



UNITED NATIONS
SERBIA



UN Country Team in Serbia

COMMON COUNTRY ANALYSIS

2021



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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Virus	MAPS	Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative	MEP	Ministry of Environmental Protection
CCA	Common Country Analysis	NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
CEB	The Council of Europe Development Bank	ODA	Official Development Assistance
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
CoE	Council of Europe	OHMR	Office for Human and Minority Rights
CSO	Civil Society Organization	OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
EC	European Commission	PISA	OECD Programme for International Student Assessment
EBRD	European Bank of Reconstructional Development	RCO	Resident Coordinator's Office
EIB	European Investment Bank	RHP	Regional Housing Programme
ERP	Economic Reform Programme	SCRМ	Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration
ESRP	Employment and Social Reform Program	SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
EU	European Union	SEPA	Serbian Environmental Protection Agency
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment	SIPRU	Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit
GDP	Gross Domestic Product	SoE	State-owned Enterprises
GHG	Greenhouse Gas	SORS	Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia
GIZ	German Agency for International Cooperation	UASC	Unaccompanied and Separated Children
GNI	Gross National Income	UN	United Nations
GoS	Government of Serbia	UNCT	United Nations Country Team
GRB	Gender-responsive Budgeting	UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
GRECO	Group of States against Corruption	UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus	UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
ICT	Information and Communications Technology	UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
IDPs	Internally Displaced People	UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
IMWG	Inter-Ministerial Working Group for the Implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality
IPA	Investment for Pre-Accession Assistance	UPR	Universal Periodic Review
KfW	Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (German Development Bank)	WHO	World Health Organization
LNOB	Leave No One Behind	WTO	World Trade Organization
LSG	Local Self-Government		

FOREWORD

The Common Country Analysis (CCA) responds to the urgency of the 2030 Agenda by delivering an evidence-based analysis of the context for sustainable development in Serbia. The analysis integrates the overall commitment of the United Nations (UN) to UN Charter values, the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) principle, and international norms and standards. It rests on traditional and non-traditional quantitative and qualitative data and sources, including a broad, regular consultation process, described further in the methodology section.

This CCA is updated annually and examines the current situation **in Serbia** with respect to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It highlights progress made towards nationalisation and achievement of the SDGs within the context of the process of accession to the European Union (EU) and in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It identifies challenges, including: structural weaknesses; entrenched inequalities; and incomplete strategic, legislative and policy frameworks, as well as shortcomings in performance and effectiveness and gaps in implementation.

In its initial iterations in 2020, the CCA provided the foundation needed to develop the three core priorities for UN action over the 2021–2025 period. Through its annual update, the UN team may identify new sub-areas of required action, which will be integrated into annual workplans.

The UN's first priority in Serbia is to harness the full potential of a green, sustainable and inclusive economy, contain and mitigate the effects of climate change, pollution, and ecosystems degradation while supporting economic and local development. In 2021, the economy recovered well from the 2020 recession, and the country made notable progress in policy and legislative commitments related to climate change, energy and mining, which led to the opening of the EU accession Cluster 4 (Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity) in December 2021. In the years ahead, with appropriate regulatory and market interventions, supported by national and international investments, and skill-building, Serbia can initiate and fast track its transformation to a low-carbon, resilient economy that is decoupled from environmental pressures, creates job and business opportunities and is sensitive to the needs of the most vulnerable.

The UN's second priority is to place well-being, social equity and human potential at the heart of all systems, policies and practices. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the Government of Serbia (GoS) led a fast and comprehensive response, including for vaccinations. Despite the measures taken, the pandemic continues to strain the health, social welfare, and education sectors and, with the emergence of the Omicron variant, poses further risk to economic productivity and development. In addition, the ongoing resistance to vaccination by some of Serbian population may result in the continued circulation of

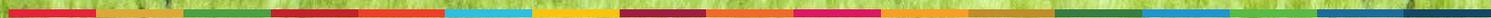
the virus in 2022. In 2021, we learned that we must collectively place health at the core of governance as an investment and not misunderstand it as a cost. Support for the COVID-19 vaccination campaign and health treatment capacities each should be expanded, alongside efforts to ensure more equitable access to all communities. At the same time, 2022 calls for greater focus on prevention by addressing critical environmental risks, investing in innovation and primary health care, promoting and supporting healthy lifestyles, and curtailing tobacco use, for a healthier society and a reduced burden on the economy. **Growing inequalities remain a serious impediment to a just society.** Several social and ethnic groups – notably the Roma, rural communities, LGBTQI, persons with disabilities, migrants, survivors of gender-based violence, children and youth exposed to poverty and social exclusion, and older persons – remain vulnerable, discriminated against, and sometimes excluded from the labour market. In an environment of increasing disparities, gender inequalities are complex, resulting in inconsistent political, economic and social representation and participation, employment, and ownership of assets (despite adequate legislation), as well as an unequal division of responsibilities in the household and family care. Growth must be inclusive and sustainable. **The demographic transition** offers an opportunity to break down rigid categories of age, gender and social status and make full use of the immense, untapped potential within the society, in favour of greater well-being. Trust in the future, as well as in institutions, governance, equitable social systems that promote inter-generational solidarity, a strong, inclusive education system, decent jobs, and gender equality, correspond to socioeconomic well-being and a healthy living environment, each of which is fundamental to a sustainable demography.

Finally, the **UN's third priority** – building trust and mutual accountability through the Rule of Law, Rights and Governance agenda – while at the core of our joint actions in 2021, still requires sustained efforts in the areas of: justice; security; fundamental rights and freedoms, including a safe and fair civic and media space; trust-building; good governance and electoral processes; and stronger, more strategic cooperation between the GoS and civil society. As with the green agenda, the legislative and policy foundations were adjusted, expanded and strengthened in 2021, through multiple coordinated efforts between government institutions, civil society, the UN and key development partners, such as the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), the Council of Europe (CoE) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). This year also saw unprecedented demonstrations of citizens' growing awareness of, resistance to, and engagement on critical public causes, such as the state of the environment and national economic priorities. More than ever, effective governance and meaningful civic engagement will be essential for stable, transformational development in the years to come.



UN Country Team in Serbia
COMMON COUNTRY ANALYSIS

1 INTRODUCTION



1.1 PURPOSE

The Common Country Analysis (CCA) is a living document, which delivers an **integrated, forward-looking, and evidence-based joint analysis** of the context for sustainable development in Serbia and any emerging circumstances that may influence it. On an annual basis, the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) evaluates efforts made towards the 2030 Agenda with respect to the country context and identifies challenges hindering achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The CCA underpins the programming cycle of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF).

1.2 METHODOLOGY

This CCA is data-driven and draws on diverse sources of qualitative and quantitative data, including official national statistics and non-traditional data sources. The current version is an update of the 2020 editions of the CCA (UNCT Serbia 2020). It is fully gender mainstreamed, as a result of the comprehensive review conducted by the Gender Thematic Group and UN Women, and includes new sections (e.g. the contribution of information and communications technology (ICT) to sustainable development; the financial landscape). Information on the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is also included, drawing on analyses conducted by the UNCT, individual agencies and the joint United Nations (UN)-Government of Serbia (GoS) fact-finding report. Over 30 colleagues representing 15 agencies contributed directly to the document, while additional staff participated through thematic and results groups.

This updated report is the result of broad consultations held throughout the UNSDCF cycle by the UNCT and the Resident Coordinator's Office (RCO), under the leadership of the Resident Coordinator and Results Group Chairs, with:

- institutions and partners of the GoS, in both bilateral¹ and group settings²;
- civil society organizations (CSOs);
- international financial institutions (IFIs);
- the European Union (EU); and
- international development partners³.

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of European Integration, Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Social and Labour Affairs, Prime Minister's Advisor in charge of SDGs, Statistical Office, Public Investment Management Office and Public Policy Secretariat.

² Ombudsman, Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, Commissioner for Protection of Equality, Office for Human and Minority Rights (OHMR), Coordination Body for Gender Equality, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of the Interior, and Ministry of Youth and Sport.

³ Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency [SIDA], German Agency for International Cooperation [GIZ], Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation [SDC], Norway, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], Council of Europe [CoE].

UN Country Team in Serbia
COMMON COUNTRY ANALYSIS

2 NATIONAL CONTEXT



2.1 POLICIES, PROCESSES AND MECHANISMS SUPPORTING THE SDGs

2.1.1 National framework for strategic development

National development priorities – aligned with the 2030 Agenda – are set in key strategic documents, listed below:

- The Action Plan⁴ for the Implementation of the Government Programme 2020–2022 operationalises the priorities⁵ of the GoS, as announced by the Prime Minister.
- The National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis (NPAA) aims to adjust reforms to accession priorities set by the six EU policy clusters.⁶
- The Economic Reform Programme (ERP) defines priorities within the EU accession process.⁷
- The Employment and Social Reform Program (ESRP) defines priorities in the areas of: labour market and employment; human capital and skills; social inclusion and social protection; and the reform of pension and health-care systems, with a gender perspective.⁸
- The Report on the Implementation of the ESRP is the primary mechanism for monitoring and dialogue on social policy and employment in the process of EU integration.⁹
- The National Priorities for Development Assistance (NPDA) is a multi-annual planning document that defines the strategic directions of Serbia's development.¹⁰

Additional **sectoral and cross-cutting strategies and action plans**, listed below, set out supporting measures and reforms:

- National Investment Plan “Serbia 2025”;¹¹
- Industrial Policy Strategy 2021–2030;
- Low-Carbon Development Strategy and Action Plan;¹²
- Sustainable Urban Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030;
- Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2016–2025;
- National Employment Strategy 2021–2026;
- Gender Equality Strategy 2021–2030;
- Law on the Planning System (2018).¹³

2.1.2 SDG initiatives and monitoring bodies

After the endorsement of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, Serbia established a national mechanism for its implementation: the **Inter-Ministerial Working Group for the Implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (IMWG)**. The IMWG was comprised of high-ranking representatives from 27 line ministries and other institutions, and was chaired by the Minister in charge of Demography and Population Policy. The IMWG helped develop the **2018 Mainstreaming, Acceleration, and Policy Support (MAPS) report**, and coordinated and developed the first **Voluntary National Review for Serbia in 2019**.

Following the elections of June 2020, a Special Advisor to the Prime Minister on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was appointed, replacing the position of the Minister without Portfolio; to date, the IMWG has not been re-established. This has contributed to delaying the development of key documents, including the National Sustainable Development Plan and the second Voluntary National Review, currently foreseen for completion in 2022. The **Focus Group of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia**, established in 2017, continues to develop control mechanisms for the SDGs, including implementation, oversight, and support. SDG localisation is also a key priority of the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities.¹⁴

The monitoring of **progress towards SDG achievement** is supported by the following:

- The **DevInfo platform** is a database of SDG indicators developed by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS), with support from the UNCT. In 2021, it was strengthened to include 107 indicators, or 43% of the total number of indicators (an increase of 44, or 18% from the initial version), including eight additional environment indicators (SORS 2021).
- The **Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and Serbia Roma Settlements MICS** (SORS and UNICEF 2020) were published in October 2020 by SORS as part of the Global MICS Programme with UNCT, EU and GoS support.¹⁵

⁴ The Action Plan (published January 2021) highlights four priority areas of action: efficient public administration; further economic strengthening; Serbia in Europe and the world; and human rights protection and security.

⁵ The six strategic priorities of the GoS are: fight the COVID-19 pandemic and strengthen the health-care system; preserve the vital interests of Serbs in Kosovo; fight organized crime; maintain Serbia's independence and independent decision-making; ensure the rule of law and advance reforms towards EU accession; and strengthen the country's economy (as announced in October 2020, by the Prime Minister).

⁶ The latest iteration of the National Programme (March 2018) is currently being amended.

⁷ The ERP is the most important document in the economic dialogue with the EC and EU Member States. Produced annually by the Ministry of Finance and the Public Policy Secretariat, in agreement with the GoS Working Group for Development and Monitoring of ERP Implementation and with engagement of civil society, it analyses the expected impact on social outcomes and the environment, in each of the proposed structural reform areas. The EC reviews it and provides recommendations for the subsequent planning cycle. The current ERP (2021–2023), was followed by the related EC Assessment (October 2021). Independent reviews are conducted annually; the European Policy Centre published the latest monitoring report (December 2020).

⁸ The ESRP (2016) also presents gender-disaggregated statistics and outlines specific measures to support women and other vulnerable groups in the social and labour reform processes.

⁹ The latest ESRP was released in October 2020, followed by a report on its implementation by the Center for Democracy Foundation in February 2021.

¹⁰ The latest National Priorities draft, prepared by the Ministry of European Integration (MEI), is valid through 2025 but is pending adoption by the GoS. It defines priorities in: public administration reform; justice; internal affairs; transport; environment; energy; competitiveness; human resources and social development (including health); and agriculture and rural development. It serves as a basis for negotiations with potential development partners and defines potential areas of cooperation and donor support towards socio-economic reforms.

¹¹ Presented by the Prime Minister and President in December 2019 but, to date, remains not publicly available.

¹² Pending adoption.

¹³ This law consolidates the national strategic framework, by defining development priorities and aligning national targets with the SDGs, and encouraging local self-governments (LSGs) to localise specific SDG targets in their respective development plans. A provision (Article 53) of the Law calls on the GoS to submit a proposal of the National Development Plan to the National Assembly by 01 January 2020. This has not yet been completed.

¹⁴ For further information, see: Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SKGO).

¹⁵ These reports are key to monitor the: Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma in the Republic of Serbia; Strategy on Education 2030; National Programme of Support to Breastfeeding, Family and Developmental Care of Newborns; and the Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence (2020–2023), among others.

- The “**Women and Men in Serbia**” publication and database were issued in October 2020 by SORS and UN Women and include gender-disaggregated data (e.g. on population, health, social protection, education, employment) (SORS and UN Women 2020).
- The **Gender Equality Index** was issued in October 2021 by the GoS Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (SIPRU), with support from UNCT and development partners (SIPRU 2021).

Figure 1 Progress towards the SDGs
(with currently available indicators)

SDG	INDICATORS									
SDG 1	1.2.1	1.2.2	1.3.1	1.4.1	1.5.1	1.5.2	1.5.3	1.5.4	1.a.2	
	↑	↑	↑	×	×	↑	×	×	↓	
SDG 2	2.1.2	2.2.1	2.2.2	2.a.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
	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
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	5.a.2
	×	×	×	↓	×	↑	↑	×	×	↑
SDG 6	6.1.1	6.2.1	6.3.1	6.3.2	6.4.1	6.4.2	6.a.1	6.b.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	9.c.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	11.b.1	11.b.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	14.b.1									
	×									
SDG 15	15.1.1	15.1.2	15.2.1	15.6.1	15.a.1	15.b.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	16.b.1
	×	×	↓	↓	×	↓	×	↑	↑	×
SDG 17	17.1.1	17.3.2	17.4.1	17.6.1	17.8.1					
	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑					

Source: SORS 2021

The statistical capacity of the country 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. Still, there are gaps, which limit the capacities for data-driven policies, including those aimed at SDG achievement and the LNOB principle, also due to insufficient sharing of data between the line ministries and the Statistical Office. Drawing on the substantial capacities within SORS, the stats systems should be coordinated and converged across all GoS institutions.

2.2 STATE OF DEMOCRACY, RULE OF LAW, AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

2.2.1 Political and institutional reforms in line with the EU accession process

Serbia became an **EU candidate** in 2012 and has opened two of the six EU thematic policy clusters of the negotiating framework, and none closed. The open clusters are Cluster 3, “Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth”, and Cluster 4, “Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity”. Additionally, 18 of 35 negotiating chapters of the EU acquis are opened, with two chapters provisionally closed. The open chapters include Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, Justice and Security, and Procurement.

Serbia also has **active partnerships** with several countries and regions, including the countries of the Western Balkans (detailed in Section 2.8), Russia (on issues related to energy and the military), China (on infrastructure and energy), the United States (via a Development Finance Corporation), and former non-aligned countries (on military and agriculture)¹⁶ and within the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁷

2.2.2 Elections and state of democracy

Parliamentary elections were held in June 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic and an opposition boycott, resulting in a Parliamentary majority of the ruling coalition.¹⁸ The elections were observed as efficient by the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) but with some gaps.¹⁹ The next election cycle is scheduled for 3 April 2022, giving the current Government a shorter mandate (less than two years). In addition, a referendum – held in January 2022 – approved amendments to the Constitution, specifically on matters related to the judiciary.

Changes in electoral laws were enacted prior to the elections, including on: voter registration; post-election inspection of voter lists by voters; election observers; preventing misuse of state resources; the media regulatory body; reduced threshold for candidate lists to obtain seats in Parliament (from 5% to 3%); and increasing representation of women (from 30% to 40%) and national minorities.²⁰

¹⁶ A High-Level Commemorative Meeting was held in Belgrade in 2021 to mark the 60th anniversary of the First Conference of Non-Aligned Countries, gathering 105 countries, organizations, and 50 government leaders.

¹⁷ For a detailed analysis of the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on the achievement of the SDGs in Serbia, please see: UN/DESA: “Jointly Building Belt and Road towards the SDGs: Serbia National Report”.

¹⁸ The ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won 60.65% of votes, securing a two-thirds majority, or 188 seats in the 250-seat Parliament. The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) won 32 seats, and the Victory for Serbia (PzS) wing of the Serbian Patriotic Alliance (SPAS) won 11. Remaining seats went to minority parties.

¹⁹ A special election mission by the OSCE/ODIHR assessed the elections as well-run overall, although several of their previous recommendations were un-addressed (e.g the reduction of party donation limits, an expenditure cap, and financial reporting and disclosure prior to election day) (OSCE/ODIHR 2020). The advantage for the incumbent Government was highlighted, including its dominance in the media. Serbia takes part in the Inter-Party Dialogue with the European Parliament, which resulted in 16 action points – awaiting implementation – to enhance electoral democracy and trust, including in media oversight during election campaigns.

²⁰ For more information, see: Law on the election of members of Parliament and Law on local elections.

The current GoS strived towards achievement of gender parity with women holding key posts, such as Prime Minister, as well as ministers of sectors, including Energy and Mining, Justice, Local Administration, Economy, Trade and Information Technology, and Human and Minority Rights. In the **National Assembly, women hold 39%²¹ of the legislature's 250 seats**, placing Serbia **28th of 188 countries** (IPU Parline 2020). While women's participation is lower at the local level, where only 20 of 165 municipality presidents or mayors are women, women councilors have increased from 29% in 2015 to 37% in 2020 (European Institute for Gender Equality 2021).

2.2.3 Human rights and the Rule of Law

Serbia's legal framework is mostly harmonised with international human rights standards. **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.²²

The current legal framework does not provide sufficient guarantees against potential political influence over the judiciary. Serbia has a very weak track record in the processing of war crimes cases. Overall, unambiguous and determined steps on prevention and repression of corruption remain to be taken. Serbia's legal framework on fundamental rights is broadly in place but its implementation is inconsistent. Regarding freedom of expression, limited progress was made.

European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document: Serbia 2021 Report, October 2021

Serbia submits regular reports to UN Human Rights Mechanisms and Treaty Bodies and under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), as well as CoE mechanisms (Venice Commission, GRECO). After the last election cycle, the new Government installed a designated **Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue**, succeeding the Office for Human and Minority Rights (OHMR). It partakes in the work of the General Assembly's Third Committee addressing human rights. Serbia was last reviewed by the UPR Working Group Session 29 (UPR WG 29) in January 2018 and accepted 175 of 195 recommendations by UN Member States (UNHRC 2018).²³ The Council for Monitoring the Implementation of UN Human Rights Mechanisms Recommendations (also the National Mechanism for Reporting and Follow-up [NMRF]), established by the GoS in 2014, is mandated to monitor, gather information and data, and report to UN Human Rights Mechanisms, including the Human Rights Council under the UPR. Serbia's NMRF resumed its activities under the coordination of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue.

Human rights and rule of law are also shaped and assessed through the EU accession process and addressed by EU **Chapter 23: Judiciary and fundamental rights** and **Chapter 24: Justice, freedom and security**, which represent foundations of the acces-

sion process and are given utmost priority in the negotiations. Implementation of the Action Plans for chapters 23 and 24 are assessed semi-annually and reported to the European Commission (EC). In the most recent Report on Serbia, the EC noted limited progress on Chapter 23, specifically the functioning of the judiciary, prevention of torture, civic space, freedom of expression and safety of journalists and processing war crimes (EC 2021b). These findings are in line with recent concerns raised by the UN Human Rights Mechanisms, outlined above.

Certain rights explicitly recognised in international human rights instruments are not yet included in Serbia's domestic legal framework, which adversely impacts the most vulnerable. The Constitution does not guarantee the independence of the judiciary²⁴ or the right to vote in relation to legal capacity,²⁵ and does not sufficiently protect rights to adequate housing, nutrition and water supply.²⁶

Despite recommendations from UN bodies, legal standards on torture are not yet fully compliant with the recommendations of the UN committee on torture.²⁷ The introduction of life imprisonment without parole as a sanction in the Criminal Code has raised concerns from international human rights mechanisms in the context of the "right to hope" of persons convicted.

Progress was made in 2020 and 2021 in further adhering Serbia's legal framework to international human rights standards.²⁸ The Parliament passed amendments to the existing Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, expanding grounds for discrimination and enhancing monitoring between the judiciary and Equality Commissioner, and adopted a new Strategy for the Improvement of the Position of Persons with Disabilities (GoS 2020b), National Strategy for Preventing and Combating Gender Based Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (2021–2025) (GoS 2021b) and National Strategy for Gender Equality (2021–2030) (GoS 2021c).

The EC Serbia Report and other sources describe the **legal framework for respecting and protecting minorities and cultural rights**²⁹ as generally in place. Yet, minorities remain underrepresented in public institutions. The Roma are among the most marginalised, as they face significant exclusion and discrimination in all areas of life. Progress has been made to improve access to textbooks in minority languages for certain groups. Continuous attention should be given to tensions and risks facing certain minority groups and related matters (e.g. the "passivation" of addresses in southern municipalities under the Law on

²⁴ The potential for political interference in the High Judicial Council (HJC) work and the State Prosecutorial Council (SPC) is a key obstacle. Constitutional changes in the independence of Judiciary are not carried out.

²⁵ Article 52 of Serbia's Constitution (Official Gazette RS, No 98/2006) foresees only one person with full legal capacity having the right to vote, contrary to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Art. 25).

²⁶ See International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 11.

²⁷ See Criminal Code (Official Gazette RS, 85/2005, 88/2005, 107/2005, 72/2009, 111/2009, 121/2012, 104/2013, 108/2014, 94/2016, and amendments 2019).

²⁸ See: Law on Social Welfare (Official Gazette RS, Nos. 24/2011); Law on Individual Property Tax (Official Gazette RS, No 95/2018); Criminal Code (Official Gazette RS, 85/2005, 88/2005, 107/2005, 72/2009, 111/2009, 121/2012, 104/2013, 108/2014, 94/2016, and amendments 2019); Family law (Official Gazette RS, 18/2005, 72/2011 and 6/2015); Law on Financial Support for Families with Children (Official Gazette RS, No. 113/2017, 50/2018).

²⁹ Serbia is a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional society with a diverse population. Minority communities live in relatively concentrated areas in Vojvodina (Hungarians, Slovaks, Ruthenians, Croats, Bunjevci, etc.), Sandžak (Bosniaks), eastern Serbia (Vlachs and Romanians), and southern Serbia (Albanians). Representative and administrative structures provide communities an interface with central authorities to address their needs. In Sandžak and south Serbia, economic development, youth employment, infrastructure and transportation links and opportunities for education and Serbian language (for the Albanian minority) would help further integration.

²¹ See: Gender Structure in the Number of MPs.

²² Except for the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. Ratification of optional protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is pending. A list of signed CoE conventions is available. Annex 3 provides a list of UN human rights treaties, ILO Conventions, and other conventions to which Serbia complies.

²³ Most recommendations refer to perceived gaps in non-discrimination, freedom of expression and media, war crimes processing, rights of the child and of national minorities, and independent institutions.

Permanent and Temporary Residence, narratives around former Yugoslavian war legacies), by advancing transitional justice and fostering conflict prevention and reconciliation.

The expired **Strategy for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination** (2013–2018) and its accompanying Action Plan have not been replaced. The first law on Same Sex Unions was drafted and shared but is still pending adoption.³⁰ Almost 70% of respondents to a 2019 public opinion poll on citizens' attitudes towards **discrimination**, put forth by the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality (CPE 2019), reported discrimination in Serbia. Over 40% of respondents believe discrimination is not sanctioned at all in Serbia, while the Roma community is perceived as the most discriminated against. Respondents cited labour and employment as areas where discrimination occurs most frequently, and revealed the least tolerance for the LGBTQI community.

Media freedoms and freedom of expression remain areas of concern, despite new media laws and a new strategic framework on media space. In practice, concerns persist as to political influence over national media outlets with insufficient control mechanisms and transparency (EC 2021b). As of December 2021, the database of attacks and pressures against journalists maintained by the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia recorded 151 attacks on journalists and media workers (NUNS 2021) of which 6 physical attacks, 5 attacks or threats on property, 96 cases of direct pressure and 44 cases of verbal violence. In early 2021, independent media outlets were targeted by tabloid press publicly linking them to criminal structures, resulting in six Serbian journalists and media associations withdrawing from the Working Group on Safety and Protection of Journalists, established by the GoS in December 2020. This context has increased self-censorship in the media (Vukasović 2018), which may hinder human rights awareness among the population and decision makers.

The fight against corruption is a recognised Government priority: A legal and institutional framework is in place and Serbia is a party to the UN Convention against Corruption. Despite these measures, the Corruption Perception Index (2020) ranked Serbia 94 out of 180, with a score of 38 (of 100), a decline from the previous year (Transparency International). To combat corruption more effectively, a Department for the Fight against Corruption was established within the Ministry of the Interior.

The **adoption of laws by urgent procedure** is a contentious issue, as it risks circumventing the participation and consultation of interested groups, CSOs and rights-holders groups.³¹ Nonetheless, recent reports of the EC and the European Council anti-corruption body (GRECO) reveal a noteworthy decline in adoption by urgent procedure in 2021.³²

The **full independence of the judiciary**, and the application of ratified international human rights treaties to all judicial areas remain insufficient.³³ Recommendation for changes were made in UN human rights mechanisms and by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and reflected in the Action Plan for Chapter 23 (GoS 2020c). Related Constitutional changes were then approved by constitutional referendum in January 2022.

In October 2021, the **new Strategy on Processing War Crimes was adopted**, after the previous one expired in December 2020. Serbia still faces tangible gaps in transitional justice processes and needs greater commitment to process war crimes systemically and more effectively (EC 2021b). Serbia has not responded to requests from the Residual Mechanism on Criminal Tribunals to arrest and hand over two persons charged with contempt of the court in processes related to war crimes (a note has been submitted for consideration by the Security Council). Case backlog remains high in pre-investigative phases, while the cases prosecuted and processed before domestic courts do not yet sufficiently involve higher-ranking suspects (Ibidem).

Serbia has not demonstrated a clear commitment to take measures to address the legacy of the past and foster **reconciliation**. Efforts are needed to strengthen the rule of law, reduce organized crime and corruption, disentangle public from private interests, and ensure an independent judiciary and accountable government and administration (Ibidem). These measures are vital in light of the proliferation of wall murals in Belgrade and elsewhere in Serbia, expressing a resurgence of nationalistic rhetoric among specific groups. To help reduce divisions, the UNCT and the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide are launching an "Anti-Hate Speech Initiative" in 2022.³⁴

A new area of discussion, debates and antagonisms emerged prominently in 2021 around the combined topics of **environmental protection, pollution, and energy transition**. From September to December 2021, environmental protests were staged against lithium mine investments in Western Serbia, urban air pollution and illegal dumpsites along the Danube. This environmental uprising, along with the rising number of environment-related litigations, represent manifestations of increased awareness among citizens and a will to shape their future. At the global level, on 8 October 2021, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution recognising the importance of the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. A more visible focus on environmental protection, pollution and energy transition, by both GoS institutions and civil society, is anticipated hereafter.

2.2.4 Decentralisation

The GoS is pursuing decentralisation and a devolution of authority to the local level to address governance challenges, promote local development and stabilise population flows towards urban areas. A precondition for decentralisation is **expanded competencies, capacities knowledge management and financial autonomy of local authorities**. To address related challenges, a new "Program for the Reform of the Local Self-Government System from 2021 to 2025" was adopted in July 2021. It aims to improve the legal and organizational framework, transparency, professionalism and efficiency of local self-governance, and enhance citizen participation in public affairs (GoS 2021d).

³⁰ For more information, see: the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue of the Republic of Serbia, strategic documents.

³¹ According to the data from the website "otvoreni parlament", 7% of laws were adopted under accelerated procedure in 2020–2021, down from 27% in the previous biennium.

³² In accordance with Article 167 of the Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly of Serbia, a law may be adopted by accelerated procedure if there is a risk to the functioning of State organs and organizations, human lives and health, or national security. Accelerated procedures may be applicable to laws confirming international agreements or those harmonising national with European jurisprudence. The person proposing such a law is obliged to explain why that particular law must be adopted by an accelerated procedure.

³³ Numerous UN Mechanisms for Human Rights recommended direct application of international human rights standards before domestic courts, Human Rights Committee (CCPR/C/SRB/CO/3), Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (E/C.12/SRB/CO/2) etc.

³⁴ For more information, see: Joint statement by UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide and UN Resident Coordinator in Serbia.

2.2.5 Civic space

Governments should ensure stakeholders can actively participate in the reform and policy making process, for example by establishing inclusive structured dialogues on reform priorities with the involvement of an empowered civil society. An enabling environment for CSOs is therefore crucial.

European Commission, 2018

Cooperation between the State and civil society represents a crucial challenge to democracy and freedoms. Efforts to sustain **dialogues between these key stakeholders** were evident in 2021 but, according to international indices, the level of democracy in Serbia has declined in the last four years (Freedom House 2020a and 2020b; Economist Intelligence Unit 2020 and 2019; Bertelsmann).

To further **enable the working environment for CSOs and a wide network of key actors in the development of Serbia**, the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue initiated a series of “social dialogue” events, featuring discussions on 18 policy topics in 2021 between the State, civil society and other interested parties. The Prime Minister also held several discussions with representatives of the EU Convention of CSOs in varied areas, such as the rule of law, environmental protection, and post-COVID-19 health infrastructure. Although the impact of these consultations has not been assessed, the differing perspectives of the GoS and civil society have been visible, primarily due to a **gap in trust between the parties and their inability to agree on objectives and negotiate solutions**. The UN and the EU urged and supported dialogues throughout 2021. UN Special Procedures initiated communication with the State on the use of the law combating terrorism and money laundering to access bank accounts of CSOs, journalists and individuals,³⁵ after the Financial Action Task Force indicated that the decision by the Ministry of Finance's Directorate for the Prevention of Money Laundering to request access to the bank records was not in line with the Task Force's standards (FATF 2020). The Leaders of Parliamentary caucuses used derogatory language against civil society groups in 2021, triggering the European Parliament's adoption of a resolution denouncing a deterioration in the treatment of political criticism and pluralism, through intimidation and hate speech (European Parliament 2021). Challenges related to media freedom and freedom of expression (detailed in Section 2.2.3) have contributed to frayed relations between State and society.

The Fourth Periodic Report of the Republic of Serbia on the implementation of the UN Convention on the **Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN CEDAW)**, which concluded in 2019, recommended that Serbia: “Ensure that civil society organizations, including women's rights activists, are able to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and association without intimidation or reprisals; and ensure that cases of alleged intimidation or reprisals against civil society activists are duly investigated, perpetrators are prosecuted and appropriately punished and victims receive protection from such acts” (UN CEDAW [Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women] 2019). While feminist and women's CSOs have been involved in policy and normative development, financial support for the provision of critical specialized services remains uncertain (e.g. SOS telephone, shelters, etc.).

Finally, the fragmentation and polarisation of civil society is an impediment to building a strong, strategic counterpart to State authorities, despite vast and fundamental knowledge available within the 36,000 NGOs operating in the country.

2.2.6 Public administration reform and data-driven policies

The COVID-19 crisis has significantly impacted public administration, accelerating change and digitalization, while also generating pressures, financial constraints and limitations due to remote work, the imposition of epidemiological measures and unanticipated factors.

Public administration reform is ongoing, guided by the national strategy³⁶ and supported by an array of measures, such as gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) and improved official data for data-driven policies. The implementation of the Public Administration Reform Strategy Action Plan over the three-year reference period (2018–2020) resulted in the implementation of only 43% of the results planned. These findings highlight sub-optimal planning and inadequate alignment of reforms with existing capacities in public administration (human and financial) (MPALS 2020).

Reforms should be accelerated and advance a modern service-oriented approach to policy development and implementation, taking advantage of the digitalization transformation. The public administration needs capacity and skills in project preparation and management. System inefficiencies in public procurement must be addressed to reduce costs and time lags and increase transparency.

Serbia has taken **significant measures in support of gender equality**, stipulating in the **Budget System Law** that **all national and local budgets be gender-responsive**. GRB was introduced in 68 of 79 institutions at the national and provincial levels, and in 10 of 174 local self-governments (LSGs) (UNCT Serbia 2021b). Yet, notable gaps remain: for example many budget users still lack the skills to implement the new system: capacity-building initiatives are currently underway.³⁷

2.3 ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

2.3.1 Structure of the economy and implications for sustainable development

The economy has proven resilient to the pandemic and expanded at a record pace in 2021. The Bank of Serbia projected growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for 2021 at 6.5%, after contracting by less than 1% in 2020 due to the crisis on the heels of a GDP expansion of over 4% in 2018 and 2019 (NBS 2022).

The lower contraction of Serbian GDP in 2020 and the strong rebound in 2021 are rooted in several factors, including: the relatively modest share of international tourism in the economy; the larger share of the country's GDP concentrated in sectors that have been largely resilient to the crisis (agriculture, forestry and fishing, administrative and support services) (SORS 2021b) and Serbia's relatively stable macroeconomic fundamentals prior to

³⁵ On 11 November 2020, several UN Special Rapporteurs issued a statement alleging that the GoS had abused its anti-money laundering and anti-terrorist financing mechanism to intimidate and restrict the work of civil society and human rights defenders and stifle criticism of the authorities.

³⁶ Strategy of Public Administration Reform in the Republic of Serbia, and Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy for the 2018–2020 period.

³⁷ According to the study “Gender Responsive Budgeting in the Local Self-Governments in the Republic of Serbia”, challenges include: low technical capacities and lack of awareness of gender equality, a cross-cutting development issue, as well as insufficient cooperation between gender equality mechanisms and other local and national government institutions.

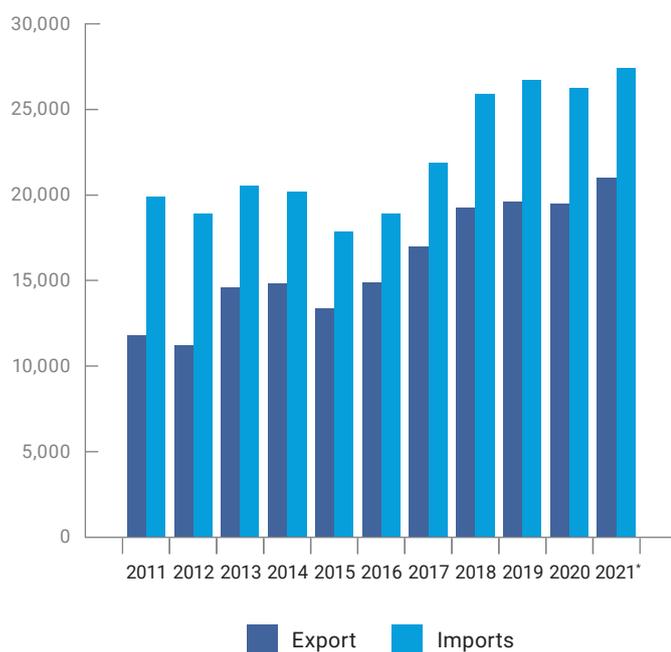
the COVID-19 outbreak. This ensured the fiscal space needed to spend money has been available to policymakers to protect lives and livelihoods throughout the crisis. As such, the GoS and the National Bank of Serbia reacted quickly and provided fiscal and monetary support to ease the negative effects of the first wave of COVID-19. The measures also positively impacted the liquidity of businesses and enabled them to retain workers.

The **stimulus measures** – including cash handouts – provided citizens with a source of income and allowed for payment obligations to be postponed. These measures – which are continuing in 2022 – could have been and could be more impactful and equitable if they specifically targeted those in need and include income or other eligibility thresholds. In their current form, they risk being received by citizens that are not in need, while overlooking some of the most vulnerable.

Recent GDP growth has been accompanied by other **positive trends**: The activity rate of people aged 15 years and over expanded from 47.7% in the last quarter of 2019 to 48.3% in the third quarter of 2021, while the unemployment rate decreased from 15% to 11% over the same period (SORS 2021c). Importantly, more young people also entered the workforce, reflected by fewer young people not in education or employment (Ibid.).

Serbia's performance on export markets has also been positive. From January through October 2021, exports were 33% higher than in the same period in 2020. While growth in FDI, which was consistently positive until 2019, contracted in 2020 it is estimated to have bounced back in 2021.³⁸

Figure 2 Import and export growth



Source: SORS External Trade Statistics (SORS 2021h)

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 as follows:³⁹

- maintain a continuous dialogue with the private sector;
- complete the transition to a paperless trading environment;
- further simplify and strengthen the capacities of border-crossing points; and
- develop and empower the national system of quality infrastructure (standardisation, conformity assessment, market surveillance, and metrology).

Finalising the accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) – ongoing since 2005 – has been declared a GoS priority and would contribute to enhanced productivity, including by pushing forward trade facilitation reforms.

Despite these positive trends, **GDP per capita** remained at 7,666 USD in 2020 **at market prices**, second in the Western Balkans but less than half the average for Central Europe and the Baltics (16,082 USD) and less than a quarter of the EU average (33,927 USD) (World Bank Poverty and Equity Data Portal), with significant regional discrepancies.

Average earnings were 124% of the national average in the Belgrade region and 85% in the Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia (SORS 2021e).

Importantly, GDP per capita alone is not an accurate reflection of how the economy supports well-being or the long-term impacts of economic development on social and environmental sustainability. The high rate of GDP growth will need to be accompanied by measures to lift the most vulnerable and marginalised groups out of poverty and promote their integration. This is particularly important in view of the **low share of people among the poorest whose primary source of income was wages** (32.4% in 2017 against 25.1% in 2018); even as economic growth accelerates, this group's standard of living will not necessarily improve. In contrast, this group's main source of income was pensions (45% of their total income) and social transfers, which reached 210,000 individuals, or some 88,000 families, reducing their at-risk-of-poverty rate by an estimated 5.3% (SIPRU 2019, ILO 2020).

This priority is further reinforced by the **disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups**, particularly: informal workers;⁴⁰ low-wage workers; the self-employed and entrepreneurs; and workers employed by small- and medium-sized enterprises, particularly in the culture and hospitality sector;⁴¹ women;⁴² and youth.⁴³ The support measures adopted by the GoS to address the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including wage subsidies for all companies, and employment safeguard measures were not complemented by support to the unemployed and inactive workers, and therefore inadvertently reinforced long- and short-term trends.

These trends and dynamics hold important implications for our common priority of Leaving No One Behind. They showcase the need to better understand the dynamics of vulnerability and emphasise the **importance of a strategy focused on the needs of populations at risk of marginalisation**, which could be addressed by strengthening the social transfer programme and widening its

³⁸ According to preliminary data by the National Bank of Serbia (NBS 2022).

³⁹ Identified in consultation with the GoS in the UNECE Report, "Regulatory and Procedural Barriers to Trade in Serbia: Needs Assessment", which provides action-oriented recommendations.

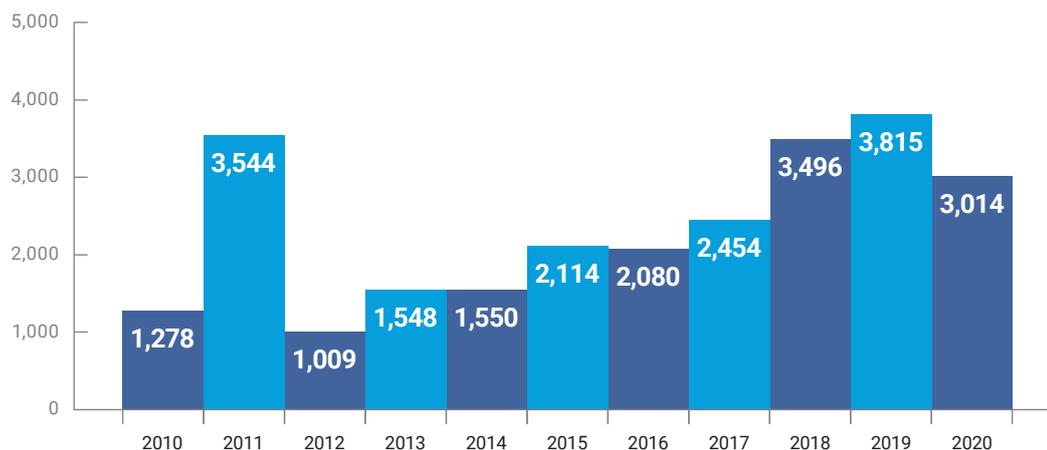
⁴⁰ As many as 70% of informal workers claimed that their financial situation deteriorated during the crisis, while 36% did not have enough resources to make ends meet (OHCHR and CDF 2020).

⁴¹ Creative industries (cinematography, publishing, design, music, etc.) have experienced lost income due to the lockdown measures; 26% of related businesses laid off at least some employees (UNESCO 2020).

⁴² Women's working conditions were more adversely affected than men's; women experienced higher workloads (22% versus 6% among men) and slightly longer work hours (8% for women, 7% for men) (SeConS 2020); yet, slightly more men than women reported reduced salaries and unpaid leave during this period.

⁴³ Youth at work reported increased anxiety related to work in the post-COVID-19 period (UNICEF 2021).

Figure 3 FDI inflows (mil EUR)



Source: Razvojna agencija Srbije (RAS)

scope. While data shows a decline in public expenditures on social transfers (World Bank and UNICEF forthcoming), the upcoming operationalisation of the “Social Card Registry” developed in early 2021 (GoS 2021i) is expected to improve identification of vulnerable groups and the system’s performance and response to crises.

Looking ahead, while economic growth prospects are positive overall, there are areas of potential fragility, which are of particular concern for persons at risk of poverty: the **increasing rate of inflation** – estimated at 7.5% year on year at the end of November 2021 (SORS 2021d) – may render basic goods unaffordable for vulnerable groups; and current **energy shortages** – due to both domestic and international developments – could exacerbate the challenges faced by energy poor households.⁴⁴

2.3.2 Labour market and productivity constraints

In the wake of COVID-19, much has been debated on the **Future of Work**. Between digitalization, digital nomads, and alternative ways of working, in 2020–2021 we have started to experiment with building the workforce of the future. As digitalization of the workplace advances, it is important that employment does not become a driver of inequality; efforts should be made to recognise the economic and social sectors that require the physical presence of people at their place of work, including farmers and agricultural workers, artisans, construction workers, plumbers, tourist service providers, health-care providers. These are not only jobs of the past; they are also jobs of the future. These jobs should be valued and the skills needed for them retained in country. At the same time, it is vital to build new skills to advance the green transformation agenda, with an emphasis on technical and vocational skills. This presents both a challenge for the formal, technical, and informal education systems, as well as an opportunity for meaningful, sustainable job creation across the country, including via the circular and care economy.

Structural challenges to labour market performance remain, with persisting labour participation gaps between vulnerable groups and the general population as well as between women and men.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, **real wages registered a 7.7% increase in 2020**, in part due to wage increases already decided before the crisis in the public sector. The non-taxable component of salaries was also raised (from RSD 16,300 to RSD 18,300 as of

January 2021) (GoS 2020d). This threshold remains high for people with low salaries, potentially discouraging the legalization of labour and leading to a higher risk of in-work-poverty. **Low-wage workers or the “working poor”** accounted for 22.9% of the Serbian workforce, against an EU average of 17.2%. The average of younger workers who are low-wage earners was even higher at over 30% (ILO 2020).

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 2020e). Low productivity is the result of: 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, including in international trade.⁴⁵

Promoting **gender equality in the job market** is another key priority. The 2018 gender pay gap was 8.8%, placing Serbia among the countries with the **lowest gender pay gap in Europe**. Yet, **women in Serbia are less active in the job market** (42.1% versus 56.6% men in the working age population), and the activity rate of women without education and with low-level education is 31.5%, more than 30% lower than the activity rate of men with the same level of education (SORS 2021c).

This is partly the result of **unequal distribution of unpaid work by sex**. In Serbia, women spend almost 4.5 hours a day doing unpaid work, whereas men spend just over two hours (UN Women 2020b). When in paid work, women are concentrated in low productivity sectors and the care economy, and are reportedly discriminated against in recruitment, promotion, pay and benefits, access to training opportunities, and maternity and parental leave. Strengthening gender equality, taking action to provide social services (e.g. childcare), and valuing the unpaid work of women could accelerate both economic and social development. For example, expanding preschool education for children (0–6 years) from the current 47.9% to 52.0% would result in a direct economic benefit of EUR 398.3 million against an estimated cost of EUR 212.5 million, without considering the social benefits (Ibid.).

⁴⁴ See Section 2.4.4 for further insights on the issue of energy poverty in Serbia.

⁴⁵ Serbia has demonstrated significant progress reflected in the “Ease of doing business” indicator, which increased from 70 (2016) to 75 (2020), moving Serbia to 44 of 190 (World Bank 2020c). While this shows progress, it must be noted that this World Bank methodology was criticised and the publication discontinued.

Labour market inclusion is limited for certain social groups.

Youth, persons with disabilities, some ethnic minorities (particularly the Roma), and older workers are among the groups facing obstacles in labour market participation and decent working conditions. The employment rate among the Roma population was only 21% in 2017 (UNDP and World Bank 2017), and for persons with disabilities 9% in 2011 (Marković 2014). Youth unemployment (15–24 years) decreased from 27.5% in 2019 to 26.6% in 2020 but remains high, while young people (15–29 years) not in employment, education, or training increased from 19% to 20% in 2020 (Eurostat 2020). Similarly, the employment rate of young people (15–24 years) increased from 21.5% in 2019 to 21.75% in 2020. The employment rate of older workers (55–64 years) was 52.17%, against a EU-27 average of 59.6% (Eurostat 2020b). Youth training and employment will be at the core of the EU Youth Guarantee – to support every young person under the age of 30 years who is not employed, in education or training – in Serbia in 2022 and beyond.

While discrimination in the labour market persists, the **perception of discrimination is low** among almost all labour market actors (below 5%), indicating limited awareness of labour rights and of capacities to recognise discrimination based on various grounds (e.g. gender,⁴⁶ gender identity, nationality, sexual orientation, religious belief). Attainment of labour rights in Serbia is low, alongside insufficient collective bargaining (no collective agreements in the private sector), and the suspected trafficking of low-paid foreign workers (from Turkey, India, China, etc.) under the Seasonal Work Law. Abusive work conditions, particularly forced labour and human rights violations, are reportedly faced by certain foreign workers. Gross human rights violations reportedly occurred on the premises of large, foreign-owned businesses in 2021, prompting the European Parliament to adopt a resolution urging Serbian authorities to investigate the living and working conditions of these workers.

2.3.3 ICT contribution to sustainable development

Serbia has recently made significant progress in the ICT sector and currently has the **highest average Internet speed in the Balkans**, although broadband access is unequal, with rural areas most impacted.

A majority of the population accesses the Internet; **77.4% of individuals used the Internet in 2019** (ITU 2020), a notable increase from 40.9% in 2010, and 80.1% of Serbian households have Internet access at home. Active mobile-cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants was 96.4% in 2019 (ITU 2019b), making Serbia the country with the highest penetration rates for mobile services in the Balkans (ITU 2018). Still, **Internet access remains expensive**: The average fixed-broadband basket costs 2.9% of Gross National Income (GNI) per capita (compared to an average of 1.5% in Europe in 2019 [ITU 2019]). Decreasing prices would make access more inclusive and foster competition and innovation among traditional industries. Related progress requires improved competition within the electronic communications and ICT sectors, training and digital skills development (FAO 2020).

Women in Serbia use the Internet and computers less than men.

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

or applications, changing software settings and writing code (ITU and UN Women 2021).

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 (only 28% of ICT students are women) and learn to code at a young age (only 14.2% of programmers are women) (ITU and UN Women 2021).

New and critical risks related to **digitalization** have emerged both globally and locally, including: i) the “infodemic”, which exploded on both social and traditional media in the wake of the COVID-19 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 digitalized services have emerged; and iii) energy-intensive digitalization, which further weighs in the supply/demand energy balance, in a context of sharp price increases.

2.4 THE ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change, pollution and environmental degradation confront Serbia’s decision-makers as both global and local emergencies. Three key priorities for the country emerge clearly for the country in this complex domain: completing and implementing a comprehensive regulatory framework; mobilising both private and public finance; and build skills and capacities to fast track the green transformation agenda across the country and economic sectors; while addressing related political resistance.

Significant **progress in adjusting and upgrading the legislative and policy framework was achieved** in 2020 and 2021:⁴⁷

- The first **Law on Climate Change** (March 2021) provides the basis for development of the national climate policy, aiming to: reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions; align the regulatory framework with the EU Acquis; establish the National Council for Climate Change (as an advisory body to the GoS) and the National GHG Inventory System.⁴⁸
- The **Law on Energy Efficiency** (March 2021) establishes the Energy Efficiency Financing and Incentives Authority.⁴⁹
- The **Green Agenda for the Western Balkans** (signed in November 2020), was operationalised by a supporting Action Plan (October 2021), which commits Western Balkan countries to put sustainable development, resource efficiency, nature protection and climate action at the centre of all economic activities and align with the EU’s objectives.⁵⁰
- A **Green Bond** for the value of EUR 1 billion was issued by the National Bank of Serbia on international markets (in September 2021) further to the finalisation of a framework document,⁵¹ to raise a portion of the necessary funding for

⁴⁷ See: UN Thematic update on climate change.

⁴⁸ Additionally, the Law mandates the adoption of: a) a long-term low carbon development strategy with an action plan and b) the programme for climate change adaptation.

⁴⁹ The Law also provides and provides for financial or other benefits for the implementation of energy efficiency measures.

⁵⁰ With commitments in: climate, energy, mobility; circular economy; depollution; sustainable agriculture and food production; Biodiversity. This Agenda will underlie all EU-oriented political and economic developments.

⁵¹ The Republic of Serbia “Green Bond Framework”, Ministry of Finance, Public Debt Administration, 2021.

⁴⁶ Among women reporting personal experience with discrimination, 45% indicated that it was based on gender, 44% on age, 37% on marital and family status, 24% on appearance, and 23% on health status (CPE 2020).

the Climate Transition from international capital markets. Serbia was the first European country outside the EU to use this instrument.⁵²

- The **National Coalition for the Reduction on Energy Poverty**⁵³ was established, bringing together representatives of the GoS, civil society, the private sector, local authorities, and development partners, to tackle the implications of the energy transition on the most vulnerable.⁵⁴

Serbia actively participates in efforts under the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making, and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention, accessed in 2009) and under its Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (ratified in 2011). Both instruments can be used as cross-cutting tools to support the country's efforts in the implementation, follow-up, and review of SDGs, particularly SDG 16, as well SDGs 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15, in conjunction with SDG 17.

While Serbia lacks a designated fund to allocate special purpose revenues to environmental, renewable energy, and energy efficiency measures, **estimated expenditures allocated to the “environmental protection budgetary function”** amounted to about 0.3% of GDP in 2019. The Fiscal Council noted the need to increase this to about 1.2–1.4% of GDP.⁵⁵

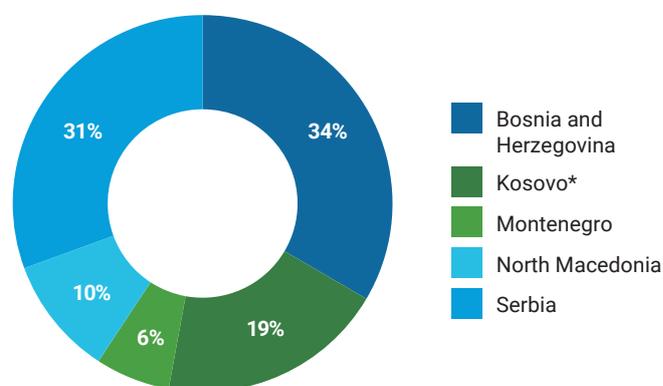
Domestic funding has been and will increasingly be complemented by international development assistance, including from multiple IFIs. The EU and its Member States represent the largest donor: having committed through the Economic and Investment Plan to EUR 9 billion in support for the Western Balkans's socio-economic recovery under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), which is expected to generate additional potential investments amounting to EUR 20 billion (EC 2021c). Serbia also initiated the Country Programme of Priorities, a first step to be considered for funding from the Green Climate Fund.⁵⁶

Before the pandemic, Serbia had planned investments in the energy and environment sectors for 2020, including large loans and energy and environmental infrastructure projects (e.g. in wastewater treatment, waste management and maintenance of protected areas). These needed to be postponed in view of the exceptional needs in the health sector to respond to the pandemic.⁵⁷ Measures the GoS took to support companies during the crisis were a missed opportunity to support Serbia's transformation to a greener economy, as they did not include environmental criteria. Additionally, favourable tariffs for renewables were removed in

early 2020, forcing companies to compete with fossil fuels on the market, negatively impacting biomass rates (or rates of organic matter used as fuel).

Figure 4 Direct subsidies

Direct subsidies in EUR per 1 MWh produced (2018–2019 average)



Source: Energy Community, “Investment into the past”, 2020

While expenditures on environmental protection remain low, Serbia continues to allocate substantial resources to subsidies for coal and lignite producers, which heavily distort competition and prices. Serbia is second only to Bosnia-Herzegovina in the region, in terms of direct subsidies per 1 MWh produced (see graph). As a total allocation, this represented EUR 41.36 million in direct payments.

Sections 2.4.1–2.4.6 below review areas requiring further support to complete the regulatory framework with respect to: climate change mitigation and adaptation; waste control and management; water quality; air pollution; noise reduction; disaster risk reduction and the protection of biodiversity. Key levers of success in the future include:

- a **political vision and political will** to lead the transformation and unlock opportunities, build institutional capacity, and strengthen monitoring and regulatory bodies at all levels;
- a whole-of-society **awareness of, buy-in for, and participation in the green transformation**; and
- the **full integration and mainstreaming of a gender perspective**, including through: systematic efforts to disaggregate data by sex; studies on differentiated needs and the roles and impacts of climate change on women; monitoring and reporting in line with national and international commitments and normative frameworks to ensure the inclusion of women as stakeholders and contributors to sustainable development and increase their participation and representation.⁵⁸

2.4.1 Climate change

Serbia invested efforts in developing policy, institutions, and instruments for environmental protection and climate change action and is a signatory of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (ratified in 2001), and the Paris Agreement (ratified in 2017). At the Climate Ambition Summit 2020, the GoS reiterated its ambition to reduce GHG emissions by 33.3% compared to 1990 levels. One year later, at the UNFCCC COP26, Serbia failed to submit: an updated **Nationally Determined Contribution**; **its long-term GHG emission development strategy** towards a just

⁵² Balkan Green Energy News, Serbia raises EUR 1 billion in its first green bond auction, 17 September 2021. The National Bank of Serbia reported that the initial offers for the Eurobond exceeded EUR 3 billion and emphasised that funds raised under this instrument should be allocated to environmental priorities (i.e. resource efficiency, waste management, preservation of biodiversity and water resources and pollution control).

⁵³ For more information, see: Energetski Portal: Business Web Portal on Clean Energy.

⁵⁴ A comprehensive monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) system was also developed to support the operationalisation of the Climate Change Law, complemented by a “Climate Smart Information System for local self-governments” that will cover mitigation-relevant sectors, such as transport, energy, and waste. These tools will allow Serbia to plan, implement and monitor climate change policies and measures more effectively. Klimatske Promene, Establishing Transparency Framework for the Republic of Serbia.

⁵⁵ See Environmental Protection Agency and National Fiscal Council. In addition to public funding, other sources of finance for environmental protection in Serbia are: fees gained as revenues of budgetary environmental funds (0.3% of GDP); and private investments (0.14% of GDP).

⁵⁶ For more information, see: Serbia's Green Climate Fund portfolio.

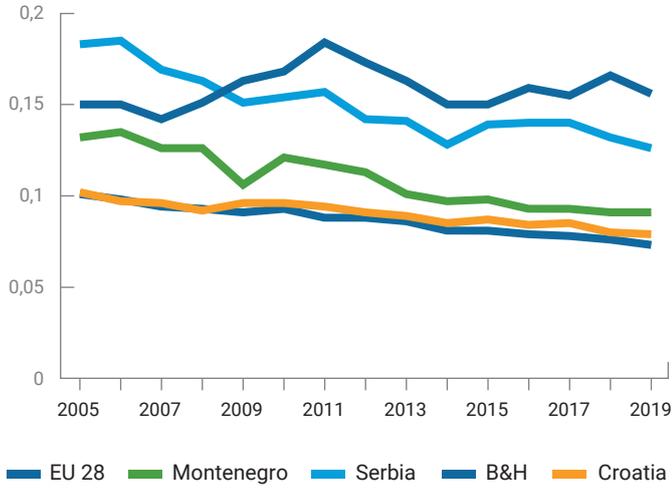
⁵⁷ It has been reported that during peaks of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increase in the quantity of medical waste from health-care facilities, straining the capacity of the waste management system to cope.

⁵⁸ See UNECE 2021. “Guidance: Gender Mainstreaming in Environmental Policy in Serbia”.

transition to net zero, by or around mid-century; and its climate adaptation plan.

Figure 5 Primary energy supply

Primary energy supply (total oil equivalent (TOE)/1,000 USD)



Source: OECD Primary energy supply dataset, available at the OECD iLibrary

Targeted measures are needed to reduce the carbon and energy intensity stemming from a fossil fuel-based economy. The share of modern renewables (excluding large hydro) is negligible in Serbia and the country missed its renewable energy target for 2020, mandated by the EU integration process.

Energy intensity, defined as the ratio of primary energy supply to GDP, is the main indicator used internationally to track progress on energy efficiency and remains exceptionally high in Serbia. As shown in Figure 6, measured in “ton of oil equivalent (toe)” per thousand USD, it stood at 1.26 in 2019 against 0.073 in the EU, higher than in any of the other Western Balkan countries (except Bosnia and Herzegovina).

In terms of **total primary energy supply (TPES)**, Serbia satisfies most of its electricity demand from domestic production, with a high share of fossil fuels (88%), including almost 50% from coal), while significant improvements are needed in emissions reduction (e.g. through energy efficiency, retrofitting buildings, and electrification).

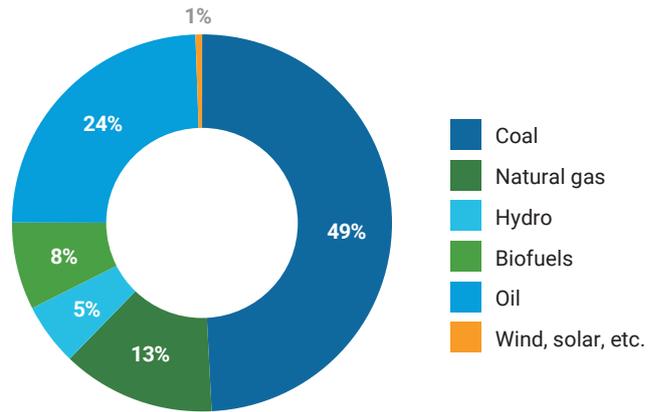
The **impact of energy policy reforms on the most vulnerable** must be considered and solutions tailored to communities and households lacking access to the transformation tools to ensure they Leave No One Behind. This is critical, as the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SORS 2021f) shows 9.9% of households could not keep their homes adequately warm, and the average household spent around 12% on energy expenses, of which heating accounted for 60% (Republički Zavod Za Statistiku 2019).⁵⁹

Energy-poor households frequently use individual heating devices that rely on solid fuels, devices that, even when new, are inefficient and consume disproportionately higher amounts of fuel and emit large quantities of polluting substances. As such, energy poverty contributes to poor air quality and health.⁶⁰ Energy poverty also has a woman's face, as shown in the Review on the Gender

⁵⁹ According to the EU, a household is fuel poor if over 10% of its income is spent on fuel to maintain an adequate level of warmth. As such, the average household in Serbia can be considered “energy poor”.

⁶⁰ GiZ estimated that the real efficiency of the solid fuel devices used in Serbia is 32%, while the World Bank estimated it at 30–40% (World Bank Group, WBIF Energy Community 2017).

Figure 6 Total primary energy supply (TPES) by source, Serbia



Source: International Energy Agency (IEA) website, (Countries tab: Serbia)

Responsiveness of Energy Policy and Gender Based Inventory of PM emissions.⁶¹ Accordingly, the Ministry of Mining and Energy set up a “National Coalition for Energy Poverty Reduction” with key line ministries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Another dimension of the “Just Transition” is the future impact of decarbonisation on Serbia’s coal-producing regions, where resources need to be urgently invested in the key priorities of welfare and reskilling and economic diversification (UNDP 2020b).

It is also apparent that the green transition is also hampered by resistance to change, embedded in political, social and psychological constraints. This includes legitimate concerns: by workers having to transition from jobs in the gray to the jobs in the green economy; by citizens and producers having to effect change in consumption, production and mobility patterns; and by citizens with limited access to, or understanding of, science-based knowledge that can assuage unfounded concerns. Strengthening the space for meaningful dialogue and for the implementation of the joint solutions will create cohesion and also optimise the use of natural resources.

More effective adaptation policies must also be prioritised, as climate change has already resulted in extreme events, such as above-average temperatures, droughts and floods, which are impacting people and the economy, notably agricultural production, forestry and natural resource management.⁶² As noted above, Serbia has not yet submitted its National Action Plan,⁶³ which is an integral part of its obligations under the UNFCCC. **Nature-based solutions** (e.g. afforestation; reforestation; agro-forestry and peatland restoration) have untapped potential to be integrated into climate-change adaptation efforts, including as complements to engineered solutions, in view of their cost effectiveness and benefits for local communities (UNDP 2021).

2.4.2 Waste and waste management

Municipal waste production in Serbia appears comparable to that of neighbouring countries. The amount of waste generated has increased, but per capita generated communal waste is believed

⁶¹ The review was jointly conducted by the RES Foundation, the EU Commission and UN Women.

⁶² According to the INFORM Risk Index, Serbia’s exposure to disaster risks is measured at 3.1 of 10, or low risk, which may not adequately reflect current realities. Serbia is commencing initial work to renew the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

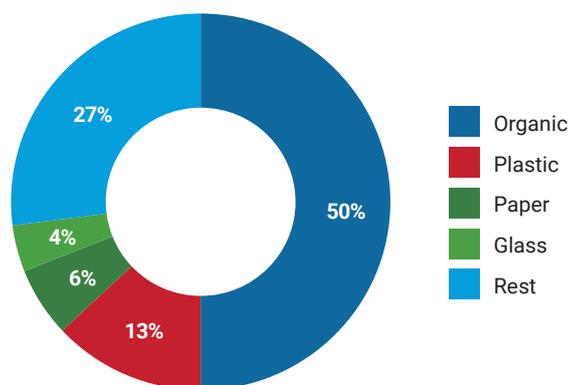
⁶³ Further information on the process to advance the National Action Plan is available at the UNDP Climate Change Adaptation website.

to be lower than the EU-28 average (Eurostat 2019).⁶⁴ Recent estimates from a pilot study conducted in Belgrade, however, reveal a more nuanced picture, placing the city at the high end of European average values. Households in the capital currently generate about 165,838 tons of food waste (edible and inedible) annually, corresponding to 108.1 kg per capita per year, of which 27.7 kg is edible and 80.4 kg inedible. To assess, monitor and reduce food waste, similar research should be conducted on a national scale.⁶⁵

Currently, **Serbia's recycling rate of municipal waste is significantly lower** than in EU countries. In 2020, the total treated waste was 55.9 million tons, with 96% landfilled, 3% recycled and 0.2% used for energy production (SORS 2021g). Figure 7 shows the potential for recycling and composting or anaerobic digestion. Limited waste recovery remains a concern. In addition to the need to complete the legislative and policy framework, Serbia's non-compliant landfills must be closed, waste reduction, separation, and recycling prioritised, and measures taken to treat medical and hazardous waste.

The draft National Program for Waste Management (2021–2024),⁶⁶ prepared by the Ministry of Environmental Protection, marks a shift away from regional sanitary landfills to regional waste management centres. The latter will include waste sorting, separating, and recycling, as well as non-recyclable waste treatment (UNCT Serbia 2021, p. 6). Challenges include enforcement capacities, low rates of municipal waste collection, and the non-transparent licensing of waste recycling companies.

Figure 7 Composition of municipal solid waste



Source: SEPA, State of the Environment Report in the Republic of Serbia for 2020 (MEP and SEPA 2021)

Substantial investments are underway in waste and wastewater, including by the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB), the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (German Development Bank), l'Agence Française de Développement (AFD), and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD),⁶⁷ and are expected to improve citizens' quality of life and further the achievement of SDG 6.

⁶⁴ 2017: Serbia-308 kg, EU-28-486 kg.

⁶⁵ In 2021, Belgrade was selected for research on the quantity and type of food waste produced by households; research was performed by the Center for Environmental Improvement using a direct measurement approach in accordance with UNEP methodology and with UNCT support.

⁶⁶ The previous National Strategy for Waste Management of the Republic of Serbia was for 2010–2019.

⁶⁷ The most significant are the: KfW Water and Sewerage Programme in Medium-Sized Municipalities in Serbia has been implemented in 17 cities and municipalities since 2008; the CEB Water supply and waste water treatment facilities project, which started in 2019, will benefit up to 60 municipalities and the EBRD project for the construction of the Energy-from-Waste Facility (EfW) in Belgrade.

2.4.3 Water and sanitation

According to the Institute of Public Health, in 2021, approximately 70% of city water supply systems provided drinking water of adequate quality, while 30% was inadequate with physical-chemical properties (8.33%), microbiological properties (9.62%), or both (13.46%) (IPH 2021). Investment in water infrastructure ranks among Serbia's key needs, at almost EUR 6 billion.

The **Protocol on Water and Health to the 1992 Convention**, of which Serbia is a part, cites improved water management as critical to human health and well-being. This requires the protection of water ecosystems and the prevention, control and reduction of water-related diseases. Under the Protocol, Serbia: set intersectoral targets at the national and/or local level; strengthened the legal framework for the safe management of drinking water and sanitation, also through risk-based approaches; and implemented on-site sanitation systems. The **enforcement of safe drinking water regulations needs strengthening**, especially in small-scale water supply systems in rural areas.⁶⁸ The legal framework does not recognise the specific needs of vulnerable groups (i.e. persons with disabilities) to access water and sanitation, as it views vulnerability only in terms of financial resources (UNECE 2019).⁶⁹

International cooperation and transboundary water management are important, as Serbia depends on water resources originating outside its territory (90% 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") with limited human and financial capacities in transboundary water management.⁷⁰

2.4.4 Air pollution

Air pollution has recently gained attention in public discourse and in national policies. Serbia faces significant air quality challenges, due to the use of solid fuel-based (traditional biomass and fossil fuels) heating in individual households and public buildings, industrial emissions (including thermal power plants), increased urban road traffic, and frequent landfill fires. Contributing to the problem, a high percentage of households – 48% in the general population and 88% in Roma settlements – still use unclean fuels and technologies for heating, cooking and lighting (SORS and UNICEF 2020).

Movement restrictions and other suppression measures – enacted to curtail the COVID-19 pandemic – resulted in short-term environmental gains, including decreased air pollution and GHG emissions, largely due to reduced traffic. These were short-lived. Looking at 2020 overall reveals **increased air pollution**. Using data from the monitoring stations for different particle concentrations

⁶⁸ Serbia identified knowledge gaps in the baseline analysis of small-scale water supply systems in rural areas and WASH services in schools and health-care facilities. With WHO support, it conducted systematic analyses to improve the evidence base (UN MAPS 2019).

⁶⁹ Serbia first applied the Equitable Access Score-card in 2016. This is a self-assessment tool developed under the UNECE-WHO Regional Office for the Europe Protocol on Water and Health whereby countries establish a baseline to measure equity in access to water and sanitation. Equitable access is measured along different dimensions, including geographical disparities, the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups, and affordability. Based on the findings, Serbia developed an Equitable Access Action Plan (2019–2022) to improve access to safe drinking water and sanitation for vulnerable and marginalised groups (UNECE 2019).

⁷⁰ 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*.

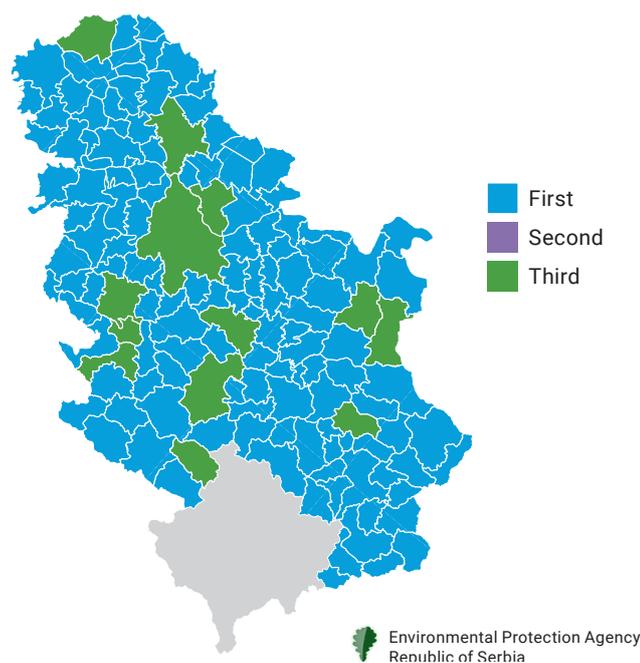
and comparing them against target values, the report finds that the air was excessively polluted in seven large cities (Belgrade; Nis; Bor; Pancevo; Smederevo; Kosjeric; and Uzice). Limits were exceeded for each of the particles, and concentration of PM10 particles was of concern (MEP and SEPA, 2021, pp. 21–22).

Air pollution has a severe impact on human health, which is often discounted. According to estimates from the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and WHO, each year, 1,004 deaths in Belgrade can be attributed to exposure to air pollution (Čolović, Daul et al. 2019); and 6,394 deaths were attributed to air pollution in urban areas across the country in 2016. According to the European Environment Agency, Serbia ranks first in Europe for the number of years of life lost due to PM2.5 exposure per 100,000 inhabitants (EEA 2020) and SO2 pollution levels are not declining (ECS 2020). Non-compliance with sulphur dioxide and dust emissions resulted in the initiation of a case by the Secretariat of the Energy Community against Serbia in 2021.

Serbia is a party to the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution (“Air Convention”) and its Protocol on Long-term Financing of the Cooperative Programme for Monitoring and Evaluation of the Long-range Transmission of Air Pollutants in Europe, the Protocol on Heavy Metals, and the Protocol on Persistent Organic Pollutants. Serbia has not accepted the amended versions of these Protocols and has not yet ratified the Protocol to Abate Acidification, Eutrophication, and Ground-level Ozone (The Gothenburg Protocol) to the Convention. The revised Gothenburg supports achievement of SDGs 3 (good health and well-being), 11 (sustainable cities and communities), and 12 (sustainable consumption and production). As several of the Air Convention requirements are in line with, or close to, EU legislation requirements, ratification and implementation of the Air Convention will help align national legislation and standards with EU legislation and frameworks.

Figure 8 Air quality 2020

Air quality categories according to zones and cities in Serbia



Source: GoS 2021e, page 21.

Serbia is currently developing a **Programme of Air Protection and Action Plan**, approval for which is anticipated in the third quar-

ter of 2022. The Programme of Air Protection defines air quality goals and measures for their achievement, facilitates further development and adoption of by-laws, and supports continued application of European legislation on air protection (GoS 2021f). Reducing air pollution will depend on a combination of policies and practices: a) mass replacement of inefficient domestic heating devices; b) a new vision for transport and mobility that includes the elimination of old, polluting vehicles as well as incentives for low-carbon and zero-carbon transport; and c) the phase-out of coal in large industrial facilities and power plants, alongside fundamental behavioural changes.

2.4.5 Landmass and biodiversity

Biodiversity in Serbia is rich in quality but not quantity. The GoS plans to **extend the landmass under protection**. Just 7.66% of Serbia’s landmass is under protection in 469 areas,⁷¹ while legislation envisages an increase in protected areas.⁷² According to Serbian law,⁷³ 1,760 species are under strict protection and 868 are under a protected regime. Almost all mammal, bird, amphibian, and reptile species are under protected regime, as well as a vast number of insect and plant species. More than 50% of strictly protected species are on the list of international conventions and EU Directives, most of which are in the Bern Convention, the Bonn Convention, or the Bird Directive.

The Nature Protection Program for 2021–2023, adopted in May 2021, is aligned with the 2018 Law on the Planning System as well as the UN Strategic Plan for the Convention on Biological Diversity 2011–2020. It defines goals for the improvement of nature protection and biodiversity conservation and outlines how the goals will be achieved in its corresponding Action Plan.

In 2020, the GoS adopted a Regulation on Systematic Monitoring of Soil Quality accompanied by a set of rulebooks that identified polluting activities and monitoring entities. The new draft Spatial Plan recognises the urgency associated with industrial contaminated land and lists the remediation of “hot spots” among priorities for the first phase, through 2025.

2.4.6 Industrial risks

Serbia is a party to, and receives assistance in, the implementation of the **UNECE Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents**, which aims to protect people and the environment by enhancing prevention, preparedness, and response to industrial accidents and transboundary cooperation. Steps are needed to improve coordination between national and local authorities, establish mandates for industrial safety, environmental protection, land-use planning and construction, improve emergency management and response, and strengthen chemical and water management.

The Serbian Ministry of Environmental Protection launched a National Policy Dialogue for Industrial Safety to foster coherent, risk-informed policymaking on industrial safety across sectors, through a Steering Committee. The National Policy Dialogue will support implementation of international frameworks, particularly the Sendai Framework and SDGs 3, 6, 9, 11, and 12. Implementation

⁷¹ <https://www.zzps.rs/wp/osnovne-informacije/?lang=en>

⁷² The Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia 2010–2020, the Regional Spatial Plan of AP Vojvodina until 2020, the medium-term program for the protection of natural resources 2011–2020, and the annual programmes for the protection of natural resources of the Institute for Protection of Nature of Serbia and the Institute for Nature Protection of AP Vojvodina all envisage an increase in protected areas.

⁷³ See: “Regulation on the proclamation and protection of strictly protected and protected wild species of plants, animals and fungi.”

of the National Policy Dialogue aims to assist Serbia in advancing policy reforms towards improved environmental governance, industrial safety, accident prevention, disaster risk reduction, and emergency response, through the development of a National Program on Industrial Safety.

2.5 AGRICULTURE, FOOD SYSTEMS AND FORESTRY

2.5.1 Agriculture and food systems

In 2020, agriculture, forestry, and fishing accounted for 6.3% of GDP, and represented Serbia's fourth largest sector. With the food processing industry, the sector generated 9.4% of Serbia's GDP (SORS 2021b). Employment in agriculture, forestry and fishing was particularly high (14.5%) in 2020, including both formal and informal employment⁷⁴. The sector also contributed 18% of total exports, particularly towards the EU and countries of the Central European Free Trade Agreement.

The Serbian agri-food sector is characterised by the territorial duality of the farm structure and overall agri-food system. In the North (Vojvodina), where farms are larger, economic growth is expected to accelerate via the commercialisation and modernisation of food chains and help mainstream sustainable production practices and reduce negative environmental impacts. In Central Serbia, where farms are smaller and more fragmented, employment growth and poverty reduction are priorities that could be realised through increased productivity, the income of small-scale food producers and sustainable production practices (SDG targets 2.4 and 2.5).

Serbia recently developed a national programme for rural development and agriculture along with a Strategy, which define development priorities for 2021–2024. The Strategy aims to improve life quality, reduce poverty, contribute to gender equality⁷⁵ in income distribution, and generate economic opportunities – particularly for women and youth. A platform was also 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 programme support provided in these areas.

The **harmonisation of Serbian agricultural policies with the EU Acquis is still incomplete**. In particular: a) direct payments in Serbia are still not harmonised with the Common Agricultural Policy scheme, and beneficiaries are not required to comply with Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions or with the Statutory Management Requirements; b) the Code of Good Agricultural Practices is currently lacking; and c) efforts to align policies and their implementation with the EU Green Deal are also necessary, particularly regarding the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies.

Finally, the **adoption of a food systems perspective**, as discussed in preparation for the World Food Summit, would help advance a more comprehensive, integrated set of intersectoral activities to expand and strengthen value chains, improve nutrition throughout

the life-course and reduce the burden of non-communicable diseases in Serbia⁷⁶. Food loss and food waste is underexplored in Serbia (as comprehensive data is currently unavailable), leaving room for improvement. Similarly, diffuse pollution in agricultural soil caused by pesticides, empty pesticide containers, and fertilizer used in agriculture requires further action (e.g. an assessment of risks and strategies for their reduction) to protect the environment and support sustainable and regenerative agricultural production.

Increasing ICT penetration, enhancing the adoption of advanced technologies in Serbian agriculture, and facilitating financing to smaller farm-holders could foster productivity growth. Currently, only 14% of farmers report adopting smart farming technologies, and 81% report that the high cost of farming equipment is the primary reason for not adopting smart technologies. A significant majority (94%) stated that they would adopt such technologies if subsidies were made available (ITU and FAO 2020).

2.5.2 Forestry

Forests account for 2.3% of the national GDP and cover 28.1% of the country's total area. Many of the forests in Serbia are in hilly or mountainous regions, which complicates optimal forest management. There are significant variations in forest coverage, which ranges from 6% in Vojvodina to 37% in Central Serbia⁷⁷. On average, this is considerably less than the 41% projected for 2050 by the national Law on Spatial Planning of the Republic of Serbia and the Land Degradation Neutrality goals defined under the Target Setting Program. While Serbia's original forest coverage is characterised by genetic and ecosystem diversity, current forest conditions reflect an increasing percentage of artificially established forests with low ecological integrity.

These trends have resulted in the loss of forest carbon and biodiversity along with habitat loss, in the deterioration of key ecosystem goods and services, and have substantially reduced the potential for Serbian forests to act as carbon sinks. Better forestry policies and practices should be prioritised to tackle the illegal extraction of timber, forest fires, and pressures from the agricultural, energy, and construction sectors and more resources should be earmarked for the achievement of the Land Degradation Neutrality goals and the national Law on Spatial Planning. 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 the sustainable development of the forestry sector.⁷⁸

2.6 NATIONAL VISION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

To achieve inclusive and socially sustainable development in line with the priorities of EU accession and the 2030 Agenda, Serbia must address key population and demographic challenges, optimise mixed migration flows, and expand equitable access of all to key resources, services and the labour market. Measures are being taken to: expand education reform; create employment incentives for youth and vulnerable groups; support social entrepreneurship; and increase income for the most vulnerable (GoS 2019). All are prerequisites for people-centred development and

⁷⁴ Informal employment dominated with 188,300 formal sector workers against 233,100 informal. Informal employment dominated with 188,300 formal sector workers against 233,100 informal. SORS 2020c.

⁷⁵ Compared to the previous year, indicators have shown an increase in women's participation in agricultural and rural development. Monitoring gender equality in the Agricultural Sector remains a challenge as the Agricultural Census has not yet included a gender perspective and the Census was postponed to 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The mainstreaming of gender in the Census methodology will require more efforts.

⁷⁶ The National Programme for Obesity Prevention in Children and Adults (GoS 2018d) outlines activities.

⁷⁷ SDG 15.1.1 Forest area as a proportion of total land area, SORS SDG Database, October 2021.

⁷⁸ See also: FAO National Forest Inventory.

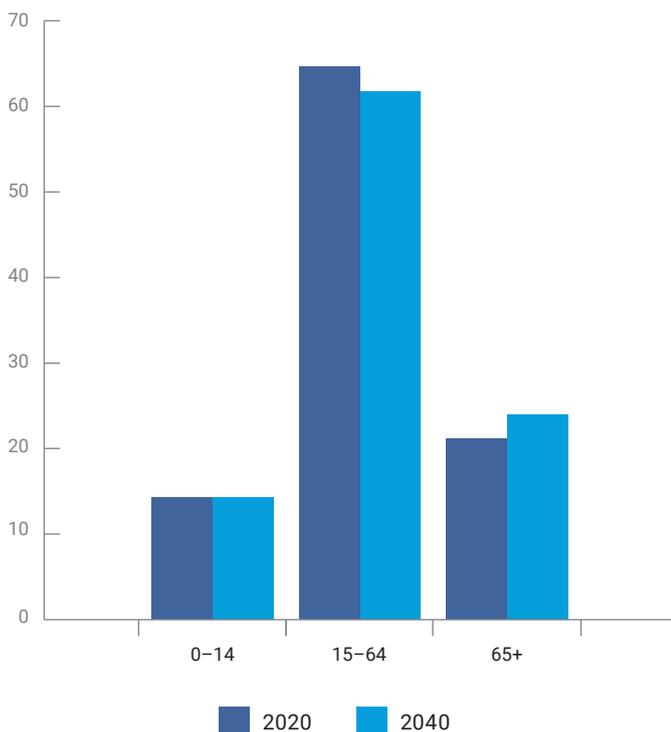
well-being. Efforts towards achievement of the SDGs must focus on areas of exclusion and inequalities that affect: women and children in specific circumstances; youth not in employment, education, or training; Roma and other ethnic minorities; the rural population; LGBTQI persons; people with disabilities; refugees and asylum seekers; and older people.

2.6.1 Demographic trends and challenges

As in other Central and Eastern European countries, demographic trends in Serbia point to a declining population and ageing, driven by a negative migration rate and low fertility rates. Since the beginning of the pandemic, **new migration outflows** have also surged with an **increase in qualified digital nomads** selecting Belgrade and surrounding areas as their base.

The rate of natural population growth has remained negative for many years. In 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the growth rate was -8 (a decrease of 2.7% compared to 2019). On average, Serbia's population declines by 36,361 people annually (based on 2018–2019 data from SORS) while, in 2020, the population declined by 55,158. The World Bank estimates that, if current trends continue, the population of Serbia will fall to 5.51 million by 2050 (World Bank 2020).

Figure 9 Serbia population pyramid



Source: SORS 2021i

Serbia's population is demographically old, comparable to many EU countries, with 21.1% of residents aged 65 years and older in 2020.⁷⁹ Population ageing in Serbia correlates with lower fertility rates, migration, and a modest increase in life expectancy. From 2011 to 2020, average life expectancy of males and females increased by approximately two years (from 70.7 years to 73.1 years for men and from 76.2 to 78.3 years for women).

⁷⁹ From 2007 to 2020, the percentage of young people (0–14 years) fell from 15.5% in 2007 to 14.3% in 2020, while the percentage of the population 65 years and over increased from 17.2% (2007) to 21.1% (2020).

In 2020, due to COVID-19, a shorter life expectancy was recorded for both sexes (71.4 years for men and 77.2 years for women). The birth rate, likewise, decreased in 2020 compared to the previous 10-year average (8.9 per 1,000 in 2020 compared to 9.2 on average in 2010–2019). It is projected that, in 20 years, the proportion of persons older than 65 years will increase to 24% (every fourth person would be older than 65 years) (SORS 2021i).

While similar trends are present across Europe; Serbia and other Eastern European countries do not compensate for their decreasing populations with immigration entrants, contrary to some Western Europe countries. In the longer term, costs related to the reduction in the working age population are needed to support those of pensionable age.

2.6.2 Migration and asylum

Serbia experiences **moderate international and internal migration flows**. The strategic and legal **framework for migration management** has been expanded and updated, and the **reception of migrants/asylum seekers is one of the more comprehensive and generous in Europe**. The effectiveness of **migration management policies** can be further aligned with relevant international **protection laws and EU standards**, particularly regarding refugees and asylum seekers.

Internal migration trends have led to the depopulation of rural areas (particularly in South and Southeast Serbia) and the concentration of the population in large cities (such as Belgrade). This is driven by better employment prospects, communal infrastructure, public education and health services, as well as cultural life in large urban areas. Most internal migrants are women (who predominantly migrate for marriage or education) and younger individuals (51.5% of whom is 15–34 years). The mobility of young people leads to higher regional disparities, with many areas (mainly the South and Southeast) facing depopulation, economic decline, and social exclusion (Bobić et al. 2016).

The **emigration** of Serbian citizens remains high, however, reliable statistics on international migration are unavailable and estimations differ significantly. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 50,000 Serbian citizens migrate each year to Western European countries, mainly Austria, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland. 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, care providers, drivers, construction workers). It is projected that the emigration of young and educated people from Serbia could rise by 20–30% in the next five years (Petrović et al. 2020).⁸⁰ The recently adopted Economic Migration Strategy 2021–2027 aims to manage international migration, alongside development objectives (GoS 2020).

Several studies examined the causes of emigration prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) "Youth in Serbia 2018/2019" survey, conducted on a representative sample of 1,100 respondents aged 14–29 years, three quarters of young people expressed a desire or intention to emigrate. The leading reason for emigration was improved living standards (28%) and potential professional advancement (6%). A 2018 survey conducted of 11,013 university students (10,244 at State-affiliated schools and 769 at private faculties and colleges), administered by the Cabinet of the Minister for Demography and Population Policies, showed that one in three students (32.4%) planned to leave the country and work abroad (MDPP and SORS 2018). The main reasons cited were the inability to find employ-

⁸⁰ With GDP growth of 4%.

ment in a desired profession (27.3% of students), low-paid jobs in a desired profession (21.3%), and low living standards (20.1%).

While the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on emigration are yet to be fully understood, the initial stages of the crisis brought an unexpected shift in the mobility patterns in Serbia with the return of large numbers of people from the diaspora in the initial months (Vracic and Judah 2021, p. 10). To retain the recent returnees and more generally the younger generation, the most critical factors – as identified by an empirical research conducted by the Fiscal Council – are an improved institutional framework and comprehensive public sector reforms (in health, education, etc.). The findings show that even a significant rise in average wages (to 900 EUR/month) would not prevent people from emigrating unless accompanied by strengthened services and institutions (Petrović et al. 2020).

Since 2015, over 1 million refugees and migrants have arrived in Serbia, and the majority has continued towards the EU. In 2021, 4,700–7,600 refugees and migrants were in Serbia at any given time. While the flows and numbers of arrivals slightly decreased, in part due to the pandemic, Serbia remains a country of transit and reception. Between January and October 2021, UNHCR and partners reported that 11,100 persons had arrived in mixed movement flows, including 929 unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). Of the observed arrivals in 2021, 71% originated from refugee-producing countries (63% in 2020). The primary nationalities arriving in 2021 were Afghani (50%), Pakistani (17%), Syrian (10%), Somali (4%) and Bangladeshi (4%). At the end of October 2021, 6,150 refugees and migrants were in Serbia, the majority accommodated in government centres, a few in specialized UASC institutions or private accommodations, and a few thousand independently housed.

Of those accommodated in government centres run by the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (SCRM), 89% were men, 4% women and 7% children. The number of UASC has increased: At the end of October 2021, some 90 UASC were registered in specialized child protection institutions and asylum centres. Most are boys, aged 6–17 years, mainly from Afghanistan, as well as from Syria, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Ghana, and Cameroon, which are at high risk of human trafficking, smuggling, discrimination and violence, including sexual, psychological or physical exploitation or abuse. The SCRM and the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs supported efforts to improve the identification of UASC girls who are at heightened risk of gender-based violence.

Three new laws on the management of the refugee and migration situation were adopted in 2018: the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection; the Law on Foreigners; and the Law on the Protection of State Borders. Two strategies were also adopted: the Strategy for Combating Irregular Migration 2018–2020; and the Economic Migration Strategy 2021–2027. The Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection is partly aligned with EU and international standards, and Serbia has implemented the majority of international obligations defined by this law.

More efforts are needed with respect to: the effective implementation of the asylum procedure and quality of decision-making; State-funded interpretation and free legal aid; the provision of legal identity and travel documents, and access to citizenship and naturalisation for persons granted international protection; the provision of health insurance cards; and the removal of administrative fees for work permits. In September 2020, the Ministry of the Interior adopted new standard operating procedures for the treatment of migrants and persons who express their intention to apply for asylum. There are significant data gaps in migration policies with respect to emigration, diaspora and circular migration.

2.6.3 Health and well-being

Health is an integral part of sustainable development, as a fundamental human right and as a key component of well-being. In Serbia, population health is increasingly defined by lifestyle-related morbidity and mortality, as well as inequitable access to services. Children's health in vulnerable communities remains adversely affected by nutrition, and women's health also requires attention.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** has significantly impacted public health and the capacities of the health-care system. Response to COVID-19 – led and coordinated by the Ministry of Health and grounded in the existing framework of public health laws and infrastructure – was adequate at the onset of the pandemic, thanks to emergency response and disease surveillance systems, highly skilled teams in the National Public Health Institute, and a network of 24 district institutes of public health. The early management of the outbreak illustrates the key importance of:

- capacity to increase and modulate emergency response (e.g. designate “COVID hospitals”, identify dedicated resources to laboratory testing, define health-care protocols, etc.);
- preparation of the health-care workforce for emergencies;
- rapid communication among different institutions and with the donor community;
- public education, including by recourse to social and traditional media;
- rapid and adequate fundraising, with over USD 1.5 million mobilised, including from corporate donors, and a USD 100 million loan from the World Bank; and
- the availability of a Country Preparedness and Response Plan (CPRP) (the UN-led Plan is based on Serbia's identified priority needs in fighting COVID-19 and structured around core pillars).

The early lifting of restrictions subsequently led to a setback. From January to November 2021, deaths from all causes combined were 26.5% higher in Serbia than the same period of the previous year.⁸¹ As in other countries, in more recent months, the Serbian public health system has been strained by limited capacities to identify, isolate, test and treat COVID-19 cases, and to trace their contacts, while continuing to provide regular health services. Non-essential health procedures were suspended during the state of emergency and only available on a limited basis throughout the crisis. Patients who were denied such services often had to rely on private health services, increasing the burden on private households for out-of-pocket payments (non-reimbursable payments directly incurred by the patient).

Serbia made a formidable effort to procure COVID-19 vaccinations as early as possible and used a similar national emergency response system to vaccinate both citizens and non-citizens effectively. In the first half of 2021, Serbia was ranked the #1 performer in vaccinations among EU and neighbouring countries. Unfortunately, the persisting resistance to vaccination by almost 50% of the population meant that, by the end of 2021, the country's performance was not sustained, despite multiple joint efforts from both the authorities and development partners. Communication about risks, vaccination and preventive/protective measures remain essential in reducing the impacts of COVID-19.

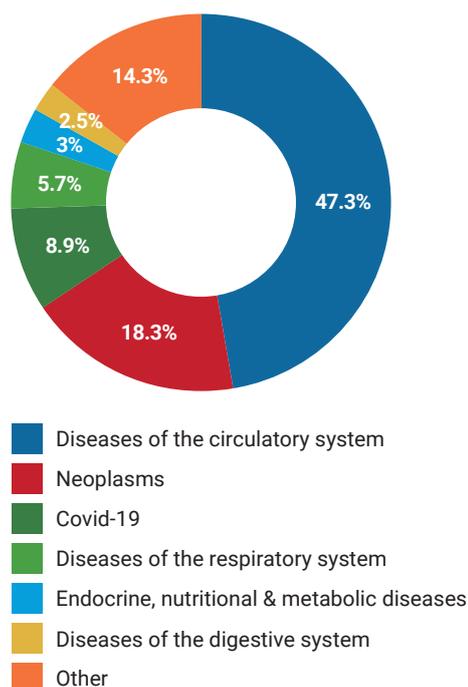
Lifestyle is an important determinant in public health outcomes. Serbian citizens are limitedly engaged in sports and recreation, while 36% of the adult population smokes.⁸² Although tobacco

⁸¹ SORS 2021i. Deaths in 2020 were 15% higher than in 2019.

⁸² The latest available data from the 2014 IPH Health Survey shows that 34.7% of Serbian adults (over 15 years of age) are smokers. The use of psychoactive substances in the general population (at least once) was 8.0% of the total population aged 18–64 years (10.8% of men, 5.2% of women) (IPH 2014).

use is declining among men, there is no significant change among women. The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is not fully implemented and inadequately enforced, and compliance is generally low. 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. In 2020, there were 116,850 deaths (60,450 men, 56,400 women) recorded in Serbia (16.9 per 1,000), a 15% increase with respect to the previous year: leading causes of death in both sexes were diseases of the circulatory system (47.3% of the total), followed by cancer (18.3%), and COVID-19 (8.9%).

Figure 10 Deaths and related health problems



Source: SORS 2021i

Undernourishment remains a concern with 5.6% of people undernourished (FAO 2018). Obesity and being overweight are more common than malnutrition and increased steadily among adults from 17.3% in 2005 to 21.5% in 2016 (WHO 2016a).

There are also specific concerns related to the health of **children and youth**.

- In 2020, neonatal mortality was 5 per 100,000 newborns (SORS 2021i) and infant mortality was 5 per 1,000 live births (IPH 2021), showing an increase compared to 2019 after a period of continuous decline, and compared to the EU average of 1.8. The under-5 mortality rate was 7 per 1,000 newborns.⁸³ The MICS (SORS and UNICEF 2020) noted that child mortality rates are significantly higher in Roma settlements, with infant mortality estimated at 8 per 1,000 live births in Roma settlements, and the probability that a child will die before reaching five years at about 9 per 1,000 live births. Stunting, as an indicator of chronic malnutrition in children, remains high among Roma (17%).
- Exclusive breastfeeding (one of the prevention measures for obesity) has increased since 2014 (by 13%) but remains low (24%).⁸⁴

⁸³ The effect of COVID-19 on these trends will be clearer in the longer term. All data is drawn from the national health system (IDP) database, "Health indicators in the Republic of Serbia".

⁸⁴ Obesity among children aged 7–14 years increased in 2019 (10.5%) compared to 2013 (4.9%) and 2006 (2.6%). Obesity among children aged 5–6 years is significantly higher (21.1%), while it is much lower below 5 years (3%).

- It has been difficult to maintain high immunisation coverage among children in Serbia,⁸⁵ a trend that worsened during the pandemic.⁸⁶
- Non-communicable diseases are on the rise in children. Obesity in children is increasing, with a higher prevalence of overweight children among lower income groups, while child development and mental health concerns are becoming more common.⁸⁷
- The number of sexually transmitted infections among youth may be underreported, and a lack of comprehensive sexual education contributes to risky behaviour among young people.

Similarly, specific concerns related to **women's health** need continued attention.

- The **maternal mortality** rate is trending downward (from 15.2 per 100,000 in 2012 to 6.2 per 100,000 live births in 2019) but remains higher than in EU countries (average of 4.3 in 2015).
- The use of **modern contraceptives** is low (21% of the general population and 7% of Roma) with an unmet need for family planning (8.8% of women married or in union in the general population and 13.8% in the Roma population) (SORS and UNICEF 2020). Among women married or in union, 82% in the general population and 56% among Roma make independent decisions about their sexual and reproductive health (contraception use, sexual intercourse, health care) (SORS and UNICEF 2020). Young people are at high risk of unsafe sexual and reproductive choices, as many lack related knowledge and are uncomfortable discussing it⁸⁸ (FES Youth Studies 2018/2019).
- The **birth rate for adolescent girls** (15–19 years) in the general population is 12 per 1,000 but 13.5 times higher in Roma settlements with 163 births per 1,000 (SORS and UNICEF 2020).
- **Cervical cancer** remains a significant preventable cause of women's disability and premature death, ranking the fifth most frequent cancer among women in Serbia (ICO/IARC Information Centre on HPV and Cancer 2021) with an average standardised incidence rate of 27.2 per 100,000 and an average standardised death rate of 9.4 per 100,000. Public awareness of cervical cancer is low, and the quality and coverage of cervical screening needs improvement (IARC 2018) through: a cervical screening registry and national vaccination programmes.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ The MMR1 vaccine coverage had increased (93.4%) in 2018 (after a 2017 measles outbreak). A decline was observed again in 2019 (to 88%) with 12 of 25 districts having suboptimal coverage (below 95%) and 6 districts even lower (below 85%). In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, immunisation coverage was further affected: National MMR1 coverage dropped (78%) with only three districts above 95% coverage and as many as 13 below 85%, of which five districts were below 70% coverage. The MMR2 is also quite low at 84%.

⁸⁶ According to a UNICEF opinion poll of parents over the course of the pandemic, the primary reasons for not ensuring children's vaccinations were due to the unavailability of services or, in some cases, parents' hesitancy. According to the MICS data, although coverage in the Roma population increased between 2014 (13% for timely vaccination, 44% for full vaccination by three years of age) and 2019 (35% for timely, 63% for full vaccination), it continues to lag behind the national rate (2019: 69% for timely and 79% for full vaccination). Additionally, MICS reveals that children from more educated, urban and wealthier families have lower MMR coverage.

⁸⁷ Of 100 adults, at least 20 have repeatedly experienced some forms of adverse childhood experiences (violence and abuse, mental health problems in the family, etc.) which consequently increased health problems in adulthood (physical or mental illness, psychological problems, etc.) (SORS and UNICEF 2020).

⁸⁸ About 30% of the respondents did not answer questions on sexual experience, and another 22% said they were uncomfortable responding. Only 42% declared using contraception regularly, indicating risky behaviour and taboos around sexuality and sexual experiences among youth.

⁸⁹ HPV vaccinations are included in the Program of Mandatory and Recommended Immunizations of the Population against Certain Infectious Diseases, but only recommended and, thus, not covered by the Health Insurance Fund and only available if beneficiaries (parents) pay a fee (around 132 USD/dose).

Inequalities in health status and access to health care are wide. Women experience worse health conditions than men, and report a higher incidence of chronic illness than men (by 6.6%) and more frequently perceive their health as poor or very poor (SIPRU and World Bank 2016). Health indicators are worse for vulnerable groups (older people in rural areas, individuals from the Roma community, persons with disability, people with multiple disadvantages).

Despite universal health-care coverage⁹⁰ provided by statutory health insurance, a higher density of resources (i.e. the number of doctors and hospital beds per inhabitants), and higher annual allocations for health by public and private funds than in countries with comparable levels of development, 15% of the population over 16 years has unmet health-care needs. This is mostly due to financial barriers, distance, or transportation issues, and/or long waiting lists (Popović, et. al 2017) and is well above the average in the EU (2.0%) and in neighbouring countries, such as Bulgaria (1.9%), Croatia (1.4%), and Hungary (0.8%) (Eurohealth 2020). Unmet health needs are more frequent among those with lower education, limited financial resources, and the most vulnerable.

Other areas where further actions are reported include: the lack of integration between health services and social services at the local level, especially in remote and rural area; the absence of long-term elderly care, palliative care, mental health-care services for children, youth and adults; and challenges in responding to violence against children and women.

Recent data reveals a **link between air quality and health**. A 2019 WHO report assessed the effects of air pollution in major cities, with continuous concentrations of air pollutants peaking during the winter. The results show that long-term exposure to air pollution leads to premature deaths for a percentage of the population, and short-term exposure to air pollution increases mortality risk. Exposure to PM2.5 accounts for 3,585 premature deaths per year, including 1,796 in Belgrade.

2.6.4 Education

Public expenditure on education accounted for 3.5% of GDP in the 2019 national budget, against an EU average of about 5% (ETF 2020). **Participation in primary and secondary education is high. Children with disabilities, Roma children, and children from very poor households and rural areas benefit less** than other children. Education reform is prioritised in the national development agenda to tackle challenges (e.g. low functional knowledge, persistent inequalities, and gender gaps).

Recent findings from the 2018 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study show that nearly 40% of 15-year-old students in Serbia are not performing at the basic level of reading, mathematics, and science literacy. These results are comparable to those of neighbouring countries, and well below the OECD average. Socioeconomically advantaged students outperformed disadvantaged students in reading by 73 points, less than the average difference between these groups across OECD countries. The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) shows that Serbia has the smallest percentage of students reaching the low international benchmark of mathematics achievement (9%) and science achievement (7%) (IEA TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center 2015).

The GoS recognises **early childhood education** as strategically important. Enrolment in preschool is increasing in all age groups.⁹¹ Preparatory preschool is mandatory for all children aged 5.5–6.5 years, and **coverage in 2019 was 96.4%** (against an EU average of 95.7%). Equity remains a significant concern, as only 10.5% of children from the poorest quintile and 7% of Roma children are enrolled. Measures are needed to increase provision and capacity, targeting the most vulnerable.

In 2019, **The coverage of primary education was 99%, and secondary education was 94%**, with near universal completion rates and minor gender disparities. Measures are needed to foster inclusion, as vulnerable groups are more likely not to attend school or to be segregated. Net attendance among children in Roma settlements was 85%, with primary school completion at 64%. Disparities were even higher in secondary education: Net attendance of children in Roma settlements was 28% and completion 61%. The gender parity index in Roma settlements was 0.98 in primary school, dropping to 0.89 in secondary school (SORS and UNICEF 2020). Most (65.6%) people with disabilities have only completed primary school or below (Marković 2014). Efforts are needed to improve levels, notably in secondary education, among these groups.

Only around 48% of the relevant age group attends **technical, vocational, or tertiary education**, representing a slight increase. At the same time, over 50% of young people in the labour market with secondary education perform jobs inconsistent with their formal education (ETF 2020). It is vital to address this discrepancy between educational qualifications and labour market needs.

Gender disparities in tertiary education are evident: More women enroll and complete tertiary education. In 2019, women comprised 57% of enrolled students and 59% of graduates as well as 57% of graduates (versus 43% men) with doctoral degrees. Women dominate many academic fields, notably health (71%), arts (68%), and science (66%), while men are more represented in engineering, manufacturing and construction (57%), ICT (66%) and services (56%) (SORS 2020i).

Approximately 185,000 students were enrolled in **vocational education and training (VET)** in 2020, representing 66% of the total number of students enrolled in secondary education overall (UNESCO 2021). According to the European Training Foundation, VET provision in Serbia has been undergoing reform shifting from a state-led and school-based and theory-based model to a demand-driven, outcome-based approach, with support from donors (e.g. Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation [SDC]). Launched during the 2019–2020 academic year, the Dual Education model combines school-based teaching with work-based learning in companies to help better match jobs to skills (ETF 2020).

Legislative and policy developments in 2021 include:

- adoption of the new education strategy through 2030 and its action plan (through 2023), which promotes equipping schools with computers and Internet connection (ITU and UNICEF 2021) (although more efforts are needed to implement the strategy/plan and reporting mechanisms);
- amendment of the Law on Higher Education, to ensure compliance with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education; and
- adoption of the new Law on the Student Organization.

The COVID-19 pandemic led Serbia to adopt a **hybrid education model**, and additional legislation on distance learning and mandatory guidelines were adopted in 2020–2021. Additionally, the

⁹⁰ Health care in Serbia is financed through mandatory health-care insurance of all employees, self-employed persons, and their families, and the State insurance provided to retirees, the unemployed, refugees, etc.

⁹¹ For children aged 6 months to 3 years, it increased from 13.3% in 2010 to 28.1% in 2019; for children aged 3–5.5 years, it increased from 47.4% in 2010 to 76.6% in 2020/2021 (SORS 2021, DevInfo).

Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development developed an “Operational Plan for the Continuation of Schoolwork in Difficult Conditions”, to support distance learning through television and online platforms.⁹² The speed of response and the selected approach were highly effective: 99% of students in primary and secondary education were able to access the learning platforms, with a 98% usage rate (UNICEF 2020). Further efforts are required to compensate for learning gaps caused by digital exclusion, in particular among disadvantaged students. With the existing gaps between cities and villages in Serbia, the use of resources provided by school libraries and the use of communication technologies in teaching and learning are each encouraged (EU in Serbia 2020).

The GoS launched the Digital School Project in 2008 and 95% of schools obtained a computer-equipped classroom. Schools, particularly in underdeveloped areas, still lack a computer or Internet connection. Similarly, many children, particularly in rural areas, lack access to the Internet at home: Approximately 9% of 15-year-old students did not have a desktop computer at home; 17% of 15-year-old students did not have a laptop or other portable device at home; and about 3% did not have an Internet connection at home (OECD 2020b). Efforts, thus, are needed to improve access.

Substantial links between digital reform and other key educational reforms, especially curriculum reforms, remain undefined. While the GoS has taken considerable steps to improve equitable access to ICT infrastructure for schools, teachers and students, the measures outlined below should be taken.

- Coordinate the digitalization of the education sector with educational improvement.
- Further develop the legal and strategic framework for digital learning.
- Increase the availability of high-quality digital learning resources.
- Strengthen teachers’ competencies for digital and distance instruction, including their knowledge of hybrid and distance learning theories.
- Ensure availability of professional materials on educational technology and instructional design.

The national curriculum of Serbia is relatively extensive but inflexible and, as noted by the GoS, applied uniformly without considering local conditions. Serbia has recently begun building cross-curricular competencies but has been integrating digital competencies into other subjects for some time, as is supported by national strategies (EC/EACEA/Eurydice 2019). Strategic topics related to sustainability, climate change, and economic transformation are not yet integrated into formal or informal curricula, including at the tertiary level, similar to most European neighbours. A direct result of this gap is the lack of new skills available at the entry point of the job market to steer and promote the green transformation.

2.6.5 Poverty, social exclusion, and social protection

Poverty remains relatively high compared to average levels for the EU-28. Unlike in other countries, the at-risk-of-poverty rate⁹³ decreased in 2020 to 21.7% (compared to 23.2% in 2019, 24.3% in 2018, and 25% in 2014 (SORS 2020c and SORS 2021f), due in

part to a less pronounced impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economic growth in Serbia and to the enactment of extensive response measures. It remains substantially higher than the EU-27 average of 17.1% (Eurostat 2021).

When key elements of absolute and relative poverty profiles are considered together, the unemployed, people without education, multi-person households, and non-urban populations qualify as severely vulnerable (SIPRU 2018c). Data on the prevalence of absolute poverty show that **non-urban populations** remain more vulnerable (10.5%), especially in eastern and southern Serbia (12.1%).

Women of all ages are more at-risk-of-poverty than men (SORS and UN Women 2020), are typically employed in low productivity sectors and the care economy and are reportedly discriminated against in recruitment, promotion, pay and benefits, training opportunities, and maternity leave (UNCT Serbia 2020d).

The Special Report on Discrimination against **Older Persons** (CPE and UNFPA 2021, pp. 72–73) notes the difference in life expectancy between women (77.2 years) and men (71.4 years), taking into consideration the tendency for older women to live alone and that men’s pensions are 37% higher than women’s, further exacerbating the poverty rate among older women.

Inequality in income distribution is high in Serbia: the Gini coefficient was estimated at 33.3%, against an EU average of 30.2% (EUROSTAT).⁹⁴ Due to inequality, Serbia recorded an overall loss of 12.5% in human development, yielding an Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI) of 0.705 in 2019, rather than 0.806 (UNDP 2020b).

Social protection helps reduce poverty and social inequalities. Serbia is a low spending, low poverty reduction country (GoS 2016), with EUR 1,192.84 per capita in social protection expenditures, compared to EUR 8,451.26 in the EU-27. In 2019, the impact of social transfers on poverty reduction was 18.02%, far below the EU-27 average of 32.38%. In 2020, the real GDP growth rate was negative (-0.9%) due to the economic impact of COVID-19, yet vastly better than the EU-27 average (-5.9%).

As mentioned in Section 2.3.1, **social assistance** during the pandemic consisted of a combination of cash and in-kind assistance, but many groups who needed assistance most direly – children, families with children, residents of substandard housing settlements (primarily Roma populations), the homeless or those at risk of homelessness, and those who do not possess personal identification and travel documents – were overlooked or under-included in benefits programmes.

As mentioned above, a law on **social cards** was adopted in February 2021 to foster a more equitable distribution of social assistance and reduce abuse through a single social card register, linking various public databases and compiling information on the social and material status of beneficiaries in one place. A new strategy for social protection for 2019–2025 and amendments to the law on social welfare are pending (GoS 2021i).

The number of people entering the **social protection system** decreased by 1.9% from 2019 and 3.6% from 2018, reaching 737,087 in 2020 or 10.2% of the population. In the same period, 187,635 children or 15.6% of children entered the social protection system, although the percentage of children in the general population has been declining (RISP 2018). These trends are straining the social protection system, which has reportedly suffered staff reductions in social work centres.

⁹² Children were registered for primary school online, and eighth-grade primary school students preparing for their final test also conducted preliminary self-assessments online.

⁹³ The at-risk-of-poverty rate is the proportion of persons whose income per consumer unit after social transfers is less than 60% of the median of the national income per consumer unit.

⁹⁴ The Gini coefficient measures the inequality in income levels at the country level. A Gini coefficient of zero expresses perfect equality, and a coefficient of one maximal inequality.

While **social justice** is a stated priority for the GoS, certain changes in laws and regulations are adversely impacting the most marginalised and vulnerable people (as detailed in Section 2.7).

2.6.6 Gender equality and gender-based violence

Gender inequalities can be pervasive, rooted in social structures, marked by imbalances in power between women and men, and sustained through diverse discrimination patterns.

In Serbia, **gender equality laws and policies are in place and trends to reduce the gender gap are positive**. The Gender Development Index is 0.977, which compares favourably to the world average of 0.943 (UNDP 2020). According to the Global Gender Gap Report, Serbia is among five countries that narrowed the gender gap the most and ranks 19 of 156 countries surveyed, with a score of 0.780 (WEF 2021). The 2020 Report on SDG Implementation also notes progress towards targets 5.3.1b, 5.4.1, 5.5.1, 5.5.2, and 5.b.1, and regression in 5.3.1a. Targets 5.1.1, 5.2.1, 5.2.2, 5.6.1 and 5.a.2 were not tracked (SORS 2021).

According to the third Gender Equality Index (2021), based on data from 2018,⁹⁵ gender equality improved from 52.4 points in 2014 and 55.8 in 2016 to 58 points in 2018 but remained lower than the 67.4 points of the EU-27 (SIPRU 2021). If progress continues at this pace, it will take 59 years to achieve full gender equality in the domains covered by the Index. Trends reveal that, of six domains, two (power and work) show signs of continuous progress, two (money and knowledge) show inconsistent trends (periods of increase and periods of decrease in the Index value), while the remaining three (time, violence against women, health) reveal no change (due to a lack of data for the first two, and factual trends for the last). Gender inequalities persist in the domain of work: while the participation of women in the labour market increased from 2016 to 2018,⁹⁶ segregation worsened, further concentrating women in social services, which are among the sectors most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Knowledge is a key area of concern. Index values revealed inconsistent trends, with an overall score that is negative: the share of persons participating in formal or non-formal education decreased both among women and men. Concurrently segregation by area of education is increasing, as measured by the participation of women and men in schooling for health, education, social protection, social sciences, humanities and the arts, contributing to the decrease of Index value for this domain. Monetary gender inequalities – on the other hand – improved slightly during the same period.

Data on **intersecting inequalities** show that certain groups (single persons, single parents, and couples with two or more children) face lower achievements than average and higher gender gaps. Data on time show a disproportionate burden of household work and family care on women. Serbia lacks systematic policies and services to promote the successful reconciliation of work and family life among women. An UN Women analysis of legal norms in the economy of care mapped the gaps that perpetuate

and deepen gender inequalities and provided recommendations to improve the legal framework. UN Women's study, "Economic analysis of the monetary value of unpaid care work", showed unpaid care work at 21.5% or EUR 9.2 billion of the national GDP with 14.9% completed by women and 6.6% men. Overall, women spend twice the amount of time engaged in unpaid household work (4.36 hours) as men (2 hours). Unpaid work is highest for rural women, consuming 21.1% of their time and 17.9% of urban women's time (UN Women, Europe and Central Asia 2020).

Improvements in the political **participation of women** are noticeable (close to 50% of the ministerial positions in the new Government established in October 2020 are held by women): Amendments to the quota in election laws were made in early 2020 for the participation of women to be increased to 40%,⁹⁷ along with considerable progress in social power due to the inclusion of women on the boards of organizations making research funding decisions, a significant increase in the percentage of women on media committees, and a slight increase in women's participation in top Olympic sports committees. The gender gap in economic power is deteriorating, and there are currently no policies to prioritise and address this trend (SIPRU 2021).

Violence against women and girls remains a key challenge for women's rights in Serbia. Gender-based violence, including femicide, is widespread and similar in prevalence to other Western Balkan countries (Konstantinović V., et al. 2019).⁹⁸ At least 30 cases of femicide were reported in 2018, 27 in 2019 and 26 in 2020 (NWaV multiple years).

According to an OSCE survey conducted on the **well-being and safety of women**, over one fifth of women older than 15 years had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their partner or another person. Partner relationships carry the greatest danger of these forms of violence: Current or former partners are two times more likely to commit physical and/or sexual violence against women than other persons (17% versus 8%). In partner violence, psychological violence is most common; 44% of women reported having experienced it. According to research, 42% of women older than 15 years have been exposed to sexual harassment, and one of every 10 women has been a victim of stalking (OSCE 2018). Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic and measures to manage it (extended lockdowns and physical distancing) have been feared to have increased vulnerability to gender-based violence due to a combination of increased exposure to abusers at home and increased economic vulnerabilities of women. In Serbia, with the outbreak of COVID-19, reported cases of domestic violence decreased during the state of emergency, while psychosocial support to women in situations of violence provided through emergency helplines increased by 30% compared to the pre-COVID-19 period (UN Women 2020). These seemingly contradictory data raise the question of accessibility of related response services, a question that requires further examination. Even if the statistics on femicides and gender-based violence do not differ significantly compared to other countries in the region, improvements in prevention and response to violence are required. A centralised database for all forms of violence against women and girls is needed, as defined by UN CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention. Several high-profile cases of sexual

⁹⁵ The Gender Equality Index measures gender equality in key EU gender equality policy domains: work, knowledge, money, time, power, health, intersectional inequalities, and violence against women. The Index measures the level of achievement and the gender gap on a scale of 0–100, with 0 indicating lowest achievement and a high gender gap and 100 indicating highest achievements with no gender gap.

⁹⁶ However, activity and employment gender gaps remain prominent. The employment rate for the working-age population is 58% for women and 63.9% for men. Other indicators reveal the disadvantaged position of women in the labour market and the discrimination they face. Measures are needed to encourage and enable women to participate in occupational areas where they are under-represented to facilitate reconciliation, prevent and combat sexual harassment in the workplace, and increase women's access to employment and entrepreneurship (UN/CEDAW, 2019).

⁹⁷ Quotas in the National Assembly have led to greater political participation by women (e.g. 33% Members of Parliament). Their participation in decision-making in both the executive branch of the Government and at the local level is significantly lower: Only 5% of municipal presidents or mayors are women. Political discourse and budgetary allocations need to focus on, and adequately finance, gender equality.

⁹⁸ Research (2019) found that only 10% of cases of femicide received the maximum sentence of 40 years. Usually, the sentence was 10–15 years, which shows the public that femicide is not treated as a severe crime.

harassment and abuse⁹⁹ surfaced in 2021, involving famous public,¹⁰⁰ and political figures,¹⁰¹ and members of academia¹⁰² as alleged perpetrators. For the first time, the cases inspired activism against paedophilia and sexual violence in a “Balkan #MeToo” movement.¹⁰³

Women from vulnerable groups, such as Roma, women with disabilities, migrant, older, and rural women, and single mothers remain disadvantaged in their access to resources and economic, social, and political participation. They also face higher risks of gender-based violence¹⁰⁴ due to vulnerability and more difficult access to protection services, especially in the context of the pandemic. Among women in Roma settlements, 56% marry before 18 years of age, compared to 6% in the general population (SORS and UNICEF 2020). Funding is needed for **specialized women’s support services with a gendered approach** (including shelter services), as well as access to these services for Roma women, women with disabilities and migrant women, a priority for the GoS (CoE 2020). The same report calls on the GoS to introduce standardised data categories for mandatory use by law-enforcement agencies, the judiciary and other relevant actors on the gender and age of the victim and perpetrator, their relationship, and the type of violence and location where it occurred.

A major achievement in 2021 is the Parliament’s adoption of the new Gender Equality Law, aligned with the Law on prohibition of discrimination with special considerations on the Action Plan for Chapters 19 and 23. **The National Gender Equality Strategy for 2021–2030 was adopted by the GoS on 21 October 2021** and aims for a Republic in which women and men, girls and boys, and persons of different gender identities are treated equally, enjoy equal rights and opportunities, provide equal contributions to the sustainable development of society, and take equal responsibility for the future.

The Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence (2017) provides a better framework for the protection of victims of violence against women, while the **National Strategy for Combating Gender Based Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (2021–2025)** was adopted by the GoS in April 2021, after a five-year lapse. The Strategy is aligned with the Istanbul Convention, UN CEDAW and provisions of domestic law.

In 2021, age-specific vulnerabilities and discrimination were recognised in a comprehensive manner by the office of the Commissioner for protection of equalities and the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs. In the past five years, reports of violence against older persons increased

⁹⁹ The first high-profile #MeToo case regarding sexual violence and abuse took place in 2018.

¹⁰⁰ See: The Japan Times, “‘You are not alone’: Balkan women seize #MeToo moment”, 2021 and “Her Film on Sex Assault Depicts Her Own and Fuels a #MeToo Moment”, 2021.

¹⁰¹ N1, “Serbia’s official suspected of pimping intimidates potential witnesses”, 13 May 2021.

¹⁰² BalkanInsight, “Former Research Centre Pupils in Serbia Accuse Staffer of Sexual Abuse”, 24 June 2021.

¹⁰³ For more information, see: CSSP, “Balkan Women Uprising Against Sexual Violence”, 01 February 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Two surveys were conducted in 2018–2019, highlighting the challenges Roma women and women with disabilities face, and requiring urgent action. (1) Based on a survey conducted by Roma CSO Bibija, 92% of Roma women experience physical or sexual violence after the age of 18 years, and 16.9% of girls from Roma settlements are married before 15 years of age and 57% before 18 years, compared to the majority of the population (0.8% and 7%, respectively). (2) A survey conducted by the CSO “Out of the Circle” from Vojvodina in 2018 highlighted the exposure of women with disabilities to gender-based and domestic violence: 37.5% had been victims of physical violence, and 29.5% had been raped (forced to have sex without consent).

by 153%, with most being physical and psychological violence. This, and the hardship created by the pandemic, has highlighted the fate of a population at the tail end of the social protection system (CPE and UNFPA 2021, p. 87).

The third National Action Plan (NAP 3 2021–2025) for the Implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (UNSCR 1325) is still pending (following NAP 2). Considerable progress is noted in **gender-responsive governance**. Support was provided to the GoS and CSOs, to make gender equality central to national and local development plans and budgets, and to comply with national and international gender commitments and the EU Gender Equality Acquis. Support to the systematic institutionalisation of GRB resulted in the inclusion of gender perspectives in the budgets of 68 institutions (of 79 in total) at both national and provincial levels through 109 budget programmes, 315 budget objectives and 584 indicators, making Serbia an example of good practice. Efforts should be continued to ensure gender-responsive governance and to reach all targets. The deadline to introduce GRB, as set in the Budget System Law, is extended to 2024.

2.7 LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

The Leave No One Behind (LNOB) principle 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. It requires programming to expand their access to opportunities and facilitate their meaningful participation, so every individual can enjoy social, economic, political, and cultural life with equal rights. This is relevant to Serbia given high inequalities in income distribution and key to implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

A range of ethnic and social groups are subject to exclusion, discrimination, or vulnerability in Serbia. Reports by UN Human Rights Mechanisms, the EC, the CoE, EU Gender Country Profile, and other sources indicate high discrimination faced by many rights-holders in the country, namely **the Roma community, rural populations, the LGBTQI community, persons with disabilities, migrants, survivors of gender-based violence, children and youth exposed to poverty and social exclusion, and older persons**, among others. These inequalities were further exacerbated by the pandemic.

The awaited updates to the strategic documents on non-discrimination and Roma inclusion remain pending, while the new Strategy on Disability and the related AP were adopted with high compliance with the standards of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2020 and 2021. In addition, ministries have initiated preparations for the first Deinstitutionalization Strategy and National Strategy on Human Rights, while the draft Law on Same Sex Unions has been prepared and consulted widely but has not yet been adopted by the GoS.

Some provisions in force are not yet fully aligned with international norms on human rights and the LNOB principle, which negatively impacts the most marginalised and vulnerable¹⁰⁵:

- The Amendments to the Law on Individual Property Tax¹⁰⁶ (which introduced taxation on people holding leases on social housing apartments and social housing in protected environ-

¹⁰⁵ For more, see: OHCHR, Serbia.

¹⁰⁶ See Amendments to the Law on Individual Property Tax, (Official Gazette RS, No 95/2018), Article 2.

ments)¹⁰⁷ led to reduced allocation of State funding for social protection, health, education and public services.

- The Law on Social Welfare¹⁰⁸ limits the allocation of social welfare funds for the most marginalised and vulnerable groups to nine months, with allocated amounts far below those needed for the realisation of the right to an adequate standard of living.
- The Law on Financial Support for Families with Children significantly decreased the entitlements of women during maternity leave as well as the rights of parents of children with disabilities and Roma children. Progress was made in 2021 through amendments to the Law, and implementation of the Constitutional Court decisions on the discriminatory effects of its provisions.
- The newly adopted Law on Free Legal Aid could lead to reduced availability of free legal aid provisions for the most vulnerable.
- The Family Law is not in compliance with international standards on the rights of the child and persons with disabilities. These trends are related to inadequate regulatory impact assessments of the proposed legal solutions on human rights and the position of various vulnerable groups, particularly women, persons with disabilities, children and youth, Roma, LGBTQI persons, refugees and others. Coordination and co-operation between GoS sections and decision-making entities is lacking, preventing human rights-compliant policy development (EC 2020d).

For the LNOB strategy to be successful, Serbia requires: practical implementation of the strategy at all levels; sufficient budgetary allocations; a clear partition of jurisdictions between State institutions and other institutions responsible for strategic measures and activities; and adequate follow-up mechanisms. Regular consultations must also be arranged with social groups – especially vulnerable groups – to facilitate the creation, implementation, and monitoring of public policies and strategies.

2.7.1 Populations in rural and remote areas

Populations in rural areas face higher poverty rates than those in urban areas (10.5% versus 4.9%), especially in South Serbia and eastern Serbia, the poorest districts according to both absolute and relative poverty lines (UNDP 2018). The percentage of men owners of agricultural land is twice as high as women owners: 84% of women do not own agricultural land, whereas 12% of rural women own houses in rural areas. Only 17% of agricultural holdings are registered to women. Women comprise 55% of the unemployed rural population, and 74% of women are unpaid and supporting household members (UN Women 2017). As stated above, the rate of unpaid work is also highest for rural women.

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, populations living in rural and remote areas are particularly vulnerable and exposed to disasters triggered by natural hazards.

In 2018, the home help service supported 16,678 users on average per month, of which 90.25% were persons older than 65 years. The coverage of older persons with this service (1.24% of the total population of persons 65+ years) is low, especially compared to developed countries. The availability of this service is particularly insufficient in rural areas (CPE and UNFPA 2021, p. 78).

2.7.2 Persons with disabilities

According to an assessment of digital accessibility policies in Serbia (ITU 2021), the 2011 census cited 571,780 citizens, or 8% of the total population, with disabilities, while international data shows more (10–15%). In 2020, Serbia had around 700,000–800,000 persons with disabilities (GoS 2020b).

Persons with disabilities, particularly persons with mental (intellectual and psychosocial) disabilities, are **largely excluded from almost all aspects of social and economic life**, including: the open labour market and medicalised approaches; working spaces due to their inaccessibility and/or a lack of reasonable accommodation; insufficient prioritisation in the legal framework and practice; a lack of good quality education and health care; and deficiencies in independent living, legal capacity, political participation, and decision-making. Persons with disabilities face a widespread lack of physical accessibility in public institutions and spaces. A new National Strategy on Persons with Disabilities, adopted in 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.

Women with disability 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 and equality of children with disabilities in Serbia, but they still face substantial barriers to inclusion. 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). They often encounter negative attitudes: 29% of children with disabilities have been unable to use public services due to inaccessible facilities or inadequate conditions, while 26% have been discriminated against due to special conditions amounting to indirect discrimination¹⁰⁹. Discrimination is most often experienced in the education system, with which children have the most contact. Yet over 90% of the population believes that, with adequate support, children with disabilities can make great achievements in their lives (UNICEF and GoS. 2017).

Persons with disabilities expressed their concern with how public services available to them tend to be based on medical models, which generally result in a lack of accessibility. Persons with disabilities, especially persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, also encounter more difficulties than others in accessing employment. Large companies experience fewer difficulties adapting workplaces to make them more accessible, still, persons with disabilities find commuting to work more problematic, due to the lack of accessibility of public transport. In Serbia, persons with disabilities in employment also usually do not earn more

¹⁰⁷ See: Budget System Law (Official Gazette RS, Nos. 54/09, 73/10, 101/10, 101/11, 93/12, 62/13, 63/13 (Corrigendum), 108/13, 142/14, 68/15 (other law), 103/15, 99/16, 113/17, 95/18, 31/19, 72/19); Law on the Maximum Number of Employees in the Public Sector (Official Gazette RS, Nos. 68/2015, 81/2016, 95/2018); Law on Temporary Regulation of Salary i.e. wages and other steady income calculation and payment bases of public fund users (Official Gazette RS, Nos. 116/2014 and 95/2018).

¹⁰⁸ See: Law on Social Welfare (Official Gazette RS, Nos. 24/2011).

¹⁰⁹ 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. (UNICEF and GoS. 2017).

than the minimum wage, and 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, leaving them disinclined to seek employment.

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. However, the universal service fund in Serbia, which is funded by money received from telephone bills for inclusion initiatives, is currently not applied to initiatives to promote ICT accessibility or digital inclusion for persons with disabilities. These funding mechanisms need to be improved.

Based on the survey responses of GoS officials, digital inclusion and ICT accessibility in Serbia require:

- improved awareness of the importance of ICT accessibility and a need for disability inclusion and capacity-building across teams in charge of municipal digital services, to facilitate the integration of accessibility standards at the local government level and the provision and promotion of accessible digital services for persons with disabilities at the local level;
- more trained experts with knowledge of digital inclusion and ICT accessibility; and
- greater focus of accessibility and disability inclusion initiatives on ICT.

2.7.3 Older persons

Pensions offer protection from financial poverty for older persons. Due to the pension coverage, the risk of poverty for persons over 65 years is below the national average (SORS 2019c). However, this risk increases for people over 75 years, as they spend their savings accumulated during their employment years, are less able to generate additional income; and have increased health-care expenses due to age-related and chronic conditions (UN DESA n.d.).

According to the 2011 census, approximately 85% of the population of retirement age is covered by pensions. Persons over 65 years who are not covered by pensions are among the most vulnerable groups. In 2014, over 240,000 older people were estimated to be without pensions in Serbia (Matković and Stanić 2014), and this figure is expected to rise. Pension adequacy is also low; the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate for older people in 2016 was 31.2%, while the severe material deprivation rate was 20.9%, considerably higher than EU-28 averages (Pejin Stokić and Bajec 2017). Material deprivation is most common among older women (Babović et al. 2018). According to the 2016 Labour Force Survey, 15% of those aged 65 years and older were employed, including 19.5% of older men and a mere 9.6% of older women, mostly in agriculture (Babović et al. 2018).

Pensioners represent around 1.7 million compared to around 2.2 million employees (PIO 2020). This is not sufficient for regular payments from the pension fund. With the elderly population projected to increase relative to the general population and the working population simultaneously declining, the sustainability of the pension system presents a significant future challenge.

Persons older than 65 years account for over 20% of the population but 15% of social service beneficiaries (Babović et al. 2018). The most frequently used service is home help. The social protection system provides support in critical situations, such as accommodation in institutions (Babović et al. 2018), while community services and independent living support are less developed (SIPRU 2018e). Long-term care services for the elderly are frag-

mented, as the social protection, health care and pension insurance systems each provide overlapping services with limited coordination between them (Todorović and Vračević 2018). Fewer than 10% of persons over 65 years receive any of these services, especially in rural areas. Instead, informal caregivers provide long-term care (Todorović and Vračević 2018). Families, relatives, friends and neighbours provide an estimated 70–95% of all care needs, filling gaps in short- and long-term formal care, assuring people a more dignified life, and delaying institutional care (CPE and UNFPA 2021).

Ageism (prejudices, stereotypes and discrimination based on age) appears socially accepted (Janković et al. 2018). Research in 2015 showed that 19.8% of interviewees older than 65 years had been exposed to some form of abuse or violence in their older age, with financial abuse representing the highest risk and psychological and physical abuse also present (Janković et al. 2015). The Law on Protection from Domestic Violence does not recognise older people as a particularly vulnerable group. The GoS, notably the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, has identified the need to adopt a national strategic document on ageing in order to establish and coordinate measures and activities to improve the economic status of older persons and facilitate their access to human rights.

2.7.4 Forcibly displaced populations and other people in transit

Over the past several decades, Serbia has experienced large, successive waves of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, internally displaced people (IDPs) from Kosovo*, returnees from the EU and, since 2015, migrants and refugees from outside the region.

The **returnees from the EU** are primarily Roma facing significant challenges in social inclusion (CYI 2019).¹¹⁰ While Serbia has developed capacities and expertise in providing national aid and local integration services, additional efforts are needed in specific areas including: better protecting children of persons at risk of statelessness, ensuring birth registration for those without personal documents, and fostering inclusion of the forcibly displaced.

Data collection on **migration** need to be improved and disaggregated by gender. People in transit and families returned to Serbia under the readmission agreement with the EU must be supported.

The Regional Housing Programme (RHP) offers **refugees** from the former Yugoslavia a durable solution in the form of local integration. Although refugees have benefited from RHP housing solutions, the Sustainability Report shows that many RHP beneficiaries remain highly vulnerable and struggle to improve their economic position, thus necessitating additional support beyond housing.

Of 196,000 **IDPs in Serbia** (displaced by war in the 1990s and 2000s), some 68,000 still have needs related to their displacement. IDPs face high unemployment and low education, and 75% of IDP households receive a low monthly income, hindering their ability to integrate successfully into local communities. Undocumented IDPs face obstacles in access to rights due to the inadequate legal framework for delayed birth registration, lengthy procedures to acquire citizenship and an inability to register residence for persons living in informal settlements or informal collective centres.

¹¹⁰ In 2017, almost 4,000 Serbian citizens, mostly from Germany, were returned to Serbia (Commissariat for Refugees and Migration 2019). A survey of readmitted families living in informal settlements in Belgrade highlights the vulnerabilities they faced and the need to strengthen support services to ensure their well-being.

Legislative changes have helped improve the protection environment with respect to **statelessness**. As the 2020 UNHCR Statelessness survey identified 2,139 persons at risk of statelessness, it is clear that some have not been able to obtain personal documentation. The survey confirmed that many still live in dire conditions, often below the poverty line, and both marginalised and excluded, and many lack an education.

Since the first **asylum law** was introduced in 2008, further development of the legal framework has facilitated the integration of recognised refugees. Nevertheless, many face practical challenges in the integration process and require support to find employment or other means of self-reliance. For full refugee integration, widely recognised documents must be issued along with the option to acquire Serbian citizenship. Increasing anti-refugee/migrant sentiments and xenophobia must be confronted.

According to the Serbian Commissariat of Refugees and Migrants, through the end of October 2021, 50,000 new arrivals (5% women) entered Serbia via **mixed migration flows**, with an average of 4,000–5,000 persons accommodated monthly in government centres. In 2021, the Ministry of the Interior Asylum Office recorded 1,639 intentions to seek protection (10% women) in Serbia, 150 formally registered asylum applications, and 13 persons (two women) granted protection. In addition, 336 third-country national UASC (15% girls) sought asylum in Serbia, mostly from Afghanistan and Syria.

2.7.5 Roma and national minorities

Roma¹¹¹ are the most discriminated group in Serbia, facing difficulties in almost all aspects of inclusion – education, employment, housing, and health care. Just 7% of 3–4 year-old children from Roma settlements attend organized early learning education programmes, 64% finish primary school, and 28% attend secondary school (27% girls/30% boys, SORS and UNICEF 2020). In contrast, Roma children are overrepresented in special schools. In response, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development has adopted criteria and procedures for the enrolment of Roma students in secondary schools, which promotes secondary school enrolment and informs Roma children and their parents of the related advantages (Janković et al. 2015; SIPRU 2020a). Net attendance in secondary education has almost doubled for Roma girls (from 15% in 2014 to 27% in 2019).

The **National Coalition for Ending Child Marriages**, established in 2019, supports 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. Coalition members are representatives of relevant ministries/institutions, SIPRU and CSOs (GoS 2021g). Rates of child marriage among girls and young women from Roma settlements remain exceptionally high. Over half (56%) of women aged 20–24 years were married before the age of 18 years, and 16% were married before 15 years (SORS and UNICEF 2020).

Unemployment is particularly high among the Roma community, and the employed are typically engaged in low paying jobs, while many make their living in the informal economy (often subject to hazardous working environments). Poverty is widespread and many people lack access to necessities like electricity, safe water, and sanitation. Conditions are particularly poor in informal settle-

ments lacking basic infrastructure, where 160,000 Roma reside. This became a critical situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, where these settlements did not have adequate sanitation infrastructure.

Access to, and awareness and acceptance of, basic services (e.g. health care and social assistance) is limited among the Roma. While routine immunisation coverage in Serbia is 97%, it is estimated to be as low as 20–30% among the Roma, according to the Institute of Public Health of Belgrade. According to the World Bank, discrimination, limited language skills, and a lack of personal documents hinder the Roma community's access to public services.

Hidden discrimination is widespread, including by public officials. Negative stereotypes prevail, and reported cases of ill-treatment by police are common. In 2016, Serbia adopted the **Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma 2016–2025 and an Action Plan for its implementation (2017–2018)**. The subsequent two-year Action Plan (2019–2020) is pending and overdue. According to the Ombudsperson of Serbia's 2019 Special Report on the Implementation of the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma (Protector of Citizens 2019), the Strategy and Action Plan were established on good grounds but practical results are limited, especially poverty reduction and the socioeconomic position of Roma.

According to the 2011 Census, there are **21 national minorities** in the Republic of Serbia, accounting for about 13% of the population (SORS 2012).¹¹² Their status is regulated by the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (GoS 2006), ratified international and regional treaties,¹¹³ the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities (GoS 2018), the Law on National Councils of National Minorities (GoS 2018b), and the Law on the Official Use of Languages and Scripts (GoS 2018c). In 2016, Serbia adopted the **Action Plan for the Realization of the Rights of National Minorities** (UNHRC 2017)¹¹⁴ under Negotiating Chapter 23, developed in cooperation with representatives of the National Councils of National Minorities and various associations. The Action Plan foresees the right of national minorities to be proportionately represented in the public sector and State institutions; yet, national minorities remain underrepresented (EC 2021). For example, in the parliamentary elections of June 2020, four parties representing national minorities obtained 19 seats (out of 250).

In the 2019–2020 academic year, primary education was offered in eight languages of national minorities¹¹⁵ in 68 LSGs, and secondary education was offered in 27 languages (OHMR 2020). The subject “Maternal Language with Elements of National Culture” was taught in 16 languages of national minorities in 178 LSGs, in 374 schools (OHMR 2020) with 13,826 pupils (6,977 girls) (OHMR 2020).

¹¹² The most numerous national minorities are Hungarians (3.53%), Roma (2.05%) and Bosniaks (2.02%). Slovaks (0.73%), Croats (0.81%), Montenegrins (0.54%), Vlachs (0.49%), Romanians (0.41%) and Macedonians (0.32%) are also significant. Bulgarians, Ruthenians, and Bunjevci have fewer than 20,000 members. Germans, Slovenians, Albanians and Ukrainians have a few thousand, and Poles, Ashkali and Greeks have a few hundred.

¹¹³ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 27); European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms; Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities; European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

¹¹⁴ This strategic document was produced in compliance with the recommendations from the Third Opinion of the Advisory Committee of the CoE on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in Serbia. To ensure coordination in the operation of competent institutions, as well as inclusiveness, transparency, and quality of the monitoring process, oversight of the implementation of the Action Plan was entrusted to the Council for National Minorities, a working body of the GoS composed of representatives of government bodies and the presidents of national councils of national minorities.

¹¹⁵ Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Romanian, Ruthenian, Slovakian, and Croatian.

¹¹¹ According to the last population census, there were 147,604 Roma in 2011. This is likely an underestimation, as many Roma do not identify as such in censuses for fear of discrimination. Domestic and international sources estimate Serbia's Roma population at 300,000–460,000, suggesting Roma are the largest minority in Serbia. According to the SCRM, the IDP population includes some 21,000 Roma, or 10.5% of the entire IDP population.

Reports based on a review by UN Human Rights Mechanisms (CESCR 2014; OHMR 2018) and other relevant sources (EC 2020d) indicate that members of some ethnic minorities continue to face discrimination and Serbia should continue to apply the highest standards of **anti-discrimination laws and policies**. At the same time, it is important to continuously **foster social inclusion of minorities** within the larger society. The Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue has taken measures to build the gender mainstreaming capacities of National Minority Councils.

2.7.6 LGBTQI persons

LGBTQI persons experience high discrimination, negative public attitudes, and stigma. The first draft of a law to regulate unions of same-sex partners was prepared by a working group of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue in 2021 and shared for public consultations. The law has not yet been submitted to the Government and Parliament and is pending adoption.

Serbia is also awaiting adoption of a law to recognise gender identity different from that assigned at birth, a task of the Ministry for Human Rights. Although steps are being taken, including the adoption of the Rules on the Issuance Method and the Gender Change Certificate by the competent health institution, trans persons are unable to exercise some of their basic human rights. Intersex persons remain largely invisible, unrecognised by policies or mechanisms. Targeted efforts are necessary to de-pathologise trans identities domestically, with respect to WHO's removal of it from its list of illnesses in 2019.

Personal security remains a concern for the LGBTQI community. A 2015 National Democratic Institute poll indicated that over 70% of LGBTQI respondents were exposed to psychological violence and harassment (up 15% from 2014), while 23% reported having been physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI). LGBTQI persons are discriminated against in the workplace, and Serbia's LGBTQI community ranked the enjoyment of economic and social rights and the elimination of labour discrimination as their second highest priority. LGBTQI persons living with HIV face greater discrimination than almost any other group in Serbia. The implementation of hate crime legislation, including on grounds of sexual orientation, remains inadequate (EC 2021, page 39).

2.7.7 Persons with HIV/AIDS

The **2018–2025 Strategy for Prevention and Control of HIV Infection and AIDS** promotes protection from discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS. HIV treatment is free to all with medical insurance.

In 2019, 3,200 people (of all ages) in Serbia lived with HIV, representing an increase of 78% since 2010 when there were 1,800 people (UNAIDS 2020). The HIV prevalence rate (for those aged 15+ years) remained the same (<0.1%) from 2010 to 2019. Yet, the HIV incidence per 1,000 (for those aged 15+ years) has increased slightly, from 0.02 in 2010 to 0.03 in 2019. This increase is driven by the 15–49 age group, where HIV incidence (per 1,000) increased from 0.04 to 0.05 between 2010 and 2019, while the HIV incidence for those 50 years and older remained stable at <0.01 (UNAIDS 2020). Discrimination and stigmatisation at work persist as well as when accessing health-care institutions (EC 2020d; Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2017).

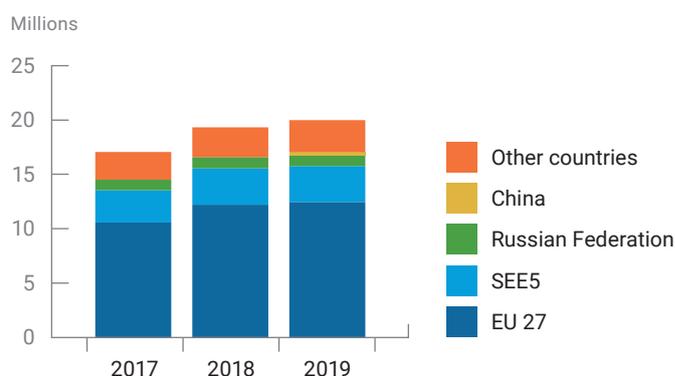
2.8 REGIONAL AND SUB-REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Serbia is actively involved in regional processes to improve co-operation and regional development. While **legacies of past conflicts** during the dissolution of Yugoslavia remain partially unresolved, regional mechanisms provide the basis for integrative and sustainable regional development.

Serbia's EU membership ambitions, its maintenance of a multi-vector foreign policy, and good relations with partners beyond Europe are fundamental elements of the country's national policy, around which there is general accord. Serbia is actively engaged in intra-regional coordination mechanisms and processes, such as in the fields of economic development and trade, transport and communications infrastructure and inter-connectivity, and peacebuilding through dialogue, with a focus on youth. Examples include Serbia's active role in the Central European Free Trade Agreement, the Transport Community, the Berlin Process and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, the Regional Cooperation Council, the Open Balkans initiative, and the Energy Community Treaty.

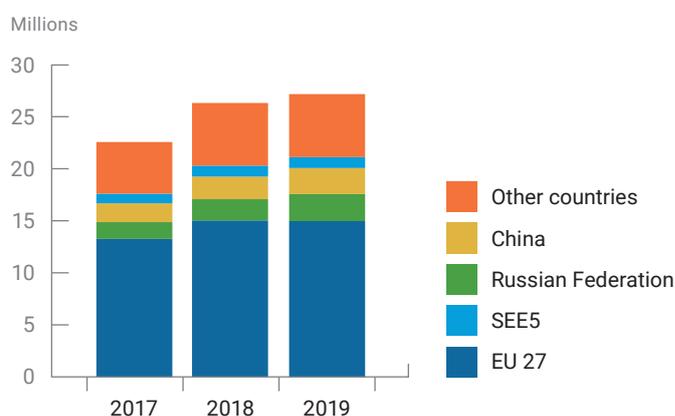
The EU remains Serbia's most important trading partner, with a high and growing share of the country's trade. The potential for trade within the subregion remains under-leveraged, representing only a small share of external trade (Figures 11 and 12).

Figure 11 Total export (Trade value in 1,000 USD)



Source: SORS 2021i

Figure 12 Total import (Trade value in 1,000 USD)



Source: World Bank, World Integrated Trade Solutions database

The EU Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) launched a substantial investment package worth EUR 30 billion (EUR 9 billion in grants, EUR 20 billion in investments) for the region over the next seven years.

Since 2019, Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia have cooperated under the “Open Balkan Initiative” to establish a “mini-Schengen” zone that would eliminate residual barriers to the free flow of people, goods, services and capital, and would be open to all parties in the Western Balkans, including Kosovo.

Under the Berlin Process, in November 2020, partners:

- adopted the Guidelines on the Green Agenda to unlock the Western Balkans Green and Digital transition through a substantial investment package supported by the EIP;
- agreed to establish a Common Regional Market (CRM), with the full freedom of movement of **goods, services, capital and people** by 2024, buttressed by a regional investment area, a regional digital area and a regional industrial and innovation area; and
- adopted the “Agenda for the Western Balkans on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport” as an essential element of regional integration.

Through the Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe, Serbia is actively engaged in improving subregional cooperation on transnational organized crime, and police and judicial cooperation in countering people smuggling and trafficking in the Western Balkans. A Joint Action Plan on Counterterrorism was signed in 2018 between representatives of the Western Balkans and the EU.

Despite positive trends in regional processes, challenges remain. The normalisation of relations with Kosovo remains a major barrier, alongside the region’s intense carbon and energy use, hindering energy transition as a transformative policy and the mitigation of climate change (IEA 2020). Alarming levels, sources, and consequences of air pollution are shared concerns, as is the poor connectivity of the transport infrastructure, impeding trade and labour flows and hampering competition in global markets. The infrastructure in most secondary cities in the region is inadequate.

Beyond Europe, Serbia has expanded its partnerships with other countries and via regional arrangements and processes, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Central and Eastern European Countries cooperation mechanism, the bilateral strategic partnership agreement with China (2009), and the Free Trade Area Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (2021), which have significantly broadened Serbia’s financing and economic relationships. These partnerships and regional and subregional processes, along with Serbia’s EU reform agenda, should be leveraged and aligned with its commitment to the SDGs, notably 16 and 17.¹¹⁶

According to civil society assessments in the region and UN Human Rights Mechanisms’ reviews, no real progress is being made in processing war crimes, and the duration of trials is exceedingly long. Progress is also absent with respect to victims’ rights, while the number of missing persons is not declining as needed. War criminals are also publicly promoted (HLC 2020). Regional cooperation is underway for transitional justice, and national and international processes and frameworks are in place. Space for acceleration remains, given the high number of war crimes, the slow reported progress, and a need to build stronger mutual trust in the region.

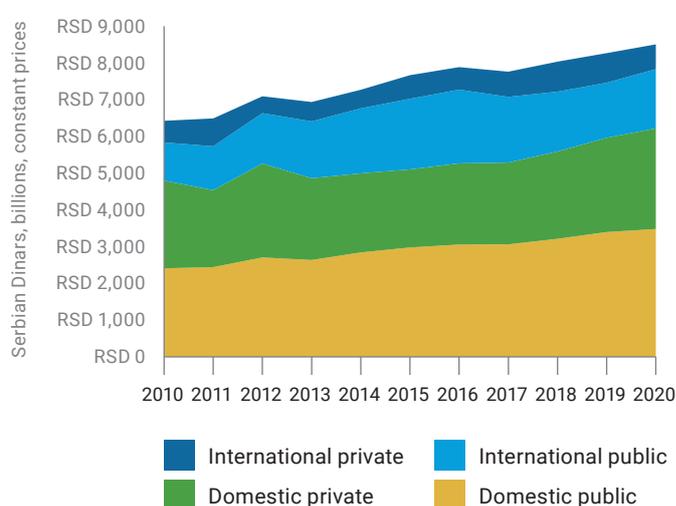
Regional cooperation on gender equality and women’s empowerment is underway. Several initiatives focus on gender-responsive governance in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia and combat violence against women throughout the region. Efforts recognising women’s potential for transformational leadership are needed and regional cooperation on this could set a crucial trend for the region and help better position regional economies and foster democratic governance.

2.9 FINANCIAL LANDSCAPE AND OPPORTUNITIES

To meet the 2030 Agenda, Serbia needs to mobilise the right scale and mix of financing and incorporate all resources – public and private, domestic, and international – in line with the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, which calls on countries to establish integrated national financing frameworks (INFF). This section highlights the analytical work conducted by the UNCT in support of this priority, focusing on **four finance categories**, in line with the UN INFF methodology: **a) domestic public finance; b) domestic private finance; c) international public finance; and d) international private finance.**¹¹⁷

At an aggregate level, as Figure 13 shows, **domestic public finance** is the main source of finance in Serbia representing 41% of total resources in 2020 and is growing rapidly. Over the last decade, it grew an average of 3.7% per year. In contrast, private domestic and international finance grew by only 1.4% in the same period and, as a result, shrank from 46% to 40% of the total over this period.

Figure 13 Aggregate financing trends



Source: RCO calculations

Government borrowing is an important component of **domestic public finance** but was a challenge for Serbia in the late 1990s with the debt-to-GDP ratio reaching almost 200% with 90% due for immediate repayment in 2000. After substantial economic reforms in 2001 and negotiations to write off and restructure the public debt, it was drastically reduced. From 2008 – when the

¹¹⁶ Serbia supports international peacekeeping by assigning nearly 300 military personnel and medical support to peacekeeping operations. A leader in the region, Serbia is a top European troop contributor country (TCC).

¹¹⁷ The four categories are: domestic public finance (fiscal revenue; government borrowing; public investment and the Development Fund); domestic private finance (private borrowing; private investment); international public finance (international government borrowing; ODA funds); international private finance (remittances; foreign direct investment [FDI]).

financial crisis precipitated the Great Recession – until 2014, Serbia suffered three recessions and public debt subsequently rose again to 70% of GDP, which was unsustainable for servicing. A rigorous austerity programme was reintroduced in 2014, impacting pensioners and employees in the public sector. From 2016 to 2019, public debt contracted reaching 50% of GDP.

The COVID-19 crisis caused – as in most countries – a new expansion in **public debt**; public borrowing increased by 12% year on year, and currently the debt-to-GDP ratio is at 56.5% (UN DESA n.d.). At this level, the Serbian debt is widely viewed as solvable and sustainable, as evidenced by a sharp fall in the country's risk premium and a coinciding upgrade in its credit rating; considering the historical context, further accumulation of public debt is not advisable. The burden of servicing debt curtails the amount of resources at the disposal of the GoS to support sustainable development: The volume of repayments is substantial with about 9% of GDP being devoted to interests and repayments in 2020 (GoS 2021h). Thus, it is critical to continue exploring cost-effective and innovative solutions to reduce the cost of servicing debt, including further issuances of labelled bonds, such as Green and Blue Bonds and Swaps for Nature, and participation in global and regional fora to identify solutions adapted to the needs for financing sustainable development in middle-income economies.

Also comprised in domestic public funding is the **Serbian Development Fund**, established in 2016 to promote the development of depressed economic regions, further businesses and entrepreneurs, and encourage competitiveness and liquidity within the economy, employment and exports. It currently represents a low share in public domestic finance and offers promise. To enhance its contribution to sustainable development, options include: increase GoS budget allocations to the Fund; transform it into a joint-stock company with a majority State capital share; and/or support it with long-term bonds.

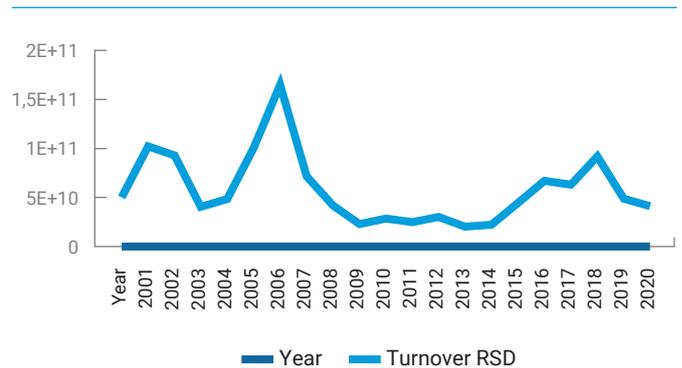
International public finance has a moderate share in aggregate funding overall, representing only 8% of total finance in 2020. Within this category, the most significant funds are the EU pre-accession funds IPA and IPARD, along with European investment and developmental banks, such as EIB, EBRD, KfW and CEB. Ensuring these funds prioritise sustainable development is especially important. As regards EU public investments, it has been estimated that about one third of the EU investment was directly linked to SDG 9, build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation. Even more funding, about 37% of the total, has been directed to green transition (with emphasis on SDG 7, affordable and clean energy, SDG 6 clean water and sanitation and SDG 11, inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable human settlements). The coherence between investments in the energy and transport sectors is more difficult to evaluate.¹¹⁸

Domestic private finance, comprised of private borrowing (the sum of domestic banks' claims on households and firms) and private investment, experienced slow growth in the last decade. The trend in domestic private investment is a concern: In 2019, the value of constant dinars only equalled its 2012 value. While corporate borrowing from banks stagnated in the last decade, household borrowing rapidly increased until the two equalised in 2020. While loans to companies have a supply side effect by financing investment, exports and working capital, loans to households have a demand side effect by financing personal consumption.

Hence, Serbia's recent growth was largely driven by consumption rather than by investment and productivity, with negative repercussions for sustainable development.

Domestic private finance is also constrained by the lack of depth of the Serbian financial market. This is exemplified by the stagnation of the stock market, as shown in Figure 14. The Belex 15 turnover¹¹⁹, taken as a loose proxy of the capitalisation of the Belgrade stock market, has not yet bounced back to its pre-financial crisis level, which may be constraining the availability of venture capital to Serbian firms and constraining their development. At the same time, competitive bank funding means that companies are often themselves unwilling to access the capital markets and issue securities.

Figure 14 Belex turnover



Source: <https://www.belex.rs/>

While these are long term issues that need to be more systematically addressed, in the medium term, one way to supply additional liquidity to the stock market would be to issue shares of State-Owned Enterprises and list them on the Belgrade Stock Exchange, with the additional benefit of enhancing the transparency and efficiency of their business operations and possibly attracting foreign capital, since foreign investors tend to participate with 33% in the total turnover of the stock exchange.

The last category in the agreed UN INFF methodology is **international private finance**, comprised of remittances and foreign direct investment (FDI). Remittances represent an important source of international finance for Serbia, totalling 1.5% of GDP (1.2% in 2020), a particularly high value in the region. While the GoS can do little to rekindle this source of external finance, it can encourage productive investments of remittances, beyond construction and consumption. Turning to FDI, after declining because of the financial crisis from 2008 to 2012, FDI in Serbia partially recovered until 2018, remaining below the 2004–2006 values. Starting in 2018, FDI inflows began to decline again. As many other countries, Serbia has recourse to incentives to attract FDI; however, in the financial markets of Serbia, incentives will only be effective alongside a more comprehensive economic policy package aimed at improving the business environment overall. FDI is undergoing a global transformation that may cause it to further contract in the future, due to changes in the global structure of production as firms take advantage of the opportunities presented by digitization and automation. As such, incentives may be a costly strategy that will not necessarily pay off (Baldwin 2019 and UNCTAD 2021).

¹¹⁸ DESA, Serbia: Potential impacts of the infrastructure investment by European Union on the Sustainable Development Goals in Serbia 2022. To be made available at: <https://www.brisdgs.org/project-countries/serbia>.

¹¹⁹ The Belex15 is a major stock market index which tracks the performance of the 15 biggest companies on the Belgrade Stock Exchange in Serbia. It has a base value of 1,000 as of 2005.

3 MULTIDIMENSIONAL 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 COVID-19 related risks. 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	Heightened tensions among regional partners	Medium	High	
			Continuation of inflammatory narratives in the political space	Medium	High	Public statements in country and region, tolerance towards public depiction glorifying war legacies
			Prolonged EU accession process	Medium	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

SDG	RISK AREAS	DESCRIPTION	SCOPE	LIKELIHOOD	IMPACT	EARLY WARNING SIGNS
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	
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

SDG	RISK AREAS	DESCRIPTION	SCOPE	LIKELIHOOD	IMPACT	EARLY WARNING SIGNS
1, 2, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 16	Economic stability and growth	Risks to economic growth and stability, resulting from structural inefficiencies and COVID-19 impact	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
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

4 TURNING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES



4.1 OPPORTUNITIES TO ACCELERATE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE SDGs

Based on the identified development challenges, opportunities to accelerate both the EU accession objectives and SDG implementation include the recommendations listed below.

1. **Improve governance** by taking decisive action against system inefficiencies and corruption, making the judiciary independent and effective, improving policy coherence across sectors, and consulting broadly during the policymaking process (with CSOs, the private sector, and academia). **Further promote social coherence by building trust and strengthening regional cooperation** with other countries in the Western Balkans.
2. **Address exclusion and inequalities** affecting vulnerable groups: women and children; youth not in employment, education or training; Roma; other ethnic minorities; refugees and asylum seekers; the rural population; LGBTQI persons; people with disabilities; and older people.
3. Build a robust, **innovative, and resilient low-carbon economy for accelerated and job-rich growth** in line with EU requirements and citizens' expectations.
4. **Decouple economic growth from environmental pressures.** Mitigate and adapt to climate and other environmental challenges in line with the Paris Agreement and EU environmental and climate change standards by improving all areas of environmental protection, governance and climate change, by more sustainably managing cultural and natural resources (including agriculture and forest management), improving human health and building resilience.
5. Leverage access to **international sources of public funding** to support a **green economy** and transform Serbia into a modern economy and society that **Leaves No One Behind**.
6. Create an attractive environment for FDI by enhancing **political stability** and **good governance** and ensuring a **skilled labour force** that corresponds to investors' needs, while enhancing the development impact of FDI.
7. **Hold social dialogues** on the **Green transformation, just transition, rule of law, civic space and governance**, to be expanded and consolidated into actions, with the active and forward looking participation of all Government and non-government actors.
8. **Strengthen health and social protection systems**, including in the emergency context.
9. Expand the inclusion of more workers under the **decent job framework**, strengthen **social dialogues**, **close the gender pay gap** and expand **rights for informal workers**.
10. **Increase the quality of jobs and develop effective solutions to curb emigration of the labour force:** Bring the informal economy into the mainfold, create decent jobs, promote rights at work, and ensure equal access to all. Align quality education with labour market needs, and build the competencies of young people to manage the uncertainties and challenges ahead.
11. Foster responsive local governance, a healthy environment, and broad-based economic growth that provides good jobs, to sway Serbia's youth to build their futures at home.

4.2 CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Three essential elements cut across the challenge areas: **governance; data; and gender**.

- **Judiciary reform and fundamental rights, justice, security, and procurement** are all critical to the country's reform agenda and at the centre of the EU acquis. Serbia needs to continue harmonising national development policies through an overarching development plan, aligned directly and explicitly with the SDGs. The commitment of the GoS to **decentralisation** adds a critical dimension to this process, while the introduction of a more "**people-centred**" approach to development would facilitate alignment with the UN system. To **nationalise the 2030 Agenda**, Serbia needs to define national SDG targets, which would better link fund allocations to the policies, measures and interventions facilitating SDG achievement in line with the Addis Ababa Convention. The full nationalisation of the 2030 Agenda should ensure policy consistency.
- To move towards **evidence-based policymaking** and **data-driven** design of policy choices, data collection must be improved across all sectors and levels. Comprehensive, **disaggregated data** should serve as a basis to tackle the main challenges and is indispensable to the development of alternative policy scenarios which must underpin policy decisions and solutions. The national capacity to monitor the delivery of policies and programmes should be improved to enable a comprehensive assessment of policy implications and better targeting of those in need.
- **Gender equality and inclusiveness for vulnerable groups** should be prioritised, particularly where traditional cultural norms may conflict with these objectives.

The UNSDCF 2021–2025 was developed in consultation with key national and international stakeholders, including women CSOs. One of its outcomes is dedicated to human rights, gender equality and rule of law: "All people, especially the more vulnerable, benefit from the realisation of human rights, gender equality and enhanced rule of law in line with international commitments." **Gender equality and women's empowerment** are well incorporated into UNSDCF Joint Workplans and measured through 52% gender-responsive outcome indicators.

4.3 CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

This analysis offers several conclusions on the achievement of the SDGs, which are embedded in the strategic priorities of the new UNSDCF for Serbia.

- The persistence of social exclusion, inequalities, and inconsistent human rights policymaking and implementation could impede achievement of the SDGs. Growth must be more inclusive to **Leave No One Behind, mainstream gender equality**, and drive **sustainable development**. Increased capacity-building supportive of the 2030 Agenda and EU accession governance models, increased space for NGOs, access for the most vulnerable, gender equality and reduced discrimination are all areas which would strengthen the country's development while improving human rights.
- Serbia needs to define a **national vision based on sustainability principles**, with a well-defined pathway towards its goals; it should embark on resilient, low-carbon growth decoupled from environmental pressures and in line with EU accession.

As there is a significant complementarity between the EU clusters and the SDGs, it would be beneficial to further align the two processes.

- Serbia needs to move towards **evidence-based policy and decision-making**, increase policy coherence, continue to strengthen institutional capacities, and introduce a comprehensive and reflective multi-level statistical system to progress towards the 2030 Agenda.
- Rather than just recover to pre-pandemic levels, Serbia should use this as an opportunity to **build forward better**, including prioritising a **green recovery**, increasing the **resilience** of the economy and society to future potential shocks, and improving **well-being** and **equality among all** its citizens.

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5 ANNEXES

ANNEX 1

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT ASSESSMENT
OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SERBIA

Available online: [Socio-Economic Impact
Assessment](#)

ANNEX 2

SOCIO-ECONOMIC RESPONSE PLAN

ANNEX 3

SIGNING/RATIFICATION/ACCESSION TO CORE
TREATIES AND CONVENTIONS

Available online: [Socio-Economic Response Plan](#)

ANNEX 4

UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW (UPR)

OUTCOMES AND EU ACCESSION CHAPTERS

ANNEX 3

SIGNING/RATIFICATION/ ACCESSION TO CORE TREATIES AND CONVENTIONS

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
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

Fundamental

Convention	Date	Status	Note
C029 - Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C087 - Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C098 - Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C100 - Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C105 - Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)	10 Jul 2003	In Force	
C111 - Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C138 - Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) <i>Minimum age specified: 15 years</i>	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C182 - Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)	10 Jul 2003	In Force	

Governance (Priority)

Convention	Date	Status	Note
C081 - Labour Inspection Convention, 1947 (No. 81)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C122 - Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C129 - Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention, 1969 (No. 129)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C144 - Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standards) Convention, 1976 (No. 144)	13 May 2005	In Force	

Technical

Convention	Date	Status	Note
C002 - Unemployment Convention, 1919 (No. 2)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C003 - Maternity Protection Convention, 1919 (No. 3)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Denounced on 02 Dec 2011
C008 - Unemployment Indemnity (Shipwreck) Convention, 1920 (No. 8)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Automatic Denunciation on 15 Mar 2014 by convention MLC, 2006
C009 - Placing of Seamen Convention, 1920 (No. 9)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Automatic Denunciation on 15 Mar 2014 by convention MLC, 2006
C011 - Right of Association (Agriculture) Convention, 1921 (No. 11)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C012 - Workmen's Compensation (Agriculture) Convention, 1921 (No. 12)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C013 - White Lead (Painting) Convention, 1921 (No. 13)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C014 - Weekly Rest (Industry) Convention, 1921 (No. 14)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C016 - Medical Examination of Young Persons (Sea) Convention, 1921 (No. 16)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Automatic Denunciation on 15 Mar 2014 by convention MLC, 2006
C017 - Workmen's Compensation (Accidents) Convention, 1925 (No. 17)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	

Convention	Date	Status	Note
C018 - Workmen's Compensation (Occupational Diseases) Convention, 1925 (No. 18)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C019 - Equality of Treatment (Accident Compensation) Convention, 1925 (No. 19)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C022 - Seamen's Articles of Agreement Convention, 1926 (No. 22)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Automatic Denunciation on 15 Mar 2014 by convention MLC, 2006
C023 - Repatriation of Seamen Convention, 1926 (No. 23)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Automatic Denunciation on 15 Mar 2014 by convention MLC, 2006
C024 - Sickness Insurance (Industry) Convention, 1927 (No. 24)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C025 - Sickness Insurance (Agriculture) Convention, 1927 (No. 25)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C027 - Marking of Weight (Packages Transported by Vessels) Convention, 1929 (No. 27)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C032 - Protection against Accidents (Dockers) Convention (Revised), 1932 (No. 32)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C045 - Underground Work (Women) Convention, 1935 (No. 45)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C048 - Maintenance of Migrants' Pension Rights Convention, 1935 (No. 48)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C053 - Officers' Competency Certificates Convention, 1936 (No. 53)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Automatic Denunciation on 15 Mar 2014 by convention MLC, 2006
C056 - Sickness Insurance (Sea) Convention, 1936 (No. 56)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Automatic Denunciation on 15 Mar 2014 by convention MLC, 2006
C069 - Certification of Ships' Cooks Convention, 1946 (No. 69)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Automatic Denunciation on 15 Mar 2014 by convention MLC, 2006
C073 - Medical Examination (Seafarers) Convention, 1946 (No. 73)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Automatic Denunciation on 15 Mar 2014 by convention MLC, 2006
C074 - Certification of Able Seamen Convention, 1946 (No. 74)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Automatic Denunciation on 15 Mar 2014 by convention MLC, 2006
C080 - Final Articles Revision Convention, 1946 (No. 80)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C088 - Employment Service Convention, 1948 (No. 88)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C089 - Night Work (Women) Convention (Revised), 1948 (No. 89)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C090 - Night Work of Young Persons (Industry) Convention (Revised), 1948 (No. 90)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	

Convention	Date	Status	Note
C091 - Paid Vacations (Seafarers) Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 91)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Automatic Denunciation on 15 Mar 2014 by convention MLC, 2006
C092 - Accommodation of Crews Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 92)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Automatic Denunciation on 15 Mar 2014 by convention MLC, 2006
C094 - Labour Clauses (Public Contracts) Convention, 1949 (No. 94)	10 Dec 2014	In Force	
C097 - Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97) <i>Has excluded the provisions of Annex III</i>	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C102 - Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102) <i>Has accepted Parts II to VI, VIII and X. Part VI is no longer applicable as a result of the ratification of Convention No. 121.</i>	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C103 - Maternity Protection Convention (Revised), 1952 (No. 103)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Automatic Denunciation on 31 Aug 2011 by convention C183
C106 - Weekly Rest (Commerce and Offices) Convention, 1957 (No. 106) <i>The Government has declared that the Convention also applies to persons employed in the establishments specified in Article 3, paragraph 1.</i>	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C109 - Wages, Hours of Work and Manning (Sea) Convention (Revised), 1958 (No. 109)	24 Nov 2000	Not in force	Instrument not in force
C113 - Medical Examination (Fishermen) Convention, 1959 (No. 113)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C114 - Fishermen's Articles of Agreement Convention, 1959 (No. 114)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C116 - Final Articles Revision Convention, 1961 (No. 116)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C119 - Guarding of Machinery Convention, 1963 (No. 119)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C121 - Employment Injury Benefits Convention, 1964 [Schedule I amended in 1980] (No. 121)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C126 - Accommodation of Crews (Fishermen) Convention, 1966 (No. 126)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C131 - Minimum Wage Fixing Convention, 1970 (No. 131)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C132 - Holidays with Pay Convention (Revised), 1970 (No. 132) <i>Length of holiday specified: 18 working days. Has accepted the provisions of Article 15, paragraph 1(a) and (b).</i>	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C135 - Workers' Representatives Convention, 1971 (No. 135)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C136 - Benzene Convention, 1971 (No. 136)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C139 - Occupational Cancer Convention, 1974 (No. 139)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C140 - Paid Educational Leave Convention, 1974 (No. 140)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C142 - Human Resources Development Convention, 1975 (No. 142)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C143 - Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C148 - Working Environment (Air Pollution, Noise and Vibration) Convention, 1977 (No. 148)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C150 - Labour Administration Convention, 1978 (No. 150)	15 Mar 2013	In Force	
C155 - Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	

Convention	Date	Status	Note
C156 - Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C158 - Termination of Employment Convention, 1982 (No. 158)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C159 - Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention, 1983 (No. 159)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C161 - Occupational Health Services Convention, 1985 (No. 161)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C162 - Asbestos Convention, 1986 (No. 162)	24 Nov 2000	In Force	
C167 - Safety and Health in Construction Convention, 1988 (No. 167)	16 Sep 2009	In Force	
C181 - Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997 (No. 181)	15 Mar 2013	In Force	
C183 - Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183) <i>Period of maternity leave: 16 weeks</i>	31 Aug 2010	In Force	
C184 - Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention, 2001 (No. 184)	12 Mar 2019	Not in force	The Convention will enter into force for Serbia on 12 Mar 2020.
MLC, 2006 - Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC, 2006) <i>In accordance with Standard A4.5 (2) and (10), the Government has specified the following branches of social security: medical care; sickness benefit; unemployment benefit and employment injury benefit.</i>	15 Mar 2013	In Force	
Amendments of 2014 to the MLC, 2006	18 Jan 2017	In Force	
Amendments of 2016 to the MLC, 2006	08 Jan 2019	In Force	
Amendments of 2018 to the MLC, 2006	26 Dec 2020	Not in force	Formal disagreement period until 26 Jun 2020

ANNEX 4

UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW (UPR) OUTCOMES AND EU ACCESSION CHAPTERS

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International obligations and cooperation with international human rights mechanisms and bodies	
<p>Consider ratifying the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families; the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on communications procedures.</p>	<p>Serbia has ratified eight of the nine international human rights instruments. It has yet to become a party to the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.</p>
National human rights framework	
<p>Design and implement a human rights action plan, and revise laws with a view to strengthen the independence of the Ombudsman and facilitate interaction with the international human rights mechanisms and CSOs.</p> <p>Harmonise domestic legislation with the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; and integrate the crime of enforced disappearance into national legislation while establishing a legislative framework to access files related to cases of enforced disappearance and other human rights violations.</p>	<p>Serbia's legislative and institutional framework for upholding human rights is broadly in place. However, it needs to ensure the framework is consistently and efficiently implemented.</p> <p>As regards the promotion and enforcement of human rights, the newly established government created a Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue.</p> <p>A new Ombudsman law and amendments to the law on access to information of public importance were adopted at the level of Government on 7 October 2021. The adoption of a new anti-discrimination strategy and of a new Roma action plan are delayed.</p> <p>In the field of prevention of torture and ill-treatment, the Ombudsman, in its role of National Preventive Mechanism against Torture, continued to increase the number of visits to relevant sites. Training sessions on the methodology for investigating cases of torture continued, in light of the outstanding recommendations of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT).</p> <p>European Court of Human Rights ruled on the case <i>Zličić v Serbia</i>, finding that Serbia violated article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, namely inhuman and degrading treatment while in police custody, and failed to conduct an effective investigation.</p> <p>Ombudsman published an analysis of the lawfulness of the work of the Ministry of the Interior during the July 2020 citizens' protests related to the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and recommended to the Ministry to identify and sanction responsible police officers. Investigations have been initiated; they have not yet resulted in any disciplinary sanctions.</p> <p>No progress was made on adoption of a law for the prevention of ill-treatment and abuse in social institutions.</p>

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Equality and non-discrimination

Continue to combat all forms of discrimination, including hate speech, incitement to violence and discrimination against vulnerable groups; promote greater accountability and implement the Strategy for the Prevention of and Protection from Discrimination; as well as the law on anti-discrimination, especially concerning national minorities.

Take concrete steps to protect LGBTQI people and their freedom of assembly and expression, including by amending the Criminal Code in order to clearly criminalise discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity; and take steps towards making a provision in law for same-sex civil partnership and marriage.

In the field of non-discrimination, Serbia adopted amendments to the law on the prohibition of discrimination in May 2021. Further work will be required to fully align this law with the EU acquis, and in particular Directive 2000/78/EC establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation, as well as with European standards. Following expiry of the previous anti-discrimination strategy in 2018, the government is delayed in adopting a new strategy (deadline in the action plan: Q4 2020).

No progress was made towards alignment of the 2016 amendments to the criminal code related to prohibition and punishment of criminal racial acts with the EU acquis.

The ministry for human and minority rights started a dialogue about a future law on same-sex partnership, as already foreseen in the previous anti-discrimination strategy. The President publicly announced that such draft law would not be in line with the current constitution and that he would not sign it.

The Ombudsman published a recommendation to the ministry for human and minority rights to draft legislation that would enable the regulation of legal gender recognition, also foreseen in the previous strategy. Difficulties remain, especially in smaller municipalities, in implementing the amendments of the law on birth registry, which enable data on gender change to be entered into the registry.

The implementation of hate crime legislation, including on grounds of sexual orientation, remains inadequate.

Due to lack of trust in institutions, cases of violence and discrimination towards LGBTIQ persons are often unreported.

Transgender persons are particularly vulnerable to violence, abuse and discrimination. Intersex persons remain invisible both socially and legally.

Administration of justice, including impunity and the rule of law

Continue combating impunity for grave violations of international law and intensify efforts to uncover the fate of missing persons, while also extending cooperation to the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals and implementing the War Crimes Prosecution Strategy.

Continue strengthening the independence, accountability and effectiveness of the justice system while ensuring implementation of the National Strategy for Judicial Reform 2013–2018, and seeking to provide increased protection to human rights defenders including through increased accountability for those threatening their rights, and taking additional measures to combat hate speech.

Serbia has a very weak track record in the processing of war crimes cases.

Serbia needs to fully cooperate with the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT), including by fully accepting and implementing its rulings and decisions. Serbia continues to publicly challenge the judgments of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), including at the highest levels. Cooperation between the IRMCT prosecution office and the Serbian Office of the War Crimes Prosecutor (OWCP) needs to be improved.

Serbia has some level of preparation in the area of the judiciary. Limited progress was made overall.

The constitutional reform in the area of the judiciary was relaunched in 2020, when the government submitted the initiative to Parliament.

The Parliamentary Committee has adopted the draft text prepared by the expert working group and sent to the Venice Commission for its opinion. On 15 October, the Venice Commission issued a favourable opinion of the draft text, including key recommendations to be addressed. Once finalised, the text will be adopted in Parliament and put for a referendum, planned for December 2021.

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Fundamental freedoms and the right to participate in public and political life

Continue defending fundamental freedoms by ensuring safety for journalists and writers, including by carrying out thorough, prompt and independent investigations into allegations of threats and violations against human rights defenders, journalists and others.

Promote greater independence and pluralism of the media, including through increased transparency concerning ownership and financing of media and through the implementation of media laws adopted in 2014 aimed at protecting freedom of expression.

Serbia has some level of preparation concerning freedom of expression. Overall, limited progress was made by adopting and starting to implement a limited number of measures under the action plan related to the media strategy, while verbal attacks against journalists by high-level officials continued.

The Republic Public Prosecutor's Office (RPPO) issued a mandatory instruction for all public prosecutors, ordering urgent action in cases of threats and attacks against journalists. Prosecutors are obliged to keep special records in relation to criminal acts committed against journalists.

Implementation of the action plan related to the media strategy was limited so far, while amendments of the media laws, including the role of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), are scheduled for a later stage in 2021 and 2022.

Cases of threats and violence against journalists remain a concern and the overall environment for the exercise of freedom of expression without hindrance still needs to be further strengthened in practice. Most media associations withdrew from the group on safety of journalists in March 2021, citing hate speech and smear campaigns against journalists and civil society representatives.

Right to an adequate standard of living

Increase efforts to improve housing conditions for those most in need.

There has been a five-year delay in adopting a national housing strategy as required by the 2016 law on housing. Almost 20% of the population of the Roma settlements that were mapped have no or irregular access to safe drinking water, while over 55% have no or irregular access to sewer networks, and 14.5% have no or irregular access to electricity. These shortcomings were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The legalisation of Roma settlements needs to be tackled as a matter of priority as required by the Poznan Declaration.

Forced evictions are still taking place, which is not in line with the law on housing.

This law needs to be implemented effectively, especially the provisions prescribing housing support and a procedure for relocation of informal settlements.

Right to education and training

Promote inclusive education for all children by, among others, reducing non-attendance and school dropout rates; implementing the Strategy of Education until 2020; and ensuring that students of ethnic minority groups enjoy greater access to school textbooks in their native language.

Some progress was made in increasing the participation of disadvantaged students at all levels of education. Progress was made in the enrolment of Roma children in primary and secondary education (from 22% in 2014 to 28% 2019). However, the implementation of measures to reduce dropout rates and segregation needs to be strengthened, especially at local level.

Serbia adopted legislation on assistive technology resource centres, which is expected to provide additional support services for inclusive education.

The process of preparing and printing textbooks in minority languages continued and produced positive results. New curricula for teaching Serbian as a non-mother tongue have also been adopted, and support by external associates in pilot elementary schools has continued. The publication of textbooks in minority languages for use in secondary schools remains limited. In consultation with eight national minority councils which have education in minority languages, the authorities recorded 300 on-line classes of Serbian as non-native language, which are available on the national platform of Radio Television Serbia.

New education strategy until 2030 and the action plan guiding the former until 2023 were adopted.

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Women	
<p>Take measures to ensure greater equality between men and women, including by supporting the economic empowerment of rural women and by applying the principle of equal pay for work of equal value to bridge the gender wage gap.</p> <p>Consolidate legal measures to prevent all forms of discrimination and violence against women, including domestic violence, and ensure the thorough implementation of the National Strategy for the Prevention and Suppression of Violence against Women and Young Girls in the Family and Partnership Relations.</p>	<p>Serbia adopted a new law on gender equality, which has been aligned with the EU acquis. The amended legal act defines general and special measures in order to achieve and promote gender equality.</p> <p>The National Strategy for Gender Equality was adopted. Roma women, older women, poor women, women with disabilities, refugee and internally displaced women, continue to experience intersecting forms of discrimination, which was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.</p> <p>New strategy on violence against women and domestic violence was adopted. The latest national action plan for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security covers the period 2017-2020 and a new one is pending.</p> <p>The implementation of the law against domestic violence needs to be improved. An integrated system for collecting and monitoring cases of violence disaggregated by type of violence and by relationship between perpetrator and victim still does not exist. The definition of rape still has to be amended in the criminal code in order to comply with the Istanbul Convention. An action plan on the national programme for safeguarding and improving sexual and reproductive health has yet to be adopted.</p> <p>Former mayor was sentenced to three months in prison for “illegal sexual activity” towards one of his staff. Although the case was not qualified as “sexual harassment”, this was the first case of an elected official being sentenced to prison for this type of case.</p> <p>The employment rate for men is 14 percentage points higher than those for women.</p> <p>The lack of state services for childcare in rural areas increases the amount of unpaid household work for women.</p> <p>Women have been at the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic, as health care, shop and pharmacy workers. As a result of the crisis, 7% of employed women lost jobs or were made to take leave compared to 4% of employed men.</p>
Children	
<p>Take legislative and other measures to increase protection of children from abuse and violence. Adopt laws that explicitly prohibit corporal punishment of children in all contexts, including at home.</p> <p>Eradicate all obstacles that limit access to education for children with disabilities.</p>	<p>The Council on the Rights of the Child, the coordination body in charge of monitoring the new strategy for prevention and protection of children from violence, was re-established.</p> <p>The government is delayed in adopting amendments to the law on juvenile offenders and protection of minors in criminal proceedings.</p> <p>Following expiry of the previous national action plan for the rights of the child, no progress has been made towards adoption of a new one. Statistical data on vulnerable groups, including Roma children and children with disabilities, is still not disaggregated.</p> <p>Although a relatively small number of children are placed in institutional care, violations of child rights in large-scale institutions for children with disabilities remain a concern, which was further exacerbated under the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of physical distancing measures.</p>
Persons with disabilities	
<p>Take concrete measures to protect persons with disabilities from all forms of discrimination and to help ensure equal opportunities for persons with disabilities in the fields of education and employment as well as access to housing.</p>	<p>An action plan to the strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities was adopted.</p> <p>The government is delayed in adopting a strategy on deinstitutionalisation, as well as a law aiming at protecting persons with mental disabilities in institutions of social welfare to be regulated in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.</p> <p>Women with disabilities in residential institutions continue to face gender-specific forms of violence. Funding for developing community-based services, and for supporting licensed service providers and social services, remains insufficient.</p> <p>The COVID-19 pandemic has had negative consequences for persons with disabilities, especially those living in residential institutions.</p>

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Minorities and indigenous peoples	
<p>Consolidate legislation promoting and protecting the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. Ensure greater integration of Roma people in Serbian society.</p>	<p>The legal framework for respect for and protection of minorities is broadly in place and generally upheld, in line with the Council of Europe Framework Convention on National Minorities.</p> <p>The implementation of Serbia's action plan for the realisation of the rights of national minorities and relevant legislation needs to lead to a tangible improvement in the effective exercise of the rights of individuals belonging to national minorities throughout the country.</p> <p>The 2021 budget for National Minority Councils was initially decreased by 20% but then maintained by budgetary transfers after concerns were expressed by the Councils.</p> <p>Despite the legal obligation to take into account the ethnic composition of the population, national minorities remain underrepresented in the public administration. On the basis of the amended civil servants' law, preparations for establishing a register of public employees, with the possibility of voluntary declaration of national affiliation, in order to collect data, were finalised; the system is however not yet operational.</p> <p>New strategy for the social inclusion of the Roma in Serbia, and the related action plan, have yet to be adopted. The new minister for human and minority rights and social dialogue was appointed as National Roma Contact Point. A new coordination body was established. Job descriptions for local Roma coordinators, pedagogical assistants, and health mediators have yet to be unified and become an integral part of local self-government services.</p>
Human trafficking	
<p>Continue taking measures to combat human trafficking in persons, including by increasing human and financial resources dedicated to the Office for Coordination against Trafficking in Persons, placing a specific focus on migrants and refugees, in line with the Human Rights Committee's recommendation.</p>	<p>Serbia is implementing the strategy for the prevention and suppression of trafficking in human beings which has a focus on the protection of women and children. There is a delay in drafting the related action plan for the period 2021-2022.</p> <p>The centre for protection of victims of human trafficking is operational while the shelter segment of the centre is not functional since 2020, lacking the necessary licence.</p> <p>Constitutional Court passed a landmark decision in a trafficking in human beings case. It rules that the state had violated its obligation to protect victims of trafficking (through registration, assistance and proper preventive action/s) as well as its duty to conduct a proper investigation, ensuring respect of the right to a fair trial, by extensively referring to international and human rights standards.</p> <p>Although legally possible, compensation to victims is rarely granted, as there is no official scheme or fund for this. The most common type of exploitation remains sexual exploitation, followed by labour. There is to date no official set of indicators to identify victims.</p>
Migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons (IDPs)	
<p>Create a strategy for the integration of refugees into Serbian society and improve procedures for asylum seekers.</p>	<p>Serbian authorities continued to strengthen the capacity for the accommodation and care for migrants under consideration of their specific vulnerabilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Serbia introduced a unique administrative place for submitting a joint request with the accompanying evidence required for a residence permit or issuance of a work permit, thus simplifying and accelerating the administrative procedure while respecting legal provisions and institutional competences.</p> <p>Serbia's legal framework on asylum is largely aligned with the EU acquis.</p> <p>Ministry of the Interior adopted new standard operating procedures for the treatment of migrants and persons who express their intention to apply for asylum.</p> <p>The high-level Working Group to Manage Mixed Migration was reappointed in early 2021.</p> <p>There are still 196,140 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Serbia, of whom 68,154 remain vulnerable and with displacement-related needs. Collective centre in Bujanovac is not closed yet. The related strategy expired in 2020.</p>



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