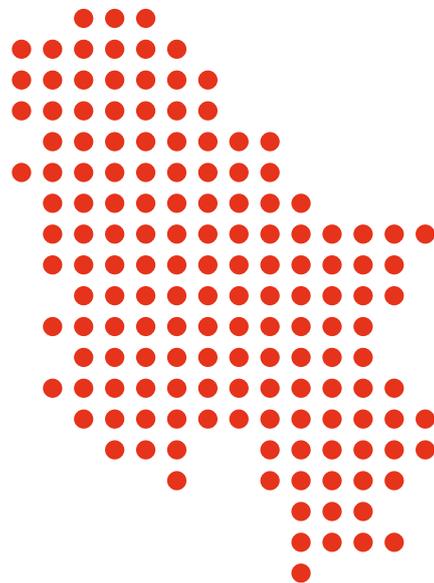


# Social Rights Monitor

2021

## Country Monitor: Serbia



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Though Serbia's GDP had been growing, the pandemic caused it to shrink 1% in 2020,<sup>1</sup> mainly due to declining activity in the services sector. Following elections in June 2020, a new government was formed in October, tasked with aligning the country to the EU acquis and dealing with Serbia's structural weaknesses. These include income inequalities, the inefficiency of the public sector, a shrinking population, and labour shortages. Importantly, as highlighted by the Serbian National Strategy Group, the country must introduce an approach to the green transition into its policies and strategies, while carrying out reforms that will support Serbia's accession to the EU.

<sup>1</sup> World Bank (2021) Serbia – overview: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/serbia/overview#1>

	2018	2019	2020	EU-27 2020
<b>GINI index<sup>2</sup></b>	35.6	33.3	33.3	30.1
<b>Unemployment<sup>3</sup></b>	12.8%	10.5%	9.1%	6.3%
<b>Gender Equality Index<sup>4</sup></b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	67.9 (2020)
<b>In-work poverty<sup>5</sup></b>	9.9%	9.1%	7.7%	9.2%
<b>Housing Overcrowding<sup>6</sup></b>	53.3%	53.3%	52.5%	15.6%
<b>CIVICUS Civic Space Monitor<sup>7</sup></b>	OBSTRUCTED	OBSTRUCTED	OBSTRUCTED	N/A

#### Selected indicators on the state of social rights in Europe

Missing data for 2020 are not available at the time of publication of the Social Rights Monitor 2021.

## Equal opportunities and access to the labour market

Two peaks of Covid-19 infections had significant impacts on the Serbian labour market in 2020, as well as on people's work and lives. The government provided some stimulus measures to companies and enterprises, mainly intended to reduce layoffs and bankruptcies. The Serbian economy was hit hard, but nevertheless was able to keep negative effects to a minimum: in the second quarter of 2020, Serbian GDP declined 9.2% from to the previous quarter, less of a fall than the European average of 14.4%.<sup>8</sup> This is believed to be due

to Serbia's steady growth over the past few years,<sup>9</sup> together with the country's relatively high dependence on sectors that have been less impacted by the pandemic's consequences, such as agriculture and food-processing.<sup>10</sup> However, the pandemic had huge impacts on employment levels, which had also been growing in the period prior to the pandemic. **Official statistics report that, just in the first half of 2020, more than 94,000 people lost their jobs.**<sup>11</sup> The National Strategy Group calls on the government to address the Serbian labour

2 Eurostat (2021). Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income: [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&-dataset=ilc\\_di12](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&-dataset=ilc_di12)

3 Eurostat (2021). Unemployment by sex and age: annual data: [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une\\_rt\\_a&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_a&lang=en)

4 European Institute for Gender Equality (2021). Gender Equality Index: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/>

5 Eurostat (2021). In-work at-risk-of-poverty-rate: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tespm070/default/table?lang=en>

6 Eurostat (2021). Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status – total population: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc\\_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en)

7 CIVICUS (2021). Civic space monitor - Serbia: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/serbia/>

8 UN Serbia (2021) Covid-19 Socio-Economic Impact Assessment: [https://serbia.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/seia\\_report%20%281%29.pdf](https://serbia.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/seia_report%20%281%29.pdf)

9 SOLIDAR (2020) Social Rights Monitor 2020 – Serbia:

10 UN Serbia (2021) Covid-19 Socio-Economic Impact Assessment: [https://serbia.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/seia\\_report%20%281%29.pdf](https://serbia.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/seia_report%20%281%29.pdf)

11 Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2020) Labour Force Survey I quarter 2020: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2020/Pdf/G20201135.pdf>

market's main vulnerabilities, which were identified in a recently published International Labour Organization (ILO) study as the high rate of workers employed by the nonformal economy, the large proportion of self-employed workers, high levels of precariousness, and low wages.<sup>12</sup>

## INCLUSION OF MIGRANTS

In line with global trends, migration in and out of the Republic of Serbia has been severely impacted by Covid-19 and the limitations imposed on the freedom of movement in the country as well as in its neighbours. In 2020, the registration of migrants dropped significantly, from around 12,900 certificates issued in 2019, to less than 3,000 in 2020.<sup>13</sup> **The registration of asylum seekers was suspended from March to May, and inhumane and degrading treatment was denounced in many reception centres.**<sup>14</sup> In particular, various CSOs criticised health and hygiene conditions, as well as unlawful detention that authorities tried to justify by the health crisis.<sup>15</sup>

The Migrant Integration Policy Index reports that newcomers to Serbia encounter many obstacles to inclusion. Once they obtain permission to enter Serbia, migrants enjoy basic rights but not equal opportunities.<sup>16</sup> Among the Western Balkan countries, Serbia could be defined as a pioneer in inclusion policies,<sup>17</sup> but their implementation still lies in the hands of civil

society organisations<sup>18</sup> and is therefore largely dependent on CSOs' capacity and means. The country's legal framework pays particular attention to national minorities' right to self-governance in culture and education. It provides for elections to National Councils,<sup>19</sup> which debate on the protection and full equality of minorities. These are mainly composed of Hungarians, Roma, and Bosniaks.<sup>20</sup> **During 2020, the Serbian Commissioner for the Protection of Equality received twice as many complaints as in previous years.**<sup>21</sup> **These complaints indicated that the Roma population are the most frequent victims of discrimination** – in access to the labour market and also to education, healthcare, decent and affordable housing, clean water, and electricity.

The pandemic triggered numerous mental health risks and challenges due to the vulnerability and traumatic experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. Fears over their safety were compounded by uncertainty, language barriers, and lack of information. Moreover, there was a complete lockdown<sup>22</sup> and limitation of movement, which was controlled by armed officers who guard state-run facilities. The National Strategy Group reports that, during the state of emergency, refugees and migrants were allowed to leave asylum and reception centres only if they were referred for specialist medical examination.

However, in April 2021, Serbia included refugees and asylum seekers in the third phase of its vaccination programme – after health

12 ILO Serbia (2020) Covid-19 and the World of Work - Serbia - Rapid Assessment of the Employment Impacts and Policy Responses: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms\\_754624.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms_754624.pdf)

13 AIDA (2020) Country Report - Serbia: [https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/AIDA-SR\\_2020update.pdf](https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/AIDA-SR_2020update.pdf)

14 Ibid.

15 Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (2020) Initiative Filed with the Constitutional Court to review the Constitutionality and Legality of the Order Restricting Movement on Roads Leading to Asylum and Reception Centre Facilities and Grounds <http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/eng-lat/initiative-filed-with-the-constitutional-court-to-review-the-constitutionality-and-legality-of-the-order-restricting-movement-on-roads-leading-to-asylum-and-reception-centre-facilities-and-grounds/>

16 MIPEX (2020) Serbia Country Report: <https://www.mipex.eu/serbia>

17 Ibid.

18 AIDA (2020) Country Report - Serbia: [https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/AIDA-SR\\_2020update.pdf](https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/AIDA-SR_2020update.pdf)

19 Commissioner for Protection of Equality (2021) Annual Report: <http://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Regular-Annual-Report-of-the-CPE-for-2020-za-sajt.pdf>

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Reuters (2021) Covid-19 Tracker – Serbia

workers, vulnerable patients, and the elderly – showing commitment to equality of treatment and inclusion. The National Strategy Group wholeheartedly welcomes this initiative. It was deployed with the support of the UN refugee agency UNHCR, which provided interpreters and other personnel.<sup>23</sup>

## EDUCATION

The education system in Serbia is undergoing important changes aimed at improving the quality of education and retention levels of teachers. **Over a decade, there was a continuous decrease in the number of pupils and learners enrolled in education in Serbia, and the student population was around 4% lower in 2020 than it was in 2013.**<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the National Strategy Group denounces the absence of a clear strategy to tackle early school leaving and increase the country's enrolment levels. However, compared to the European average, Serbian people aged 20 to 24 are more likely to have attended upper secondary levels of education – around 90%, 10 percentage points above the EU average.<sup>25</sup> Serbia registered a slight increase in the last decade – of 0.6% – in the number of students attending tertiary education, which may be explained by the ageing population. The proportion of students who actually complete tertiary education remains lower than the average in EU member states.<sup>26</sup>

The National Strategy Group reports that the Serbian government has acknowledged the crucial role of a quality education system in addressing the country's social and economic challenges. It has initiated a partnership with the European Union to bring about important reforms in the system. The EU therefore supports the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development through the REDiS 2030 project.<sup>27</sup> This focuses on building capacity for key actors in the education system, encourages more-systematic policy monitoring, and develops quality-assurance mechanisms. The project will last until March 2022, when the EU contribution should reach €2.7 million.

Throughout the year, the Serbian Ministry of Education undertook two main policy changes. Firstly, it adopted the Bylaw on the Implementation of practical teaching and professional practice,<sup>28</sup> regulating the organisation of vocational education and training (VET). This defined agreements between schools and the employers for when trainees gain experience in a workplace. Secondly, and mainly as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, a Bylaw on Special Educational Programmes<sup>29</sup> was adopted. It describes the procedures for teaching and learning during emergency situations, in particular for remote, online learning. Some of the main changes are shorter school lessons (a reduction from 45 to 30 minutes) and different evaluation methods based on learning outcomes.

23 UNHCR (2021) Serbia vaccinates refugees against COVID-19: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2021/3/60632be44/serbia-vaccinates-refugees-against-covid-19.html>

24 Eurostat (2020) Number of pupils and students, Serbia: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement\\_countries\\_-\\_education\\_statistics&oldid=515694#Early\\_leavers\\_from\\_education\\_and\\_training](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enlargement_countries_-_education_statistics&oldid=515694#Early_leavers_from_education_and_training)

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 REDiS 2030, EU support to Reform of Education in Serbia: <https://capacity-building-education-reform.euzatebe.rs/en/about-project>

28 Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development (2020) Bylaw on the Implementation of practical teaching and professional practice: <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/ministarstva/pravilnik/2020/112/1/reg>

29 Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development (2020) Bylaw on Special Educational Programmes: <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/pravilnik-o-posebnom-programu-obrazovanja-i-vaspitanja.html>

## GOOD PRACTICE

### Besplatna Biblioteka

The charity foundation Alek Kavčić began its campaign for free, quality primary education by offering free primary school textbooks in PDF format. Textbooks and complementary material could be downloaded free of charge from an online platform.<sup>30</sup> The service has been particularly welcomed by households, and more than 9,000 copies were downloaded on just the first day.<sup>31</sup> It saved the cost of buying schoolbooks, which cost around 800 Serbian dinars (€6.80) each, enabling families to save around €100 per child.

## YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

The youth unemployment rate in Serbia remained high during 2020, reaching 22.2% in the second quarter of 2021.<sup>32</sup> Youth has been hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis, not only in terms of job loss but also through deterioration in mental health and increased anxiety over working conditions in the future: 62% of young people think they will encounter bigger obstacles to find decent jobs. Indeed, **20% of young people reported that their work had been strongly impacted by the pandemic: 12%**

**had suffered a reduction in salary, and 5% were laid off.**<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the National Strategy Group calls on the government to develop long-term support strategies, as the prolonged economic downturn is likely to reduce employment levels and further transform the labour market and working conditions.

In June 2020, the Serbian government announced strategies and measures to stimulate youth employment and access to the labour market.<sup>34</sup> The government intended to implement a service to assist high school graduates in finding a job, while at the same time encouraging employers to develop training and hiring programmes through public subsidies and incentives. Moreover, the National Employment Strategy for the period from 2021 to 2026<sup>35</sup> envisages the introduction of the Youth Guarantee Support System in Serbia, particularly to encourage the formalisation of internships and traineeships.

**The Serbian Labour Force Survey shows that young people in the country do not only have to deal with bad working conditions. But they are exposed to other significant risks, such as poverty and material deprivation, which affect 33% of Serbs aged 16 to 29.**<sup>36</sup> Worse, in Serbia it normally took young people two years to find their first stable employment after the end of their studies, compared with an EU average of 6.5 months.<sup>37</sup> The pandemic means this will likely take longer, as training for new employees has often been suspended or postponed due to remote working conditions.

30 Besplatna Biblioteka: <https://www.besplatnabiblioteka.com/>

31 Emerging Europe (2021) In Serbia, free school books disrupt a foreign-dominated market: <https://emerging-europe.com/news/in-serbia-free-school-books-disrupt-a-foreign-dominated-market/>

32 Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2021) Labour Force Survey: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/oblasti/trziste-rada/anketa-o-radnoj-snazi/>

33 UN Serbia (2021) UN Serbia (2021) Covid-19 Socio-Economic Impact Assessment: [https://serbia.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/seia\\_report%20%281%29.pdf](https://serbia.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/seia_report%20%281%29.pdf)

34 ILO Serbia (2020) Covid-19 and the World of Work - Serbia - Rapid Assessment of the Employment Impacts and Policy Responses: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms\\_754624.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms_754624.pdf)

35 Government of the Republic of Serbia (2021) New Employment Strategy for more efficient labour market: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vesti/en/168387/new-employment-strategy-for-more-efficient-labour-market.php>

36 ETF (2021) Youth Situation in Serbia – Employment, skills and social inclusion: [https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-06/youth\\_in\\_serbia\\_executive\\_summary.pdf](https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-06/youth_in_serbia_executive_summary.pdf)

37 Ibid.

# Fair working conditions

According to the Serbian Statistical Office, OPBC, the employment rate remained more or less stable throughout the year, but the unemployment level rose. While unemployment reached an historic low of 7.9% at the beginning of 2020, it increased to 12.8% in the first quarter of 2021,<sup>38</sup> and an increasing percentage of the Serbian population has been without work since the pandemic's outbreak. A growing number of people could not look for work or were unable to start working because of the lockdown and other measures to limit the spread of the coronavirus; because they were out of the labour force, they did not count as unemployed. According to the National Strategy Group, the resumption of immigration at the beginning of 2021 could also explain part of the increase in the employment rate between the first two quarters of the year, from 46.3% to 48.3%.<sup>39</sup>

## IMPACT OF COVID-19

**The Covid-19 pandemic hit Serbia after an unprecedented period of growth in jobs and the employment rate. It had disruptive effects on the labour market and the economy, and 9% of the companies had to dismiss some of their employees,** mainly due to insufficient revenues to maintain their levels of activity, or due to lower demand from customers and consumers.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, a recently

published ILO report<sup>41</sup> confirms that vulnerable categories of workers – informal and self-employed workers, low-wage earners, people on non-permanent contracts, women, and young people – are the most likely to suffer from the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. This will further exacerbate in-work poverty and existing inequalities.

During the state of emergency, two sets of laws applied to workers in Serbia. In addition to the regular Labour Code, other rules were applied, such as the Law on Protection from Infectious Diseases and some preventive measures to maintain healthy and safe workplaces. Employers had to develop plans of preventive measures by mid-August 2020<sup>42</sup> to limit the spread of the virus.

The Serbian government's policy response came in June 2020, when it adopted a set of policies to limit and mitigate the negative consequences of the health and economic crises. To protect employment, the government guaranteed all public-sector workers that they would not be laid off during the pandemic and that they would maintain their full salaries. Moreover, laid-off private-sector employees received half their monthly pay during the state of emergency. Furthermore, medical personnel who volunteered for the health sector during the state of emergency were eventually hired as full-time employees.<sup>43</sup>

38 OPBC (2021) Labour Force Survey: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2021/PdfE/G20211239.pdf>

39 Ibid.

40 ILO Serbia (2020) Covid-19 and the World of Work - Serbia - Rapid Assessment of the Employment Impacts and Policy Responses: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms\\_754624.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms_754624.pdf)

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

## PRECARIOUSNESS

Precarious employment in Serbia increased from 2.4% in 2011 to 7.3% in 2020,<sup>44</sup> triple the European average rate. In addition, 23% of Serbian workers are employed on temporary or short-term contracts, double the number of 2011. Most worryingly, **informal employment remains a major challenge: it represents for 18.2% of total employment, a very high share.**<sup>45</sup> Precarious working conditions, worsened by the pandemic and the containment measures, led to an increase in already-high levels of inequality – the Gini coefficient was 33.3 in 2019.<sup>46</sup> In 2020, the Labour Force Survey by the Serbian Bureau of Statistics identified 114,000 employees without pension insurance and 115,900 workers without health insurance.<sup>47</sup> The National Strategy Group expresses its growing concern, as increased precariousness will inevitably make people more likely to accept poorer working conditions and occasional jobs in order to have at least some income.

Furthermore, the National Strategy Group denounces the insufficient definition of non-standard ways of employment and workers in the Law on Simplified Work Engagement on Seasonal Jobs 50/2018.<sup>48</sup> This leaves workers without adequate protection and encourages additional flexibility of work, opening the doors to new forms of exploitation and abuse and particularly damaging female workers, who are overrepresented in domestic, auxiliary, and nursing work.

## GENDER EQUALITY

Serbia was the first non-EU country to use the Gender Equality Index to evaluate gender equality policies and achievements and compare them over time and with other countries. The latest report was published in 2018<sup>49</sup> and described a high gender pay gap, as well as low labour market participation by women. The National Strategy Group confirms a growing number of issues related to work-life balance during the pandemic while remote working was encouraged. **Teleworking had a strong negative impact on women, who are mostly responsible for housework and daily care activities.** In 2020 and 2021, workers in the health and care sectors have been in the frontline of the crisis, often with little protection against infection and inadequate equipment. Women account for 76% of the sector's employees and are also overrepresented in the services sector. Of the employment contracts held by women, 53.9% are considered highly vulnerable by the ILO.<sup>50</sup>

One aspect of Serbia's path towards accession to the European Union has been to develop and implement a new Law on Gender Equality to strengthen women's participation in the labour market and in politics and society. Gender equality in Serbia is already protected by the Serbian constitution, which mandates equal opportunities and prohibits discrimination based on sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, or marital status. The National Strategy for Gender Equality 2016-2020<sup>51</sup> recently

44 Eurostat (2021), Precarious employment by sex, age, and NACE [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=lf\\_sa\\_goe\\_4ax1r2&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=lf_sa_goe_4ax1r2&lang=en)

45 ILO Serbia (2020) Covid-19 and the World of Work - Serbia - Rapid Assessment of the Employment Impacts and Policy Responses: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms\\_754624.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms_754624.pdf)

46 Eurostat (2021) Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income: [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&dataset=ilc\\_di12](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&dataset=ilc_di12)

47 SORS (2021) Labour Force Survey: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/oblasti/trziste-rada/>

48 Zakon o pojednostavljenom random angazovanju na sezonskim poslovima u određenim delatnostima / Act of 28 June 2018 on simplified employment in specific categories of seasonal work (Official Gazette No. 50/18): <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natllex/docs/ELECTRONIC/109262/135504/F-1023568000/SRB-2018-L-109262.pdf>

49 Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit Government of the Republic of Serbia (2018) Gender Equality Index for the Republic of Serbia [http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Indeks\\_rodne\\_ravnopravnosti\\_u\\_Republici\\_Srbiji\\_2018\\_eng.pdf](http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Indeks_rodne_ravnopravnosti_u_Republici_Srbiji_2018_eng.pdf)

50 ILO Serbia (2020) Covid-19 and the World of Work - Serbia - Rapid Assessment of the Employment Impacts and Policy Responses: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms\\_754624.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/publication/wcms_754624.pdf)

51 Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit Government of the Republic of Serbia (2018) Gender Equality Index for the Republic of Serbia: [http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Indeks\\_rodne\\_ravnopravnosti\\_u\\_Republici\\_Srbiji\\_2018\\_eng.pdf](http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Indeks_rodne_ravnopravnosti_u_Republici_Srbiji_2018_eng.pdf)

expired, and the Serbian government adopted a new strategy to fight gender-based and domestic violence for 2021 to 2025. The main objective is to develop a national support system for domestic violence against women and girls, which was particularly frequent during the pandemic and lockdown periods.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, a new bill on gender equality was endorsed by the government. It included sanctions for discrimination at the workplace and encouraging employers to adopt anti-discrimination plans.

Since 2017, when the Serbian Law on Financial Support for Families with Children was adopted, Serbian civil society organisations have come together to denounce the many

restrictions that the law imposed on maternity, paternity, and parental rights to cash benefits.<sup>53</sup> Following the CSOs' pressure and campaigns, the Constitutional Court ruled against those provisions in December 2020, claiming they went against constitutional principles. The Serbian government therefore prepared a new proposal based on the Court's decision, and in June 2021 the Serbian Parliament adopted a new law defining the criteria for financial support to households with children. Some positive steps were taken to secure the legal rights of working parents of children with disabilities and to penalise employers who did not follow the rules on parental leave and benefits.<sup>54</sup>

## Social protection and inclusion

Public spending allocated to social protection in Serbia has for a long time been lower than the European average. The economic and financial crises of 2008 slowed Serbia's fiscal consolidation, and austerity measures resulted in lower expenditure on social protection.<sup>55</sup> In Serbia, taxation is the main source of funds for social protection. In 2019, the biggest decrease in funds was registered in the healthcare sector, mainly due to a fall in the healthcare contribution rate but also because of a falling employment rate and tax evasion.<sup>56</sup> This meant Serbia was not prepared for the pandemic.

In 2021, half a million people in Serbia are living in absolute poverty, and more than two million are at risk of poverty and social exclusion.<sup>57</sup> The National Strategy Group reports that the majority of these people do not have access to social security and that the measures adopted by the Serbian parliament are not enough to help people get out of poverty. Moreover, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and health crisis, the number of people living in poverty increased across the country, but the government did not increase the adequacy, or the coverage of programmes aimed at the poorest groups in society. The most relevant measure adopted during

52 The Government of the Republic of Serbia (2021) Government adopts Bill on gender equality: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/171564/government-adopts-bill-on-gender-equality.php>

53 European Commission (2021) Press Release of 15.09.2021: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1135&furtherNews=yes&newsId=10069>

54 Masina (2021) What will the amendments to the Law on financial support for families with children bring: <https://www.masina.rs/en/what-will-the-amendments-to-the-law-on-financial-support-for-families-with-children-bring-it-could-have-been-better/>

55 Pejin, L., and Bajec, J. (2019) ESPN Thematic Report on Financing social protection – Serbia, European Social Policy Network (ESPN): <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=21843&langId=en>

56 Ibid.

57 Center for Democracy Foundation (2021) Half a million Serbians living in absolute poverty: <http://www.centaronline.org/en/event/12272/half-a-million-serbians-living-in-absolute-poverty-researcher-says>

the year was the provision of emergency cash payments of €100 per adult. However, due to the long period between the policy proposal and its implementation, the government only made the payments one week after the end of the lockdown, and it failed to reach everyone in need.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, as the measure was directed at adults, it was not of great help to households at the greatest risk of poverty – that is, those composed of two adults and with three or more dependent children.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, **children up to 18 years old are the most exposed to poverty, representing 24.2% of the people at risk, followed by young adults aged 18 to 24, at 23.6%.**<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, the payments did not reach the Roma population or people without official documents. These include internally displaced people, who are often left behind and prone to social exclusion. In addition, the needs of people with disabilities were not addressed through benefits.

## HOUSING

The housing situation in Serbia still faces several challenges. **It is particularly worrying that 20% of settlements in the country with at least 22,000 people do not have access to safe, potable water, while 63% of those with more than 60,000 inhabitants lack access to proper sanitation and sewage systems.**<sup>61</sup> According to the National Strategy Group, since the collapse of the socialist system, no real long-term housing strategy has been developed, letting a deregulated, privatised market shift from a welfare model

towards a liberal, market-oriented approach. The NSG reports that illegal construction practices became normalised, often leaving the most vulnerable, poorest parts of society to live in obsolete, unfinished, and unsafe homes. In September 2020, the government therefore adopted a Law on Housing and Maintenance of Apartment Buildings,<sup>62</sup> aimed at defining the relationships, rights, and duties of apartment owners and renters and introducing for the first time the concept of sustainable housing and energy efficiency. It stipulates that sustainable housing encompasses improving the living conditions of citizens and increasing the value of the housing stock through the development of energy-efficient facilities that reduce negative environmental impacts. To encourage the renovation of buildings and houses, the Serbian Ministry of Mining and Energy formed the Directorate for Financing and Facilitating Energy Efficiency, which will be responsible for the distribution of subsidies and benefits. The government also decided to form the first National Coalition for the Reduction of Energy Poverty.<sup>63</sup>

## HEALTHCARE

**Public expenditure on social protection declined after the 2008 financial crisis, and the service cut the most was healthcare protection.**<sup>64</sup> **The pandemic worsened the situation and made healthcare an even less accessible service.** The National Strategy Group reports that the often-low salaries of nurses and doctors, coupled with cumbersome bureaucracy and long waiting periods,

58 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) (2020). Social Protection in The Western Balkans – Responding to the Covid-19 crisis: <http://csp.org.rs/en/regional-initiative/news/regional-study-social-protection-in-the-western-balkans-responding-to-the-covid-19-crisis-published.html>

59 Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS) (2018) Statistical Release Survey on Income and Living Conditions: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2019/PdfE/G20191281.pdf>

60 Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS) (2021) Poverty and Social Inequality, 2020: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/vesti/20211015-siromastvo-i-socijalna-nejednakost-2020/?s=0102>

61 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (SIPRU) (2020), Analysis of Socioeconomic Impact of Covid-19 on Groups at Risk in the Republic of Serbia: [https://serbia.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/seia\\_report%20%281%29.pdf](https://serbia.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/seia_report%20%281%29.pdf)

62 Government of the Republic of Serbia (2020) Planning and Building Act (in English): <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/planning-and-building-act-serbia.html>

63 Government of the Republic of Serbia (2021) Press Release of 22.04.2021: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/171564/government-adopts-bill-on-gender-equality.php>

64 Pejin, L., and Bajec, J. (2019) ESPN Thematic Report on Financing social protection – Serbia, European Social Policy Network (ESPN): <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=21843&langId=en>

forced wealthy people to turn towards the private system. The increasing poverty and material and financial deprivation left 18% of Serbs without balanced nutrition, 39% without clothes, and 12% without heating systems

during the winter. The majority of poor people cannot afford to cover a sudden expense due to health issues.<sup>65</sup> This demonstrates a need for public support and for the development of care facilities both in cities and rural areas.

## Civic space

**Great concerns already existed over the safeguard of safe and inclusive public spaces, and they have been exacerbated during 2020 and 2021 by the measures adopted to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.** In March 2020, the Serbian government declared a national state of emergency, gradually enacting different containment measures. These included night curfews and a ban on movement during weekends, as well as a total ban on movement for citizens over 65 years old. Borders were closed, as were public spaces and public education institutions, and public transport was fully stopped.<sup>66</sup> These measures disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and poorest groups in society, who could not pay for services themselves. The CIVICUS Monitor of civic space, rates Serbian civic space as “obstructed”.<sup>67</sup>

The army was deployed at the borders and throughout the country to control and monitor people’s compliance with the imposed measures, and authorities used force and violence to disperse protestors who gathered to demonstrate against them. As of July 2020, more than 223 people had been detained, and 70

reported serious injuries in demonstrations,<sup>68</sup> where there were reports of the use of tear gas and stun grenades.<sup>69</sup>

Freedom of expression also came under attack in the form of intimidation and threats against journalists on social media. In April 2020, one journalist was even arrested while investigating conditions within Serbian hospitals and charged with “spreading panic” during the pandemic.<sup>70</sup> After this incident, healthcare staff were banned from providing unauthorised information to the press. **Serbia thus continues to have an oppressive environment for media and press workers who do not work for pro-government outlets.**

However, the National Strategy Group reports that in October 2020, a new Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue was established. It will play an important role in promoting freedom of association and the involvement of the civil society in public policymaking. It has taken over duties that were performed by two government offices – the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society and the Office for Human and Minority Rights.<sup>71</sup>

65 Jankovic, B. Et al., (2018) STARENJE U GRADOVIMA – izazovi savremenog društva: <http://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/starenje-u-gradovima-izazovi-savremenog-drustva-ebook.pdf>

66 UN Serbia (2021) COVID-19 Socio-economic Impact Assessment: [https://serbia.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/seia\\_report%20%281%29.pdf](https://serbia.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/seia_report%20%281%29.pdf)

67 CIVICUS Monitor (2020) Serbia – Country Report: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/serbia/>

68 Amnesty International (2021) Serbia 2020 – Country Report: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/serbia/report-serbia/>

69 CIVICUS Monitor (2020) Serbia: CIVICUS calls on Serbian authorities to stop attacks against peaceful protesters: <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/4504-serbia-civicus-calls-on-serbian-authorities-to-stop-attacks-against-peaceful-protesters>

70 Amnesty International (2021) Serbia 2020 – Country Report: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/serbia/report-serbia/>

71 Act on Ministries, Official Gazette of RS, 128/20–3.

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