricity, and provides funds in the amount of 1,500,000,000 dinars for this purpose.

### Sustainable Urban Development

Serbia is committed to transforming urban settlements so that they are sustainable, inclusive, resilient, and safe for

all citizens, and specifically for young people, women, and other vulnerable social groups. Recognizing the centrality of urban spaces for the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the potential that urban settlements carry as generators of development activities, in 2022, the GoS started the process for the revision of the Urban Development Strategy, and for the development of the Action Plan for the Strategy's Implementation. The GoS additionally actively participated in the [World Urban Forum \(WUF11\)](#), held for the first time in Eastern Europe, featuring caucuses of urban development in the region and showcasing its achievements in sustainable urban renovation. Serbia was among only 13 countries globally to organise a [National Urban Forum](#) in the lead up to the WUF11. The event reviewed key developments and policies including the National Housing Strategy, Energy Efficiency Strategy and National Architectural Strategy, and discussed directions for the revision of the Urban Development Strategy. Among others, the main conclusions of the National Urban Forum in Belgrade were the importance of dialogue, cooperation, sharing of good practices, and financing of urban development from both local resources and through a blending of private and public resources.

<sup>157</sup> Djerdap One, one of the largest hydropower-plants, produced 40 per cent less in July 2022 than in the previous year.



# 6 ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

The Serbian economy has overall proved resilient to the pandemic and to the initial impact of the war in Ukraine. The economy expanded at a record pace in 2021 and in the first two quarters of 2022, although growth sharply decelerated in later months and is currently estimated at about 3.2 per cent for 2022 overall. A key concern from the point of view of **people-centred development** is whether increased economic growth has translated into increased welfare for Serbian families in 2022, especially for the most vulnerable, and the remainder of this section will explore this point.

For conciseness, both short and long-term trends are summarised here – without a dedicated 2022 section – and with a focus on the resilience and inclusiveness of the Serbian economy, labour market trends, macroeconomic trends, the lack of depth of Serbia’s financial market, the rate of internet penetration and the development of trade and transport infrastructure.

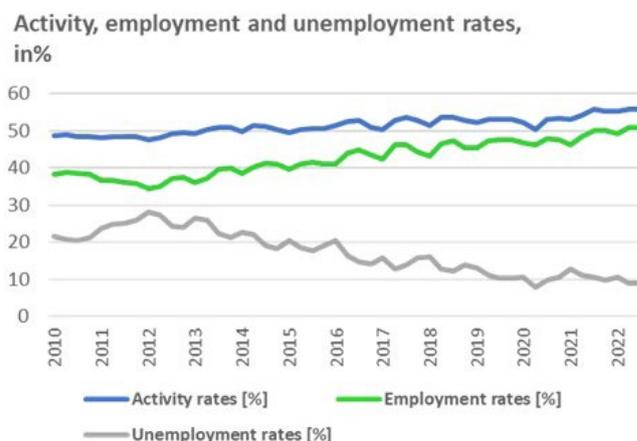
### Serbia's economy shows relative resilience to multiple, overlapping crises

The Serbian economy proved relatively resilient to the cascading crises that have rocked global markets over the last three years. After a contraction of less than 1 per cent in 2020, GDP grew by close to 7.5 per cent in 2021 and growth continued well into 2022, with a gradual slowdown in the later months of the year.<sup>158</sup> In per capita terms, the cumulative rate of growth in GDP expressed in euros was almost 7 per cent over the last five years.

This overall positive performance was due to factors including: i) the relatively modest share of international tourism<sup>159</sup> – which was one of the sectors most severely affected by the Covid19 pandemic – in the Serbian economy; ii) Serbia's limited financial, trade and investment ties with Russia and Ukraine,<sup>160</sup> as well as Serbia's relatively stable macroeconomic fundamentals prior to these multiple crises.

### Inclusiveness: Growth versus human-centred development

On average, salaries have grown more than inflation, or in other terms have grown by 0.9 per cent year-on-year to September 2022 in real terms, meaning over and above inflation<sup>161</sup>. While this is a positive development it is not sufficient to ensure that economic growth translates in human-centred development. In fact, inflation hits persons earning the lowest incomes the hardest because they consume more of their total income (or in other terms they save less). In addition, they spend a higher share of their income on food and energy, the prices of which have increased the most. Second, pensions and the minimum wage in Serbia are both only adjusted to inflation once a year in January<sup>162</sup>. For this reason, the income of pensioners' and of persons earning the minimum wage were disproportionately impacted by the high inflation rate in 2022. This is especially concerning when considering that the average pension is – according to the Pension and Disability Insurance Fund – only 39.3 per cent of the average salary, and for farmers it is only 16.9 per cent of the average salary, and additionally, that a large part of the salaried workforce only earns the minimum wage. Third, inflation is calculated on a fixed basket of goods



Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

that – according to independent observers<sup>163</sup> – does not cover actual living costs.

The stimulus measures – including cash handouts – **cushioned the impact of the successive crises for the most vulnerable** citizens by providing a source of income and allowing for payment obligations to be postponed. These measures continued in 2022 in diverse formats and were supplemented by **price caps on essential consumer goods**, electricity, and fuel. These measures could have been more impactful **and better oriented to the priority of LNOB** if they specifically targeted those in need and included income or other eligibility thresholds. In their current form, they risk being received by citizens that are not in need, while overlooking some categories most at risk of poverty. Likewise, price caps and subsidised energy prices<sup>164</sup> – with a stated aim of price-controlling inflation and protecting vulnerable households – are a very blunt instrument to achieve these goals, as price caps disproportionately benefit the wealthiest households that consume larger quantities and disincentivise the adoption of energy efficiency measures.

As Serbia progressively aligns energy prices with international market prices, and further, to a level that matches the full price of carbon – including its impact on planetary and human health – the vulnerable groups must be prioritised through more carefully targeted policy measures.<sup>165</sup>

158 According to estimates by SORS, GDP growth was 2.3 per cent in 2022 year on year. See SORS 2022b.

159 In 2019 the share of travel and tourism in Serbia's GDP was 5.9 per cent, against 24.8 per cent and 30.8 per cent in Croatia and Montenegro respectively. (Source: World Travel and Tourism Council).

160 The combined exports to these two countries averaged about 6 per cent of Serbia's total exports during the 2015-2020 period, while combined imports averaged 10 per cent but with a significant drop in 2020. (Source: IMF DOTS). FDI flows fluctuated in the same period at around 7 per cent in 2016 and 2017, with a high of 15.14 per cent in 2019 and then dropping to around 1-2 per cent in 2020 and 2021. (Source: NBS).

161 SORS 2022i

162 In January 2022, pensions were increased by 5.5 per cent. This is below inflation, so, in real terms, pensions decreased by 6.9 per cent year-on-year in August 2022 (latest data available). Source: *Bulletin*, August 2022, Ministry of Finance.

163 For example the [Clean Clothes Campaign international network](#) estimated that the living wage in Serbia is 114,752 dinars and that the coverage of the living wage by the minimum wage was only 28 per cent. The Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Serbia has likewise estimated that the minimum wage is no longer enough to cover the minimum consumer basket.

164 Currently, in Serbia, electricity and gas prices are capped to a level that is among the lowest in Europe. In the first half of 2022 electricity prices for household consumers in Serbia were 0.08 EUR/KWh, while the EU average was 0.25 EUR/KWh. Natural gas prices were 0.03 EUR/KWh while the EU average was 0.09 EUR/KWh. (Source: EUROSTAT)

165 It has been estimated that an increase in energy prices, if not mitigated, could bring up to 10 per cent of Serbian households into energy poverty, in addition to the existing 20 per cent. Energy poverty is defined as a state in which the household does not have at its disposal sufficient opportunities to provide the necessary amount of energy required for a healthy and dignified life in a way that does not endanger other basic life needs of the household or the wider community.

## Key long term economic trends

Serbia's macroeconomic situation is overall stable: the national bank preserved a high level of foreign exchange reserves and avoided excessive fluctuations in exchange rates. Financing conditions deteriorated in the first half of 2022 as indicated by low subscription rates at auctions of government debt on the domestic market, although investor confidence picked up later in the year.<sup>166</sup> This prompted the Government to reach out to the IMF to obtain about €2.4bn on a 24-month stand-by arrangement<sup>167</sup>. The current most pressing concern is **inflation**, which was at a high of 15.1 per cent on an annual basis in December 2022<sup>168</sup> and is expected to reduce real incomes and thus private consumption, weaken firms' competitiveness on export markets, prompt additional interest-rate hikes, and further depress the economy. Second, the **current account deficit** – that is the difference between exports and imports – increased by 49.5 per cent in the period January-September 2022 year on year.<sup>169</sup> Finally, the **debt to GDP ratio** in November 2022 was 53.5 per cent of GDP, down from 56.5 at the end of 2022.<sup>170</sup> Even with a lower debt stock, higher interest rates inflate the interest payments component in the national budget, **compressing the share potentially available to social and environmental priorities**. On a positive note, higher fiscal revenues were achieved due to better tax collection, which will contribute to rebalancing the Government budget and to the priority of sustainable development.

The large role of the state in the economy,<sup>171</sup> coupled with the narrow depth of the Serbian financial markets<sup>172</sup> **limits the overall availability of capital on the Serbian financial market**. This is a factor that needs to be further analyzed, in terms of its implications for financing the transformation of the Serbian economy towards a low-carbon, energy efficient and resilient model.

## Evolution of the labour market

In 2022, the **labour market in Serbia** continued its strong 2021 performance, also thanks to the introduction of active measures for employment support measures in 2022. In the fourth quarter of 2022, the total number of employed persons increased 2.4 per cent year on year ([SORS](#)).

The **gender gap in employment** is still pronounced. Women have lower rates of activity and higher rates of unemployment than men. The economic activity of women was 15 per cent lower than that of men, respectively at 48.6 per cent against

63.7 per cent ([SORS database](#)).<sup>173</sup> The unemployment rate was 8.4 per cent for men and 9.6 per cent for women. Caring for the family is a much more frequent reason for inactivity among women than among men.<sup>174</sup> The latest survey of the Academy of Women's Entrepreneurship "Economic value of unpaid work in the household and unpaid services in the community at the local level" shows that unpaid work in the household is a consequence of traditional gender roles as well as the lack of services at local level. Women spend between 3 and 4 hours daily on unpaid care work, on average, which amounts to 72,000 RSD monthly, when calculated with market prices for these services.<sup>175</sup>

In the field of **labour market governance**, in 2021 Serbia adopted a new National Employment Strategy for 2021-2026, and an accompanying action plan 2021-2023. Inconsistencies between the Serbian labour law, the EU acquis and international labour standards, specifically as regards foreign workers and inspections, remain to be addressed. There is also a persistent shortage in labour inspectors, as the recruitment of additional labour inspectors, to reach the target of 360 inspectors by end 2020 according to chapter 19 action plan, was delayed,<sup>176</sup> Additionally, a major persistent gap is the low budget allocation to active labour market policies (ALMPs). These interventions are particularly important to support the integration of hard to employ groups in the labour market, and **build skills for the green transformation**.<sup>177</sup> Together with the National Alliance for Local Economic Development (NALED), the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Serbia launched a "[Program for Suppression of the Gray Economy 2022-2025](#)" in February 2022, representing a continuation of Government action in this field.

**Average net salaries** also increased and were up by 16.5 per cent in nominal terms and by 2.9 per cent in real terms year on year but remain among the lowest in Europe. Low wages mirror low labour productivity. A firm located in Serbia needs three times as many workers per unit of output as one in the EU (World Bank (WB) 2020e). Low productivity is - itself- the result of several long term and entrenched challenges including the inefficiency of state-owned enterprises (SoE), which drives down the country's total productivity; limited investments in science and research; a mismatch between jobs and skills, which results in shortages for specific professionals; and a regulatory and administrative environment that only partially responds to the needs of businesses. These challenges hamper not only performance but also the availability of resources for investment in energy efficiency and innovations needed for the green transformation.

166 See: Ministry of Finance 2022 and supporting [data](#) available on the website of the Public Debt Administration.

167 See IMF, 2 November 2022. Additionally, during the summer, Serbia secured a €1 billion low interest loan from the UAE (see: [Serbian Gov](#)).

168 SORS 2022a.

169 SORS 2022b.

170 Ministry of Finance 2023.

171 In 2021, the percentage of employees in the public sector accounted for 26.56 per cent of total registered employment. See: SORS 2022h.

172 The Belex 15 turnover taken as a loose proxy of the capitalisation of the Belgrade stock market, has not yet bounced back to its pre-financial crisis level and has further contracted in 2022.

173 For context, the gender gap in employment was 4 points lower in Europe ([Eurostat](#)) in 2021 (latest data available).

174 Among persons who are not employed and are not looking for employment due to taking care of children or other family members, 97 per cent are women. See: "Women Entrepreneurship 10 years later" a survey supported by UN Women and EU.

175 Academy of Women's Entrepreneurship "Economic value of unpaid work in the household and unpaid services in the community at the local level" (Subotica, Sombor, Vrbas, Kula, Bač, Bačka Palanka, Bеојин) as reported in the [press](#).

176 See: European Commission 2022.

177 Spending on ALMPs remained at just 0.1 per cent of GDP, one of the lowest levels in the region. See: OECD 2022b.

The **non-taxable component of salaries** was raised (from 18,300 to 19,300 RSD as of January 2022) and is set to be raised further to 21,712 RSD in January 2023 ([GoS 2021a](#)). This threshold **remains high for people with low salaries, potentially discouraging the legalisation of labour and contributing to economic informality**. While the minimum wage has been increased, the high proportion of workers earning a minimum wage in Serbia is a pressing concern.

The share of young people (15–29-year-olds) not in employment, education or training (NEET) also decreased from 20 per cent in 2020 to 16.4 per cent in 2021 and to 13.2 per cent in the second quarter of 2022,<sup>178</sup> as Serbia continued to implement the “My First Salary” programme. Steps were taken to gradually establish the **Youth Guarantee Programme (YGP)**, a major youth employability programme supported by the EU, but the related implementation plan covering the period 2023–2025, has yet to be adopted, while the piloting of the YG service delivery system as well as outreach activities are planned for 2024. The awaited **draft Law on Internships** is also incorporated in the YGP implementation plan.

A Survey by SeCons Group for Development “Women Entrepreneurs 10 years later” shows that in the period between 2011 and 2021, the total number of active **entrepreneurs** and companies increased (including registered entrepreneurs and persons who are simultaneously (co)owners and main representatives of companies) from 323,556 to 408,545, and the participation of women’s businesses in total entrepreneurship also increased from 28.1 per cent to 31.2 per cent. The sectoral structure of women’s entrepreneurship is still significantly different from men’s, with noticeable changes including a significant decline in trade and a slight decline in catering, whereas there is an increase in the share of business in the sector of professional, scientific, innovative, and technical activities.<sup>179</sup>

### ICT contribution to sustainable development

Serbia has made **significant progress in the ICT sector**. Most of the population has access to the Internet; 81.2 per cent of individuals used the Internet in 2021, a notable increase from 40.9 per cent in 2010, while 81.5 per cent of Serbian households have Internet access at home and 74.3 per cent of internet users have social media. Active mobile-cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants were 96.4 per cent in 2019 (International Communications Union (ITU) 2019b), making Serbia the country with the highest penetration rates for mobile services in the Balkans (ITU 2018). Still, **Internet access remains expensive for low wage earners**: the average fixed-broadband basket costs 2.7 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI) per capita (compared to an average of 1.3 per cent in Europe in 2021 [[ITU 2021](#)]). Decreasing prices would make access more inclusive and foster competition and innovation among traditional industries.

**While women are generally equal to men in terms of meaningful access to the Internet** (e.g. accessing a bank account online and

uploading content), the difference in advanced skills is more prominent, with men overall more capable of installing software, changing software settings and writing code.<sup>180</sup> The Serbian ICT field is heavily male-dominated: while gender equality in technology ecosystems is in line with global averages and, in some areas, higher than in the EU, the participation of women should be promoted more. Women and girls should be encouraged to study ICT subjects and learn coding at a young age (only 28 per cent of ICT students and 14.2 per cent of programmers are women)<sup>181</sup>. The Statistical Office’s survey on SDG goals also showed that youth used ICT to a greater extent than the rest of the population.<sup>182</sup>

The **digitalisation of government services** has been upgraded with adoption of the 2020–2025 artificial intelligence strategy and its implementing action plan for 2020–2022, as well as with the setting up of a Research and Development Institute for Artificial Intelligence and the ‘Smart Serbia platform’. Progress has been made on public access to institutional data thanks to the national open data portal, while the Law on e-invoicing, which entered into force on the 1 January 2022 with a phased implementation schedule, is also expected to reduce operating costs for companies as well as increase transparency.

The robust growth of the information and communication sector continued, with exports of ICT services in 2021 valued at EUR 1,857 million, an increase close to 30 per cent from 2020. The **Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution was launched by the Government of Serbia** and the World Economic Forum, with support from UNDP, with a foreseen investment of more than EUR 200 million in faculties, research institutes, science and technology parks at the BIO4 campus.

**New and critical risks related to digitalisation** have emerged both globally and locally, including: i) the “infodemic”, which exploded on both social and traditional media in the wake of the Covid19 pandemic, challenging science and knowledge, contributing to hate speech and threats to democracy and increasing mental health concerns among youth; ii) new forms of marginalisation for persons, groups and communities unable to access digitalised services have emerged; and iii) energy-intensive digitalisation, which further weighs in the supply/demand energy balance, in a context of sharp price increase.

### Agriculture and food industry

In 2021, **agriculture, forestry, and fishing accounted for 6.3 per cent of GDP**, representing Serbia’s fourth largest sector. With the food processing industry, the sector generated 9.4 per cent of Serbia’s GDP (SORS 2021b), even as the summer drought and high costs of fertiliser inputs led to failed crops. Employment in agriculture, forestry and fishing is particularly high (15 per cent) ([SORS 2021](#)). Serbia is a net food exporter, with food and agriculture contributing 18 per cent of total exports, particularly towards the EU and countries of the Central

178 Western Balkans Youth Lab 2022.

179 SeConS 2022.

180 SIPRU 2021 and ITU and UN Women 2021.

181 ITU and UN Women 2021

182 SORS 2022d.

European Free Trade Agreement. Increasing ICT penetration and enhancing the adoption of advanced technologies in Serbian agriculture are key to developing the sector and foster productivity growth. Currently, only 14 per cent of farmers report adopting smart farming technologies, and 81 per cent report that the high cost of farming equipment is the primary reason for not adopting smart technologies. A significant majority (94 per cent) stated that they would adopt such technologies if subsidies were made available (ITU and Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 2020).

Serbia will have to develop a new Strategy for agriculture and rural development as the current one expires in 2024. This will be an excellent opportunity to address key developmental challenges, such as competitiveness, environmental sustainability, circularity with linkage to food loss, decarbonisation, underdevelopment of rural areas, and gender equality. The progressive alignment of the Strategy with the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and the integration of the principles of the [EU Green Deal, Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies](#), would be key to making the agricultural sector more environmentally and socially sustainable. Other outstanding reforms include the development of a Code of Good Agricultural Practices and the implementation of a requirement that beneficiaries of direct payments comply with Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions. A platform was established in 2020 to report on agriculture and rural development support at the provincial and local levels and to monitor women's participation in the support programme.

Finally, the adoption of a **food systems perspective**, as discussed in preparation for the 2021 World Food Summit and reflected in [Serbia's National Pathway](#), would help promote nature-positive production methods and regenerative agriculture to support poverty reduction, gender equality, environmental protection, improved nutrition and the enhanced competitiveness of Serbian farms and SMEs.

### Trade, transport and connectivity

Gains from participation in **regional and international trade and investment networks** could be further consolidated by implementing reforms jointly identified by the GoS and the UNCT, including enhanced dialogue with the private sector, the transition to a paperless trading environment, further simplification and strengthening of border-crossing points, and the development of the national system of quality infrastructure (standardisation, conformity assessment, market surveillance, and metrology).<sup>183</sup> Progressing toward the accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), ongoing since 2005, is a declared GoS priority that would also contribute to enhanced productivity, e.g. by pushing forward trade facilitation reforms.

The development of a modern, low carbon and efficient transport infrastructure is an important priority for the Government of Serbia, as evidenced by its prominence in the [National Investment Plan](#) and significant recent achievements (e.g., the

launch of the Belgrade- Novi Sad railway connection in March 2022). Further efforts are needed to ensure that transport is people-centred, gender-responsive and fully integrated in the national sustainable development strategy, including specifically the need for a transport master plan; the rehabilitation of road infrastructure in poor conditions particularly in rural areas, which currently hinders agricultural development; and the further development of intermodal transport and railway infrastructure, in line with the priorities set forth in the [Strategy for Sustainable and Smart Mobility in the Western Balkans](#) and the Western Balkans Economic and Investment Plan.<sup>184</sup>

### Creative industry

Creative industries make a significant sector in the Serbian economy with a share of 3.4 per cent - 7.1 per cent of GDP, depending on whether a narrower or broader definition of creative industries is taken. According to the UNESCO Culture for Development Indicators, contribution of the culture activities to GDP was 3.90 per cent in 2015.<sup>185</sup> Creative industries in Serbia are growing faster than the rest of the economy. GVA - gross value added - of this sector increased by 16.4 per cent from 2014 to 2016, higher growth than all other sectors of the Serbian economy in that period.

The creative industries sector consists of over 30,000 registered enterprises, mostly small, medium and micro enterprises, employing 100,000 workers, with almost 70 per cent between the ages of 25 and 44 years.<sup>186</sup> When it comes to cultural institutions, there were 520 registered institutions with 10,816 employees in 2017. 58.8 per cent of the employees were women, with 46.2 per cent as directors of these institutions.<sup>187</sup> Covering both of the above categories, the employees with occupations in the area of culture and creative sector account for 3.14 per cent of the overall working population of Serbia.<sup>188</sup>

Households' expenditures for culture in Serbia is 2.59 per cent of the total household expenditures. A higher share in the expenditures of households on culture is occupied by services, goods and products from the area of central cultural activities: buying tickets for cultural content, buying media (blank and unrecorded CDs, tapes, cameras), books, newspapers, jewellery and watches - 87.25 per cent of all culture-related expenditures, namely 2.26 per cent of the overall consumption of the household. Activities involving support and equipment: recording music and shooting films, photography, processing of information, repair of audio-visual, IT and photography equipment) account for 12.75 per cent of expenditures on culture.<sup>189</sup>

183 UNECE 2021b.

184 Please see European Parliament 2022.

185 UNESCO Culture for Development Indicators in Serbia, 2019

186 <https://www.serbiacreatives.rs/tekst/sr/18/kreativne-industrije.php>

187 Institute for Study in Cultural Development, 2017

188 UNESCO Culture for Development Indicators in Serbia, 2019

189 UNESCO Culture for Development Indicators in Serbia, 2019



# 7 RISK ANALYSIS

This multidimensional analysis presents the risks that could impact Serbia's development trajectory and hamper national efforts to achieve the SDGs, reduce inequalities and exclusion, and meet the obligations of international human rights laws. **Table 1** presents an assessment of the risks grounded in the UN-established 12-factor multidimensional risk analysis, augmented with Covid19 related risks and the heightened geopolitical volatility in the wake of the Russian military intervention in Ukraine.

Monitoring and managing risks are important to both SDG achievement and EU accession, as these require major reforms to be carried out in a consultative, coherent, and forward-looking manner.

**TABLE 1** Multidimensional risk analysis

SDG	RISK AREAS	DESCRIPTION	SCOPE	LIKELIHOOD	IMPACT	EARLY WARNING SIGNS
ALL	Political environment	Risks of heightened regional tensions based on unresolved conflict legacies and the deteriorating regional geopolitical situation	Heightened tensions among regional partners	High	High	
			Continuation of inflammatory narratives in the political space	High	High	Public statements in country and region, tolerance towards public depiction glorifying war legacies
			Prolonged EU accession process	High	High	Reported lack of progress under chapters 23 and 24
ALL	Governance and institutional capacity	Risks to institutions that would hinder the full realisation of inclusive, gender-responsive development	Limited capacity for comprehensive risk management	Medium	High	
			Limited commitment to fully embrace accountability and transparency frameworks	Medium	High	Limited impact of public discussions with stakeholders and civil society
			Centralised political system that could impede localisation of development initiatives	High	Medium	
			Limited capacity for inclusive evidence-based policymaking	Medium	High	Adoption of policies in urgent procedures
			Capacity gaps to respond to reform needs and resistance to change	Medium	High	Indicators reporting lack of reformative action in rule of law
10, 16, 17	Justice and rule of law	Risks to the fair, effective and comprehensive implementation of the principles of justice, rule of law and accountability to issues	Political influence on the appointment and independent action of the judicial system	Medium/High	High	Reported risks to independence and effectiveness of the judiciary
			Implementation gap of legislation and policies on human rights issues	Medium/High	High	Threats reported against groups of rights-holders
10, 16, 17	Democratic space / civil society voice and participation	Risks to democratic and human rights institutions, and to civil and political rights resulting from shrinking civic space, exclusion, repression, and intimidation	Limited space for civil society and human rights Defenders unable to exercise mandate	Medium-High	Medium-High	Reported threats to HRDs and low impact of their participation in public processes
			Obstruction of media and civic actors	Medium-High	High	Repeated reported threats towards journalists and reported lack of media pluralism
			Limited inclusion of young people, women and other groups in social and political life	Medium	High	
			Mechanisms of engagement between citizens and the State are not effective leading to disenfranchisement and degradation of public trust	Medium	Medium	

SDG	RISK AREAS	DESCRIPTION	SCOPE	LIKELIHOOD	IMPACT	EARLY WARNING SIGNS
1, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11	Social cohesion, gender equality and non-discrimination	Risks to social unity and equality resulting from direct and indirect discrimination, horizontal inequalities and demographic trends	High entry barriers to the labour market and inequalities in access	High	High	
			Rural-urban divide	High	High	
			Intergenerational gap	Medium	High	
			Insufficient attention to informal sector and care work	Medium	Medium	Position of informal workers during COVID-19 outbreak; reported cases of labour force abuse under foreign investments
			Gender-based violence and discrimination	Medium-High	High	
		Insufficient attention to social capital, education and skills development for vulnerable groups	Medium-High	High		
3, 6, 7, 11, 12, 16, 17	Public health	Risks to the population, economy and LNOB priorities, resulting from actual and emerging health emergencies	Prevention and response to new COVID-19 waves	Medium	High	Prevalence of new variants on total new cases of COVID-19
			Public resistance to vaccinations	High	High	Low percentage of fully vaccinated on total population
			Increase in preventable or treatable health issues	Medium	Medium	Percentage of people living with obesity or overweight, tobacco use
			Limited dual track capacities during emergencies	Medium	Medium	Long waiting lists for elective care
			Air pollution and other pollutants affect public health, including smoking	High	High	PMA concentration in the air of major urban centres
1, 2, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16	Economic stability and growth	Risks to economic growth and stability, resulting from structural inefficiencies and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian military intervention in Ukraine	Supply chain constraints limit Serbia's export capacity	Medium	Medium	Container shortages Increased prices of international transport Hoarding/panic buying
			Deterioration of international financial markets leading to higher interest rates	Low	Medium	High Government/private debt in major world economies Trends in housing prices and mortgage debt Increasing inflation Consumer-led growth
			Protectionist policies by partners constrain exports-led growth	Low	Low	Trade tensions on international markets leading to retaliatory tariffs
			Limited development of the financial sector makes firms unable to access funds needed for the transformation to a low carbon economy	Medium High	High	Risk aversion of Serbia's banks Insufficient market capitalisation of the stock market
			Limited access to global markets; Open Balkan initiative/ Common Regional Market not fully embraced	Medium	Low	Further delays in the WTO accession Trade facilitation/behind the border barriers not addressed

SDG	RISK AREAS	DESCRIPTION	SCOPE	LIKELIHOOD	IMPACT	EARLY WARNING SIGNS
6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15	Environment and climate change	Risks to the ecology of the territory, its ecosystem and its people resulting from issues associated with the environment, climate and natural resources	Lack of vision and commitment to implementing structural reforms needed to boost low carbon growth	High	High	Civil society not meaningfully involved in the development of policies and regulations  Lacking ambition for reform efforts
			Limited capacities and skills to implement the green agenda	Medium-High	High	
			Insufficient & ineffective coordination of all development efforts	Medium-High	High	
			Unsustainable production/ consumption patterns, including in agriculture and forestry	High	High	Infrastructure projects not completed on time  Environmental policies not enforced  Environmental incentives not incorporated into COVID-19 stimulus packages
			Increased frequency of extreme weather events and resulting natural hazards (e.g. river floods, droughts, landslides, fires, etc.)	High	High	Infrastructure not resilient to climate change impacts  Low percentage of irrigated land
3, 8, 16, 17	Population decline and rapid ageing of the population	Risks from depopulation to environmental and societal sustainability	Outmigration affecting national and local capacities for development	Medium/High	High	Surveys show that a growing percentage of the population has plans to emigrate or an intention to emigrate
			Future influx of migrants/ refugees not integrated effectively in the labour market	Medium	Low	Increasing anti-refugee/migrant sentiments



# 8 REGIONAL ANALYSIS

Serbia has pursued a policy of regional cooperation and bilateral relations have improved with countries in the region. Relations with Croatia have become politically more volatile recently, while in contrast those with Albania have grown to a historic closeness. While relations with Montenegro can be challenging, both sides have recently signalled their intention to substantially improve relations and actively address the open issues between them. Serbia's participation in the EU-facilitated Dialogue on the normalisation of relations with Pristina, as well as its role in support of a unitary state of Bosnia and Herzegovina per the Dayton agreement, are largely handled as specific matters, rather than in the rubric of regional cooperation. Nonetheless, both matters add unique challenges to participation in region-wide forums and initiatives. Divisive and ethnic-nationalist narratives remain a continuing and frequent feature of public discourse in Serbia and throughout the region.

In general, Serbia now leads or participates in numerous **regional governmental cooperation initiatives**. These include Serbia's active role in the Central European Free Trade Agreement, the Transport Community, the Berlin Process, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the South East Europe Cooperation Process, and the Energy Community Treaty, among others.

Even as efforts for regional integration have intensified, trade with partners in the Western Balkans has decreased over the years as a percentage of total trade, both as regards imports and exports. The share of the Western Balkans contracted from 22 per cent to 16 per cent as regards exports and from 5 per cent to 4 per cent as regards imports from 2012 to 2021. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from the Western Balkans remains a small fraction of total FDI in Serbia, while increasing from 1 to 3 per cent of total from 2010 to 2019.

Since 2019, Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia have cooperated in developing the regionally-based "**Open Balkan Initiative**", seeking to establish a zone free of residual barriers to the flow of people, goods, services and capital. It is intended to be open to all members of the EU's "Western Balkans 6", including Kosovo, who have so far shown varying degrees of political acceptance of this initiative. Serbia also participates in the Common Regional Market initiative of the EU-oriented Berlin process, which has similar aims though with a different geographical footprint.

Public investment continues to increase, especially in infrastructure improvement. At the level of small and medium enterprises, many businesses face significant challenges from an uneven playing field when competing with larger companies and foreign investors.

The wide-ranging economic and political reverberations of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine have placed Serbia and other leading regional actors under pressure to respond adequately and mutually supportively, while also generating tensions because of Serbia's position vis a vis the sanctions. Cooperation between Tirana and Belgrade has so far proven particularly effective in this respect, mainly in handling the exogenous shock to energy resources, supply and exchange of essential goods and market and macroeconomic stability.

In the field of combatting trans-regional and international organised crime networks, Serbia cooperates extensively with Eurojust, Interpol and Europol, including on high-profile cases. Serbia maintains a full-time seconded prosecutor in Eurojust. The lack of adequately developed bilateral law enforcement cooperation with neighbouring authorities in the region, however, presents some obstacles to effective action against major crime networks of the region.

**Regional cooperation on gender equality and women's empowerment is advancing.** Several initiatives focus on gender-responsive governance in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia<sup>190</sup> and combat violence against women throughout the region.<sup>191</sup> Efforts for the recognition of the transformational potential of women's leadership, including at regional level, are high among UN and partners' priorities.

### Key Developments in 2022

The Strategic Work Plan 2023-2025 of the RCC was approved in June 2022, prioritising regional economic integration, green and digital transformation, reducing poverty and narrowing the existing social, economic, and environmental divergences with the European Union.<sup>192</sup>

At the WB-EU ministerial meeting, organised within the Berlin Process in Berlin in October 2022, three regional agreements – on the Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards, on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications and on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors of Medicine, Dentists and Architects – were adopted.<sup>193</sup> Additionally, the [WB Soil Partnership](#) was established in November 2022.

The EU-Western Balkans summit took place in Tirana, in December 2022, and discussed the consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the priorities of intensifying political and policy engagement, reinforcing security, building resilience against foreign interference, and addressing the challenges posed by migration, the fight against terrorism and organised crime. The Summit adopted the [Tirana declaration](#).

190 See: <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/bosnia-and-herzegovina/Gender-Responsive-Governance-and-Leadership>.

191 See for example UN Women [Regional Programme on Ending Violence against Women in the Western Balkans and Turkey](#).

192 See Regional Cooperation Council 2022.

193 See: RCC, Factsheet on Free Movement of People.



# 9 CONCLUSIONS and LOOKING AHEAD

As we approach the halfway point for the implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Serbia is confronting entrenched challenges and making substantial gains across different agendas. 2022 tested the country and the region in unprecedented ways. The impact of the Covid19 pandemic lingers, still exacting a heavy toll on lives and health. The geopolitical challenges sparked by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in multiple disruptions in food and energy markets, soaring inflation and high and increasing interest rates. The climate crisis also continued to have a significant impact on Serbia, as a protracted heat wave and drought occurred during the summer of 2022, which resulted in the loss of hydroelectric power, reduced agricultural production, and compounded with air pollution in health hazards.

Throughout the year, the Government of Serbia, in cooperation with the UNCT, worked to change the narrative from one of scarcity to one of opportunities. The ongoing polycrisis exposes fault lines, particularly through delays in implementing our joint commitments under Agenda 2030, the Paris Agreement, and the recently adopted Global Biodiversity Framework.

A number of achievements were made in the year to date and are highlighted in this report. Under the priority of human rights and the rule of law, changes approved via a constitutional Referendum which – once fully integrated in the legislative framework – are expected to result in the **increased independence of judges** from political influence, and the adoption of a **New Strategy for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination** for the period 2022-2030.

Progress was also made on the priority of LNOB, with the reduction of the **at-risk-of poverty rate by 0.5 per cent** and the development of a **tool for the Introduction of the leave no one behind principle** into legislative and strategic acts. Serbia continued to **extend its assistance to the increased number of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants** which transited, and in lower numbers remained in the country, with more than 3,500 accommodated in governmental centres.

As an indication of commitment to people-centred development, Serbia's level of **human capital increased from 2010 to 2020**, reflecting both longer years of schooling and enhanced quality of learning (cf World Bank's Human Capital Index), while in the field of the environment and the fight against climate change, Serbia submitted its **revised National Determined Contribution to the UNFCCC** in August 2022, committing to an unconditional emissions reduction target of 13.2 per cent compared to 2010 levels, or 33.3 per cent compared to 1990 levels, by 2030.

In all the above areas, the report also points out to priorities still to be moved forward. Among the most important concerns is the unfavourable demographic dynamics, confirmed by the contraction in **Serbia's population evidenced by the early results of the 2022 census**. In response, the UN and its partners will also work to enhance the integration of all segments of society, by reducing ageism and enhancing intergenerational solidarity.

Recent regional and national developments have exposed fractures within the Serbian society. Taking decisive action against hate speech and developing a safe and stimulating place for **civil society** will continue to be foundational to our work in Serbia, along with **tackling violence against women and girls** - which

according to a recent survey affected 22 per cent of women in intimate partner relationships. A more inclusive society is one where minorities are empowered to realise their full potential: the UN will continue to support the newly established **Coordination Body on the social inclusion of Roma**, to enhance the integration and access to services and opportunities.

In the field of the environment, air pollution remains the number one environmental threat to health for the citizens of Serbia, and the UN in Serbia will continue to assist in the implementation of the **Air Quality** Protection Program and its Action Plan. There will be many other joint endeavours under the **Green Agenda**, including progressing the just transition, furthering circularity in production and consumption, protecting biodiversity and fighting pollution. Our activities in the year to date for the transformation of the food system towards sustainability will continue, with the aim of leveraging the strengths of the Serbian agricultural sector for food security and healthy, sustainable diets.

Finally, we share the Government's priority of making full use of the potential of information and communication technologies to create meaningful employment opportunities and enhance the quality of services to citizens. Success in all these areas depends crucially on the quality of Public Administration, and we believe that the expertise and knowledge of the UN will continue to be essential to support more effective and efficient services and build local self-governments' capacities for sustainable urban development.

## ANNEX 1:

### List of UN human rights treaties, ILO Conventions, and other conventions to which Serbia complies

Treaty Description	Treaty Name	Signature Date	Ratification Date, Accession(a), Succession(d) Date
Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment	CAT		12 Mar 2001 (d)
Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture	CAT-OP	25 Sep 2003	26 Sep 2006
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	CCPR		12 Mar 2001 (d)
Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aiming to the abolition of the death penalty	CCPR-OP2-DP		06 Sep 2001 (a)
Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance	CED	06 Feb 2007	18 May 2011
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	CEDAW		12 Mar 2001
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination	CERD		12 Mar 2001 (d)
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	CESCR		12 Mar 2001 (d)
International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families	CMW	11 Nov 2004	
Convention on the Rights of the Child	CRC		12 Mar 2001 (d)
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict	CRC-OP-AC	08 Oct 2001	31 Jan 2003
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography	CRC-OP-SC	08 Oct 2001	10 Oct 2002

Treaty Description	Treaty Name	Signature Date	Ratification Date, Accession(a), Succession(d) Date
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	CRPD	17 Dec 2007	31 Jul 2009
Individual complaints procedure under the Convention against Torture	CAT, Art.22	YES	12 Mar 2001
Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	CCPR-OP1	YES	06 Sep 2001
Individual complaints procedure under the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance	CED, Art.31	YES	18 May 2011
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	CEDAW-OP	YES	31 Jul 2003
Individual complaints procedure under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination	CERD, Art.14	YES	12 Mar 2001
Optional protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	CESCR-OP	NO	
Individual complaints procedure under the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families	CMW, Art.77	-	
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child	CRC-OP-IC	NO	
Optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	CRPD-OP	YES	31 Jul 2009

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# ACRONYMS

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome	NAP	National Action Plan
ALMPS	Active labour market policies	NbS	Nature-based Solutions
AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration	NCDs	Noncommunicable Diseases
BIH	Bosnia and Herzegovina	NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy	NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity	NHRI	National Human Rights Institution
CBGE	Coordination Body for Gender Equality	NRA	National Regulatory Authority
CCA	Common Country Analysis	OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
CoE	Council of Europe	PISA	OECD Programme for International Student Assessment
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations	RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
CVDs	Cardiovascular Diseases	RCO	Resident Coordinator's Office
ECA	Europe and Central Asia	REM	Regulatory Body for Electronic Media
EU	European Union	SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation	SCA	Sub-Committee on Accreditation
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment	SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
GANHRI	Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions	SDSN	The Sustainable Development Solutions Network
GBV	Gender-based Violence	SILC	Survey on Income and Living Conditions
GCM	Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration	SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
GDP	Gross Domestic Product	SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
GHG	Greenhouse Gas	SoE	State-owned Enterprise
GIZ	German Agency for International Cooperation	SORS	Serbian National Statistical Office
GNI	Gross National Income	TB	Tuberculosis
GoS	Government of the Republic of Serbia	TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
GRB	Gender-responsive Budgeting	UASC	Unaccompanied and Separated Children
GRECO	Group of States against Corruption	UHC	Universal Health Coverage
HepB3	Hepatitis B	UMI	Upper-middle-income
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus	UN	United Nations
HPV	Human Papillomavirus	UNCAC	United Nations Convention against Corruption
HRC	Human Rights Council	UNCCD	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
HRDs	Human Rights Defenders	UNCT	United Nations Country Team
ICT	Information and Communications Technology	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
IDPs	Internally Displaced People	UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
IFIs	International Financial Institutions	UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
IMF	International Monetary Fund	UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
IMRF	International Migration Review Forum	UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
IMWG	Inter-Ministerial Working Group for the Implementation of the UN 2-3 Agenda for Sustainable Development	UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
IPBES	Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem	UNODC	The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
IPHS	Institute of Public Health of Serbia	UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
ITU	International Telecommunication Union	UNTOC	United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime
LNOB	Leave No One Behind	UPR	Universal Periodic Review
LSG	Local Self-Government	VET	Vocational Education and Training
MAPS	Mainstreaming, Acceleration, and Policy Support	VoT	Victim of Torture
MCR	Making Cities Resilient	WB	World Bank
MEI	Ministry of European Integration	WHO	World Health Organisation
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support	WTO	World Trade Organisation
MMR	Measles, Mumps, and Rubella	WUF	World Urban Forum
NALED	National Alliance for Local Development	YGP	Youth Guarantee Programm



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