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CITIZENSHIP AND LIFELONG LEARNING MONITOR 2021

SERBIA





TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	3
INTRODUCTION	4
EDUCATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD	5
EES in formal education	5
EES in informal and non-formal education	7
SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE	11
Shrinking civic space in pandemic times	11
Spotlight: An oppressive environment for civil society	13
Civil society strikes back	14
CONCLUSION	15
RECOMMENDATIONS	16
BIBLIOGRAPHY	17

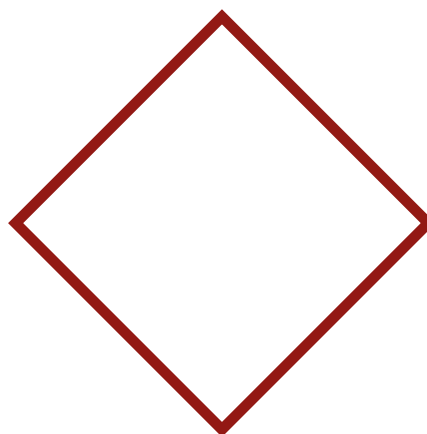




ABSTRACT

The following report represents one of eleven national case studies feeding into the sixth edition of the SOLIDAR Foundation's annual Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor. The purpose of this publication is to analyse and report the developments in the fields of global citizenship education and lifelong learning policies in Serbia and their linkages with the state of the civic space in the country. The Serbian report is focused on two main topics: Education for Environmental Sustainability (EES) in the frame of Global Citizenship Education (GCE), and the shrinking civic space and best practices among Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to counter such shrinking. In the face of the climate disruption and environmental decline, the ecological and social challenges require an education which can provide learners with the tools to understand and respond to such challenges. This analysis shows that in Serbia changes have been adopted in formal education to integrate Education for Environmental Sustainability but with a significant delay and still in the absence of an overarching policy initiative to guide the country's strategy on the SDGs, on EES and on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The most recent strategy concluded in 2017, and references to EES are minimal in formal education with the most recent measures being focused on ESD and still being piloted with a limited amount of education institutions. Moreover,

even the limited efforts witnessed in formal education were far from being replicated in informal and non-formal learning, where the onus of providing EES is put on CSOs despite an oppressive environment created by the authorities to limit the operations of CSOs. Moreover, the National Qualifications Framework is still in need of reforming, especially in connection to the quality and scope of non-formal education. At the same time, CSOs providing informal and non-formal education are not being consulted in policymaking. Under such a context, the report captures the difficulty for all learners to develop adequate green competences for the 21st century society. The lack of support for CSOs is also expanded to the restrictions imposed by the public authorities on the civic space, with frequent violations of human rights caused the COVID-19 restrictions leveraged during the past years but also due to legislative projects that have been threatening the freedom of expression and assembly. The discussion on the narrowing civic space is contextualised in this Monitor with regards to the capacity of learners to exert their green competences in influencing decisions taken regarding the way the Serbian society advances. The findings are worrisome considering how CSOs are prevented to support learners in being active citizens, and the report concludes with a set of recommendations to this end.



INTRODUCTION

This report focuses on the environmental dimension of education, starting with an investigation of the current approaches to providing Education for Environmental Sustainability (EES), and continuing with a consideration of policies and measures aimed at supporting the integration of EES in non-formal and informal education. It then provides an overview of civic space in Serbia, analysing and assessing the challenges encountered by Serbian civil society and the actions taken to counter such challenges. The report will also consider how CSOs rely on solidarity mechanisms to counter the shrinking civic space, highlighting how such practices are based on concepts and values associated to Global Citizenship Education. The report captures a lack of a holistic and systematic approach to the provision

of EES, which should include trainings in the field of environmental protection, through the integration of this content in the frame of a curriculum entailing studies and activities to support sustainable development at large. This should work in tandem with a greening of the Serbian curricula, a process which would introduce ecological ideas, concepts, principles, approaches from other disciplines within curricular and extracurricular activities, through a bottom-up approach¹. Finally, the Monitor provides an analysis of a country which has begun to take considerable steps to reform and adapt its education but does not adequately recognise the role of Civil Society in the provision of education, nor appears to make an effort to increase cooperation² and collaboration with it.

1 Nikolić Vesna, Milutinović Slobodan and Ranitović Jelena (2015). *Greening of higher education in the Republic of Serbia*. *Envigogika* 10 (2). P.4. Available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8158/5ddf3a0d81ebc2b3bb15953cac4301f069ec.pdf>. Last accessed : 23 February 2022.

2 Balkan Civil Society Development Network (2020). *Another Hit to the Civil Society EE in Serbia: CSOs Concerned Over the Abolition of the Office for Cooperation with the Civil Society*. Available at: <https://www.balkancsd.net/another-hit-to-the-civil-society-enabling-environment-in-serbia-csos-concerned-over-the-abolition-of-the-office-for-cooperation-with-the-civil-society/>. Last accessed: 24 February 2022.

EDUCATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

EES IN FORMAL EDUCATION

The environmental dimension of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) addressed by Education for Environmental Sustainability (EES) equips all learners with the tools to understand the connectedness among natural systems, human actions, and the need for individuals and groups to analyse issues, make decisions and take actions that support sustainable ecosystems³. The ecological and social challenges of the 21st century require an education which can provide learners with the tools to understand and respond to such challenges by raising awareness, shaping the attitudes and behaviours that can make a difference⁴. To this end, it is pivotal that education and training institutions are supported in embedding systematically education for environmental sustainability throughout the education and training system⁵. In Serbia, the aforementioned structural response linked to EES is needed considering that structural environmental issues are tormenting citizens. High air pollution and water pollution led to a considerable number of premature deaths, underlining the need for more EES in order to ensure the capacity of citizens to pressure the public authorities to make environmentally conscious decisions, introduce behavioral changes in their communities, and ensure that policymakers are themselves educated in this

regard.⁶ Addressing environmental sustainability through education at all levels of society can drastically contribute to awareness-raising and therefore call for enforcement of the existing instruments for environmental protection and the creation of new regulatory frameworks. The concern of a lack of comprehensive and inclusive actions taken to support the transition to sustainable societies has been echoed in the previous edition of the Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor⁷. In this 2021 edition, the cooperation among formal, non-formal and informal education stakeholders remains to be fostered if the country is to deliver the provision of EES in an inclusive manner.

While formal education in Serbia is undergoing several reforms that aim to modernise education and training to respond to the challenges posed by technological innovation and globalisation, such reforms miss out on a significant building block that is essential for addressing the ecological and social challenges, which is the development of a specific strategy for the implementation of Global Citizenship Education (GCE), which is merely incorporated into other strategies⁸. However, **the COVID-19 pandemic has made more visible the urgency of GCE, as cooperation, solidarity and interdependence emerged as crucial during the health crisis as much as in its aftermath.** To this end, a strong commitment

3 UNESCO (2021). *What is Education for Sustainable Development?*. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-sustainable-development/what-is-esd>. Last accessed: 25 February 2022.

4 Karataş, A. and Karataş, E. (2016). Environmental education as a solution tool for the prevention of water pollution. *Survey in Fisheries Sciences* 3 (1), 61-70. P. 68. Available at: <http://sifisheriessciences.com/article-1-84-en.pdf>. Last accessed: 25 February 2022.

5 SOLIDAR Foundation (2021). *Briefing Note - Education for Environmental Sustainability*. Available at: <https://www.solidar.org/en/publications/briefing-note-education-for-environmental-sustainability>. Last accessed: 4 March 2022.

6 OECD (2021). *Multi-dimensional Review of Western Balkans*. P.549. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/fr/pays/republiquede-macedoinedunord/multi-dimensional-review-of-the-western-balkans-4d5cbc2a-en.htm>. Last accessed: 4 March 2022.

7 Frank, Andrei (2021). *Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2020*. SOLIDAR Foundation. Available at: <https://www.solidar.org/en/publications/citizenship-and-lifelong-learning-monitor-2020>. Last accessed: 4 March 2022.

8 North-South Centre of the Council of Europe (2017). *Balkan Global Development Education Regional Seminar Report*. Pp.6-7. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/balkan-regional-seminar-on-global-development-education-2017-final-rep/1680770b01>. Last accessed: 28 February 2022.



to mainstream GCE and create national policies on GCE is paramount⁹. The Serbian Government has started to respond to the challenge by embarking on a long-term reform process of the entire educational system, primarily through legislation, and complemented by foreign funding¹⁰. In partnership with [RediS 2030](#), - an educational project funded by EuropeAid – Serbia has reformed its national curriculum framework by integrating Sustainable Development learning outcomes into each subject for primary, secondary, and vocational education institutions. The curricular changes have been reflected in the amendments of the Law on Fundamentals of the Education System of the Republic of Serbia¹¹. Through RediS 2030, a teacher-training module on ESD has been developed for 10% of primary and secondary education institutions in Serbia, thus being delivered in 41 pilot institutions, involving 2,600 teachers. Moreover, the [Green Pack](#), a multimedia environmental education kit about environmental protection and sustainable

development for learners aged between 11 and 14, has been upgraded in line with Serbian educational standards. The latest edition of the kit, published in 2012, has reached approximately 240,000 students.

In the frame of promoting the transition to a sustainable model of society, ESD is explicitly addressed in the [National Sustainable Development Strategy \(2008-2017\)](#), which as of today remains the only cross-sectoral policy document indicating ESD¹². **The lack of continuity after 2017, underlines yet again the piecemeal approach to environmental concerns within Serbian policies and contributes to backwards steps when it comes to the type of EES needed.** Moreover, the concept of ESD, as defined by the Vilnius Framework¹³, is not entirely congruent with how this type of education is approached in the Strategy. In fact, whilst most key ESD priorities are present, the Strategy is rather focused on contributing to the labour market needs and the economic component of sustainable development, and it fails to address a wider range of competences such as critical thinking and values thinking. This usage of ESD is coupled with references to efficiency in education are dangerous instrumentalisations of education which further the commodification of learning¹⁴ rather than developing the competences needed for the 21st century challenges. The repeated references to coordination with the demand-side of the labour market without clearly spelling out the scope of these partnerships are also hinting towards a utilitarian approach to education, rather than one that prioritises the development of one's capacity to participate fully in society.

9 SOLIDAR Foundation (2020). *Global Citizenship Education Policy Paper*. P.10. Available at: <https://www.solidar.org/en/publications/policy-paper-global-citizenship-education>. Last accessed: 4 March 2022.

10 The Government of the Republic of Serbia (2021). *Strategy for Development of Education in Serbia by 2030*. Available at: <https://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/SROVRS-2030-1.pdf>. Last accessed: 25 February 2022.

11 Velickovic, Uros (2018). *The Law on Foundations of Education System*. Available at: <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/re-source-centre/content/law-foundations-education-system>. Last accessed: 24 February 2022.

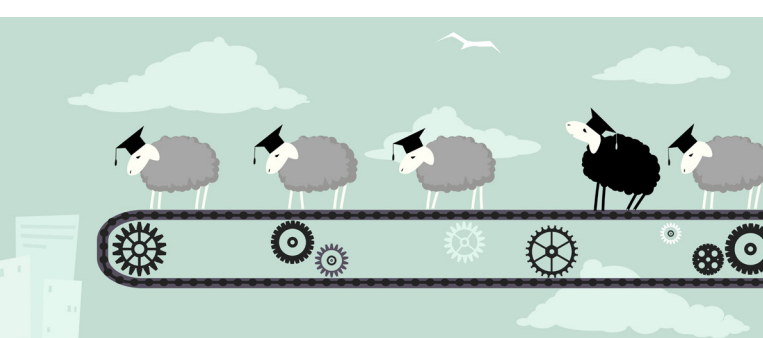
12 Government of the Republic of Serbia (2007). *National Sustainable Development Strategy for the period 2008-2017*. Available at: http://www.srbija.gov.rs/vesti/dokumenti_sekcija.php?id=45678. Last accessed: 23 February 2022.

13 UNECE (2005). *Vilnius Framework for the Implementation of the UNECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development adopted at the High-level Meeting [of Environment and Education Ministries, Vilnius, 17-18 March 2005]*. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/545242?ln=en>. Last accessed: 4 March 2022.

14 SOLIDAR Foundation (2021). *The Commodification of Education and the Prevalence of For-Profit Education Stakeholders – Policy Paper*. Available at: <https://www.solidar.org/en/publications/policy-paper-the-commodification-of-education-and-the-prevalence-of-for-profit-education-stakeholders-education-for-all-or-education-for-profit>. Last accessed: 4 March 2022.

EES IN INFORMAL AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

Beyond its role in the provision of EES and ESD in the wider frame of GCE, non-formal and informal education (NFIL) is a recognised vital component for the achievement of the whole United Nations Agenda 2030. At the same time, NFIL represents an essential opportunity to reach to adult learners in Serbia considering that the climate challenge requires immediate answer from the entire population of learners in all countries. NFIL can reach those learners not reached via formal education, while ensuring that EES can be provided at all times, in all communities, creating an all-encompassing learning process that makes all citizens actualise the tenets of EES in their day-to-day existence. However, this hinges on participation in education, and, in Serbia, adult participation in education and training is registered between 3% and 5%, revealing low policy coverage for skills development and qualification for adults¹⁵. In terms of policies, the validation of non-formal and informal learning is governed by the [Law on the National Qualifications Framework \(NQF\)](#). Following the adoption of the Law, the National Qualifications Framework Council has been established as an advisory body that provides recommendations on the process of human resource planning and development, together with 12 Sector Skills Councils, which are advisory bodies established on the principle of social partnership¹⁶. It therefore appears that the Framework acknowledges cooperation with civil society, however, it is pivotal that such partnerships are implemented in a way that truly fosters cooperation and increases and strengthens social cohesion. The NQF is still in need for further consolidation especially in light of the quality and scope of non-formal



Therefore, it is pivotal for the Serbian authorities to ensure that education and training are geared towards supporting the new generations towards the digital and green transitions, beyond simply meeting governmental priorities for economic development. Furthermore, the Strategy promotes professional development for education professionals as a specific objective, but without any thorough reference to its implementation. It is key that the implementation of the Strategy encompasses the support to educators with resources and materials that allow for the integration of sustainability across the curriculum and lesson plans without hindering their wellbeing. In order to do this, public authorities should also analyse the limits of formal education in the provision of EES and ESD and based on that involve the expertise held in civil society among the stakeholders that can support the provision of these competences and skills, in the frame of the cooperation between different types of education, for the benefit of the learners and educators alike.

Mentions of EES in the formal education approach in Serbia are minimal and scattered, with more focus provided to ESD overall. However, even ESD is established through scattered, discontinued actions that cannot ensure a change in the educational paradigm that would ensure that all Serbian learners are prepared for the 21st century society.

15 Eurydice (2021). *Adult education and training in Europe: Building inclusive pathways to skills and qualifications*. P.37. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/827fcd9c-1a8c-11ec-b4fe-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-232128473>. Last accessed: 25 February 2022.

16 European Training Foundation (2021). *National Qualifications Framework – Serbia*. P.10. Available at: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/Serbia.pdf>. Last accessed: 22 February 2022.



education¹⁷, serving as another factor that contributes to a wavering adult education participation. Further relevant soft policy for informal and non-formal learning is the [Strategy for the Development of Adult Education](#), which is the legislative framework that underpins the role of adult education in the Serbian education system. Civil society, including SOLIDAR Foundation member, [Initiative for Development Cooperation](#) (hereafter IDC) have criticised the fact that the policy has not been systematically implemented in Serbia and that there are no mechanisms to hold the government accountable¹⁸. IDC reports that CSOs are often the main provider for non-formal and informal education in Serbia. **While cooperation and collaboration between formal, non-formal and informal education providers is fundamental, such cooperation should not lead to the outsourcing of education by authorities, through the shifting of the exclusive responsibility for the provision of topics such as EES**

towards the civil society. Civil society in Serbia needs more support to adequately provide adult learning and education, especially for disenfranchised and marginalised groups. To this end, CSOs should be empowered to support the mainstreaming of EES with adequate funding but should also be recognised as valuable partners in the transformation of education systems.

The state of adult education is important to insist upon specifically because of how difficult it is for the Serbian education system to ensure a paradigmatic change that would allow learners to adapt to the 21st century society. As EES is insufficiently referred to in formal education, it becomes apparent how it also does not reach enough adults via non-formal and informal learning. However, ad-hoc efforts to address this situation are actualised by CSOs. **SOLIDAR Foundation member, IDC, is only one example of CSO that mainstreams EES through various projects which aim to foster the economic and social empowerment of vulnerable categories in Serbia, through the implementation of programmes and activities to provide informal and non-formal education to adults, inter alia.** Furthermore, the organisation provides support to workers through re-training and support for young entrepreneurs, aiming to target exactly the issue of low participation of adults in education, and working towards ensuring that the learners are developing skills for the 21st century and are attuned to global challenges, including the environmental one.

17 European Commission (2021). *Serbia 2021 Report*. 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy. P.104. Available at : https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/serbia-report-2021_en. Last accessed: 2 March 2022.

18 European Association for the Education of Adults (2020). *Overview: adult education in Serbia*. Available at: <https://countryreport.eaea.org/country-reports/serbia-reports-2019/Overview:%20adult%20education%20in%20Serbia>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

CASE STUDY

SOLIDAR Foundation member, IDC, has been running a project that implements EES, titled “Leaving No One Behind - adequate housing and active inclusion of vulnerable groups in the city of Čačak” together with the [United Nations Office for Project Services \(UNOPS\)](#). The project is funded through the European Union Support to Social Housing and Active Inclusion Programme (EU SHAI) and is currently being implemented with the City of Čačak, from July 2021 until October 2022, and will be replicated in the city of Novi Pazar. The overarching aim of the project is to contribute to social inclusion of adults and the youth experiencing poverty and social exclusion in Čačak by creating decent living conditions and promoting their active participation in society. The activities of the project encompass the promotion of environmental protection principles through seminars, workshops and trainings on ecology and environmental practices such as waste management and pollution reduction practices. The mainstreaming of EES is also reflected in the housing component of the project, which promotes the implementation of sustainable building practices, with environmentally friendly materials for 44 families,

or approximately 140 individuals. Moreover, the project aims to develop positive attitudes towards the employment of nature-friendly behavioural practices, including them in the psycho-social support activities developed for the beneficiaries. Finally, the project purports to include the community of Čačak in the implementation of sustainability practices, through the development of workshops which aim to raise awareness on the United Nations 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals, thus providing learning about Sustainable Development to marginalised groups, which often risk being excluded by formal education. The projects has a two-fold aim by ensuring that disadvantaged families have access to basic rights such as housing and education, while it also performs this action being attuned to the needs to promote green competences. The way IDC implements the project in connection to the SDGs and EES is exactly the type of social intervention that CSOs have been adapting to fit the requirements of the 21st century society, illustrating how EES should permeate all types of education and be actualised constantly, becoming the paradigm used by public authorities and learners alike.

The advantage of CSOs providing NFIL is also the fact that the education provided can be actualized through civic actions. Campaigning for climate and environmental issues is an effective tool for promoting EES in NFIL and the society at large. For instance, [IDC](#) has supported the Ecological Uprising held in Belgrade in April 2020, which was organised to protest the lack of government action to prevent water, land and air pollution by industries such as the mining sector. In fact, data shows¹⁹ that Serbia breathes one of the most polluted airs in the world, even setting the pollution record in Europe in January 2021. The increase in construction of hydropower plants all over the country, together with the lack of the development of a municipal waste separation systems has been accompanied by several controversies and discontentment. The situation is further exacerbated by the impact of decades of pollution and environmental disasters, namely the still present consequences of depleted uranium ammunition caused by the NATO bombing of the city of Nis in 1999²⁰. Further, scholars argue that Serbia turned into a “pollution haven” due to several Foreign Direct Investments that put profit before ecology²¹. The latest ecological catastrophe occurred in August 2021



when a landfill on the outskirts of Belgrade was set on fire. Civil Society has been at the forefront of the protests to request accountability from the authorities and action on environmental issues. Through the [Green Initiative](#) project, IDC, together with its project partners [Young Researchers of Serbia](#), have collaborated with various environmental grassroots movements at the local level, most of which dealt with recycling and waste management. This alliance gathers 22 CSOs and contributes to creating a sustainable waste management system in Serbia by establishing functional mechanisms for the stimulation of primary waste selection through participation of all relevant actors in society²². The Green Initiative is an outstanding example of how a meaningful and engaging learning environment for the provision of education for environmental sustainability is key to achieving the green and digital transitions. Like this initiative shows, strengthened collaboration among all education stakeholders in Serbia can help overcome some of the shared challenges in providing such education, specifically through better coordination of policies, closer cooperation, and more efficient use of available funding sources. SOLIDAR Foundation therefore supports IDC’s call for the creation of a joint platform gathering education stakeholders, where they could share information, knowledge, updates, and communicate on pressing issues. If all actors involved would acknowledge the commonality of the challenges encountered, it would be easier to establish an environment conducive to the mainstreaming of EES. Serbian authorities could better support the transition to a sustainable societal model by nurturing the establishment of multi-stakeholder cooperation platforms as well as through dedicated funding.

19 IQAir (2022). *Air Quality Index in Serbia*. Available at : <https://www.iqair.com/serbia>. Last accessed: 22 February 2022.

20 Rudic, Filip (2018). *Serbia to Probe Health Impact of NATO Depleted Uranium*. BalkanInsight. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/18/serbia-to-examine-depleted-uranium-effects-from-nato-bombing-05-18-2018/>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

21 Pavlović Aleksandra et al. (2021) The Impact of Foreign Direct Investments and Economic Growth on Environmental Degradation: The Case of the Balkans. *Energies* 14(3), 566 Available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/1996-1073/14/3/566>. Last accessed: 4 March 2022.

22 Frank, Andrei (2021). *Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor: Serbia National Report*. SOLIDAR Foundation. P.6. Available at: https://www.solidar.org/system/downloads/attachments/000/001/317/original/CLLL_Monitor2020_National_report_Serbia.pdf?1617695049. Last accessed: 4 March 2022.

SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE IN PANDEMIC TIMES

If GCE has a pivotal role in equipping learners with the tools to understand and solve global challenges by empowering them to act responsibly towards global issues²³, then this is actualised only through a civic space in which learners can put in practice the knowledge gained on said challenges. To this end, a healthy and thriving civic space is paramount, especially in times of crisis, as it enables citizens to organise, participate and express their views to influence and shape the political, economic and social life of their societies. Given this, as reported by [CIVICUS](#), the civic space situation in Serbia, based on an assessment of conditions for the exercise of the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, has been steadily and worryingly declining.²⁴ More recently, the [Law on International Affairs](#), which purported to replace the existing law governing policing, was initially withdrawn

following protests but later approved. The proposed Law, which aimed to enable biometric surveillance, faced strong reactions from civil society and independent media²⁵. Particularly, the provisions to introduce mass biometric surveillance using advanced technologies for facial detection and recognition, which could not function without mass collection of biometric data in public space, would have violated the rights to privacy and protection of personal data of all citizens and visitors of Serbia²⁶. Civil society organisations like [SHARE Foundation](#) highlighted how the proposed law could cause constant fear of monitoring and surveillance by the state, resulting in an immediate deterrent effect on freedoms of expression, assembly, association, as well as on free movement.²⁷ Eventually, on 23 September 2021, the Serbian Minister of Interior Aleksandar Vulin announced that the Draft Law on Internal Affairs, would be [withdrawn](#) from further procedures.

Nevertheless, **the decline in civic space and the threats to fundamental rights have also been manifesting through smear campaigns and threats directed at media critical of the government, coupled with a sharp increase in attacks against journalists**²⁸. While across the entire world governments needed to adopt swiftly drastic measures to constrain the spread of the pandemic of COVID-19 and safeguard the capacity of their healthcare systems, in Serbia, the public authorities introduced various measures that represent a limitation of citizens' freedoms and rights beyond the needs posed



23 SOLIDAR Foundation (2021). *Statement of the State of the Civic Space in Europe*. Available at: https://www.solidar.org/system/downloads/attachments/000/001/364/original/SVStatement_Civic_Space.pdf?1632147379. Last accessed: 4 March 2022.

24 CIVICUS (2020). *CIVICUS Monitor 2020: Europe and Central Asia*. Available at: <https://findings2020.monitor.civicus.org/>. Last accessed: 24 February 2022.

25 Civic Space Watch (2021). *Serbia: draft law on internal affairs passes public debate despite the opposition of citizens and experts*. Available at: <https://civicspacewatch.eu/serbia-draft-law-on-internal-affairs-passes-public-debate-despite-the-opposition-of-citizens-and-experts/>. Last accessed: 1 March 2022.

26 SHARE Foundation (2021). *Comments on the Draft Law on Internal Affairs*. P.1. Available at: https://www.sharefoundation.info/wp-content/uploads/Draft-Law-on-Internal-Affairs_Comments_SHARE-Foundation.pdf. Last accessed: 2 March 2022.

27 Ibid. P.3.

28 Gradanske inicijative (2021). *Safety of KRIK journalists seriously endangered*. Available at: <https://www.gradjanske.org/en/safety-of-krik-journalists-seriously-endangered/>. Last accessed: 2 March 2022.



by the pandemic. The legislation is related to the state of emergency, and it is conceptualised in non-transparent ways, lacking legal certainty and information on the duration of the state of emergency, creating confusion among citizens, particularly for the marginalised and vulnerable groups of the population, who also lacked access to information²⁹. **SOLIDAR Foundation member, IDC, has reported on the challenges in countering the shrinking of the civic space due to the restrictions to movement, to organising and several challenges imposed by the COVID-19 related measures.** Serbia, in fact, adopted one of the most restrictive measures during the pandemic which led to limitations to fundamental rights.³⁰ SOLIDAR Foundation member, IDC, [reported](#) that measures have been introduced in non-transparent ways without a clear explanation of why these measures are more effective than others. Frequent changes in the scope and periods of the restrictions and the illogical sequence of measures introduced and lifted created confusion among the people, who

often had problems conforming to measures, consequently leading to several cases of citizens penalised for violating the lockdown³¹. Citizens had been gradually restricted from the freedom of movement by introducing hours in which the movement was not allowed, with such restrictions being set out in the [Decree on State Emergency Measures](#). A notable restriction in this decree was the prohibition people over 65 and 70 from leaving their homes 24 hours a day). This amounted to a deprivation of freedom under international human rights standards. This restriction cannot be considered as a protective measure, due to the fact that it applied to the totality of the elderly population, lacking the individual approach in specific cases and particular needs of the elderly, and causing age-based discrimination³².

Along with the regulatory framework and challenges to the freedom of operating in the civic space in Serbia, funding represents a further issue for CSOs to operate and contribute to social progress. The European Commission Progress report on Serbia on Accession Talks³³ highlighted the lack of legal basis for the state to collect data on financial transfers of organisations and individuals during the pandemic. In 2020, IDC conducted a survey among the members of [the IRIS Network](#), which comprises 200 CSOs from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo. The survey findings highlighted that funding constituted by far the greatest challenge during the pandemic. For 26.7% of the respondents, all funds were kept on hold for the duration of the pandemic, thus constituting a tremendous obstacle for CSOs to plan, work and follow up on their support to communities battling with

29 IDC Serbia (2019). *A brief analysis of the legality of the government measures/response to COVID-19 from the human rights perspective*. Available at: <https://civicspacewatch.eu/serbia-a-brief-analysis-of-the-legality-of-the-government-measures-response-to-covid-19-from-the-human-rights-perspective/>. Last accessed: 1 March 2022.

30 Ibid.

31 Belgrade Center for Human Rights (2020). *Restrictions of the Freedom of Movement of Serbia's Citizens during the COVID-19 Pandemic amongst the Most Drastic in Europe*. Available at: <http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/eng-lat/restrictions-of-the-freedom-of-movement-of-serbias-citizens-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-amongst-the-most-drastic-in-europe/>. Available at: 1 March 2022.

32 IDC Serbia (2019). *A brief analysis of the legality of the government measures/response to COVID-19 from the human rights perspective*.

33 European Commission (2020). *Serbia 2020 Progress Report*. 2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy. Pp. 13, 43, 72. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/serbia_report_2020.pdf. Last accessed: 2 March 2022.

the consequences of the pandemic on the ground. Nearly 70% of the CSOs responding to the survey did not manage to identify alternative sources of funding in order to cope with the crisis and its detrimental effects on future activities, causing major issues for their ability to fulfil their missions. Most of the respondents expressed concerns regarding future sources of funding as well and declared that their hopes and expectations laid within the pool of international donors since government support is systematically lacking. Furthermore, the lack of such funding is particularly ominous as it hinders the fostering of cooperation with CSOs, which could have been key for the development of locally driven projects for the provision of social services.

The Progress report on Serbia on Accession Talks³⁴ highlighted that no progress has been made in crucial areas concerning civic space in the country and that there has been no meaningful and effective action to guarantee and protect civic space in the country³⁵. The report particularly refers to the need to determine as soon as possible whether there was a legal basis for the state to collect data on financial transfers of organisations and individuals during the pandemic. Apart from the aforementioned report, however, no meaningful soft procedure has been taken by the European Union institutions in such cases and despite the presence of several reactions of the EU Delegation to Serbia in the media to dangerous trends and practices, there has been no effective public undertaking during Accession Talks to guarantee and protect civic space in Serbia and encourage the Serbian authorities to create an enabling environment for civil society. As the accession of Serbia to the European Union progresses, it is fundamental that the EU maintains the freedom of the civic space as a priority to be pursued for Serbia to access the EU. Furthermore, the

OECD has reported that the lack of an independent judiciary and its related limited capacity constitutes another detrimental element for the openness and freedom of the civic space in Serbia. Particularly it represents one of the main obstacles to the enhancement of the quality of institutions in Serbia: due to the lack of control on the executive powers³⁶. Overall, Serbian authorities have been restricting the civic space and creating unfavorable conditions for the work and very existence of CSOs, to the point where civil society is considerably limited in their civic freedoms and activities. Such a restricted civic space prevents learners from pressuring more the Serbian government towards addressing the environmental crisis while at the same time it limits the capacity of CSOs to deliver EES opportunities to all Serbian learners.

SPOTLIGHT: AN OPPRESSIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY



A phenomenon that exemplifies the antagonistic environment created by authorities is the fostering of fictitious NGOs parallel to NGOs working on the ground. Such fictitious organisations, called [Government-Owned non-governmental Organisations \(GONGOs\)](#), are created by the government to either receive national funds that are destined for CSOs and to bring forward the position of the national authorities, or to fill the civic space and meddle in the work of CSOs. Often, these organisations orchestrate smear campaigns against independent organisations and activists which criticise the government, as confirmed by SOLIDAR Foundation member, [IDC](#). It is often difficult to distinguish the GONGOs from real CSOs, since there are some common traits. In such instances, organisations have been collaborating by

34 Ibid. Pp.30-40.

35 Ibid. P.13.

36 OECD (2021). *Multi-dimensional Review of Western Balkans*. Pp 543-544.



exchanging information on how to avoid the fictitious one and to spot them³⁷.

Another significant challenge encountered by NGOs in Serbia is the lack of cooperation with the government. The failure to adopt the National Strategy for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society in 2019 and the abolishing of the Office for Cooperation with the Civil Society in 2020³⁸, exemplify the lack of commitment to collaborate with civil society, cementing a lack of trust in the institutions.³⁹ Moreover, **there is a limited inclusion of CSOs for public policies and regulations consultations and their contributions are often disregarded.** Civil society inclusion in policy-making processes is therefore progressively decreasing, together with the lowered involvement of CSOs in the EU enlargement process, as remarked during the 8th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum, organised by the European Economic and Social Committee⁴⁰. Even under these circumstances, the role of CSOs is nevertheless

fundamental in helping to monitor whether fundamental principles such as freedom of speech, the rule of law, the independence of the media, equal treatment and the fight against corruption and preventing conflicts of interest are implemented and thus it is urgent for the EU to make sure that CSOs are engaged meaningfully in this process.

CIVIL SOCIETY STRIKES BACK

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted inequalities between and within countries but also emphasised the pivotal role of cross-border solidarity to overcome the devastating impacts of the pandemic as well as to favour a post-crisis recovery and regeneration. Particularly in response to a closing civic space, solidarity mechanisms have revealed to be paramount to overcome the challenges imposed by the pandemic and the need to build back better. Particularly, the existence of umbrella organisations and solidarity mechanisms has proved to be a great contributor to maintaining solidarity across civil society on civic space and foster the enabling environment for civic engagement. **Civic space can be a huge catalyst for innovation and changes to organisational practice, especially since, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the ability to innovate and adapt quickly became crucial. Transformation was needed to respond to several challenges, namely delivering new services, adapting activities to restrictive legislation, creating new partnership models with stakeholders or employing innovative technologies.** This has forced the civil society sector to look

37 Lukić, Filip (2019). *GONGOs: A serious obstacle to public debate on EU integration in Serbia*. European Western Balkans.

Available at : <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/10/16/gongos-a-serious-obstacle-to-public-debate-on-eu-integration-in-serbia/>. Last accessed: 1 March 2022.; Synovitz, Ron (2019). *Attack Of The GONGOs: Government-Organized NGOs Flood Warsaw Meeting*. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/attack-of-the-gongos-government-organized-ngos-flood-warsaw-meeting/30191944.html>. Last accessed : 2 March 2022.

38 Balkan Civil Society Development Network (2020). *Another Hit to the Civil Society EE in Serbia: CSOs Concerned Over the Abolition of the Office for Cooperation with the Civil Society*.

39 Naunova, Kristina and Neshikj, Ilina (2020). *Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development – Regional Report: Western Balkans 2019*. Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN). Pp.9-10. Available at: http://www.balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/76-6-Final-Regional-Monitoring-Matrix-Report_up.pdf. Last accessed: 4 March 2022.

40 European Economic and Social Committee (2021). *Final Declaration, 8th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum*. Available at: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/8th-western-balkans-civil-society-forum>. Last accessed: 28 February 2022.

for effective coping mechanisms by rethinking their programmes, operations and strategies. It has further led to calling for more networking, for partnership models, joint projects and initiatives. In Serbia, CSOs have traditionally acted as the “connecting glue” and the unifying factor in so many situations, from human rights to the environment. **SOLIDAR Foundation member, IDC, reports that in Serbia, the impact of the pandemic has in fact also contributed to the establishment of stronger relations with existing civil society networks and connections with organisations**

that put alliance-building at the core of their organisational values and strategies. Cross-border solidarity has manifested itself also in the form of knowledge-sharing, which was key for the CSOs that needed to rely on more experienced and diverse organisations. Such avenues provide CSOs with benchmarks against which they can measure their effectiveness, efficiency, outreach and impact to improve upon. Ultimately, SOLIDAR Foundation member, IDC, emphasises that cross-border European cooperation constitutes a learning platform for organisations to gather lessons

learned from shared experiences and the shared sense of direction.

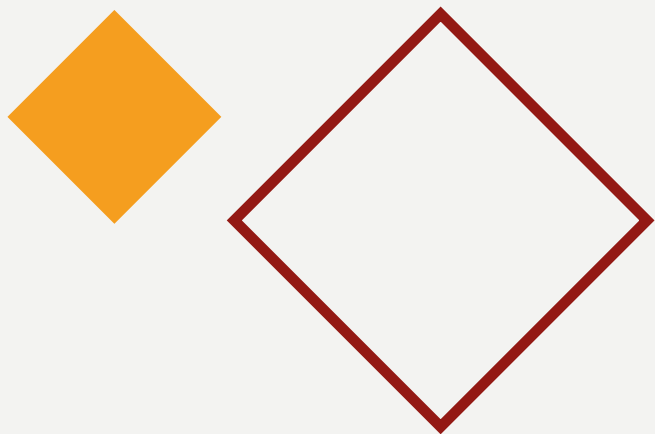
CONCLUSION

The Monitor captures a worrisome picture of Serbia, with EES being insufficiently promoted at a turning point in the fight against climate change while civil society is not allowed to support this challenge considering the restrictions to the civic space imposed by the public authorities. The Monitor has accounted for the limited policies and laws linked to the implementation of EES in formal education, while also illustrating the inconsistent approach to the SDGs and the lack of commitment to the topic which has not been formalized by means of a national strategy since 2017. At the same time, the scattered implementations of EES and ESD are currently in a piloting phase, with little evidence on their success as of now. To make matters worse, reliance on non-formal and informal education to fill in such gaps is problematic considering that CSOs are not comprehensively supported to provide such learning actions, they are excluded from policymaking in education and they do not benefit on adequate funding from the public authorities. This comes on the back of a lowered participation of adults in education, showing that not only the cohort of learners from formal education, but rather all learners do not

benefit from meaningful access to EES even as the environmental crisis is worsening. At the same time, a health and widened civic space is needed to make sure that learners can actualise any EES knowledge while they actively participate in society. However, the public authorities have been doubling down on restrictions, some imposed during the pandemic, other even beforehand, to limit the possibility of CSOs to act freely and empower learners to have a say over decisions taken in their country. The inconsistent application of COVID-19 restrictions, the reduction of funding for CSOs, the emergence of GONGOs and legislation such as the Draft Law on Internal Affairs represent just peaks in a process in which CSOs are not viewed as partners by the public authorities and are actually demonised. Under such conditions, it has been encouraging to see the solidarity that flourished among CSOs within Serbia but also in a cross-border fashion, to counteract these efforts. The work of the CSOs in these dire conditions has served as a source of inspiration and it does reflect the fact that CSOs need now support from their peers outside Serbia but also from the EU to ensure that they can continue to prepare learners for the 21st century society while also monitoring the developments in the Serbian society with regards to the EU accession process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ Create a stronger policy framework for the mainstreaming of EES in formal education
- ◆ Create frameworks for the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of EES and ESD in formal education and allocate adequate resources for the professional development of teachers
- ◆ Expands the current pilots on EES and ESD implementation to more education institutions
- ◆ Provide more avenues for cooperation among education providers and CSOs to ensure a structural approach to the implementation of Education for Environmental Sustainability, by strengthening the collaboration among all education stakeholders
- ◆ Expand the commitment to EES and ESD from formal education to non-formal and informal education, updating present strategies in ways that fosters the access to EES to all types of learners
- ◆ Finish the reforming of the National Qualification Framework and increase the efforts to boost the participation of adults in education
- ◆ Strengthen Civil Society Organisations and guarantee their independence, through the allocation of the necessary financial support and investments and the disbanding of GONGOs
- ◆ Include Civil Society in the planning, programming, implementation and monitoring processes related to accession reforms
- ◆ The EU institutions must encourage the Serbian authorities to create an enabling environment for civil society by strengthening the protection of freedom of expression and halting the closing of spaces for dissent



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The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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