

# KEY POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

## SERBIA

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A new government was formed in May 2024 following the elections held on 23 December 2023. The Ministry of Education oversees the country's education system. Slavica Đukić Dejanović is the incumbent minister. Other ministries, e.g. the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovations also play a relevant role.

Serbia's Economic Reform Programme (ERP) still forecasts that growth will continue in 2024-2026. Still impacted by the economic fallout of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, in particular by the inflation of energy and food prices, real GDP growth was 4% in 2023. Private consumption and construction were the main growth drivers. The Programme also projects that economic growth will remain around 3.5%, rising to 4% in 2025 and 4.3% in 2026, returning to pre-pandemic growth rates. The work of the ERP is now part of the wider work on the Growth Plan and Reform Agenda. The Growth Plan has the Western Balkan governments committing to socio-economic and fundamental reforms that they will undertake to spur on growth and convergence with the EU under the Growth Plan, during the period of 2024-2027. This is now a major policy area also involving education and the labour market, and encompassing, in part, the ERP.

The Commission has assessed each Reform Agenda, including Serbia's, based on the criteria established by the Reform and Growth Facility Regulation. The Commission concluded that the Reform Agendas fulfil the objectives of the Facility, which include to accelerate the closing of the socio-economic gap between the beneficiary and the Union, and to further strengthen the fundamentals of the enlargement process.

Payments will be made twice a year until 2027, based on requests submitted by the Western Balkan partners and verification by the Commission of the three sets of conditions: the pre-conditions of upholding democratic mechanisms, upholding the rule of law and respecting human rights. A specific pre-condition applies to Serbia and Kosovo\*, which must engage constructively in the normalisation of their relations, which includes implementing all dialogue agreements. General conditions of macro-financial stability and sound public financial management must be fulfilled before the disbursement of funds.

In turn, the ERP 2024-2026 focused on structural reforms aimed at removing obstacles to economic growth and development in the next three-year period. Public finance management, the green transition, digital transformation, business environment and reduction of the grey economy, research, development and innovation are priorities in the programme, followed by reforms in the field of economic integration, the energy market, transport market, agriculture, industry and services, education and skills, employment and the labour market, social protection and inclusion and healthcare. Within these areas, three key challenges have been singled out: increasing employment, especially among young people, women and vulnerable groups, with social protection against poverty; creating a business environment that is more favourable for investments; and greening the energy sector and fully opening the energy market.

In the context of EU integration, Serbia, as of 2024, has opened 22 out of 35 negotiating chapters. The last four were opened in December 2021 as part of the cluster on the green agenda and sustainable connectivity. Serbia has provisionally closed two chapters: Chapter 25 on Science and Research and Chapter 26 on Education and Culture, which have relatively little EU law or hard EU acquis.

Serbia has participated in EU research and innovation programmes since 2007 and, since then, Serbia has made progress with regards to national research and innovation policies. It has been one of the most successful countries in the region in Horizon 2020 – now Horizon Europe. Successful areas in Horizon 2020 include ICT and agricultural research, in addition to scientific cooperation in energy. Efforts to promote innovation are progressing and are complemented by the Smart Specialisation Strategy 2020-2027. Amongst other aspects, this strategy places an emphasis on skills development and one of its key pillars is the development of required skills through reforms in

education and training. Moreover, the strategy defines the economic sectors that deliver high-quality and highly skilled jobs and contribute to a more significant and faster growth of companies. This connects faculties, rectorships, science and technology parks and VET schools via the combining of science and industry.

Serbia's key strategic documents are in line with the country's EU Accession ambition, which is reflected in the current Strategy for the Development of Education by 2030 (2030 Education Strategy), encompassing vocational education and training reforms. In the reporting period 2021-2023, the Government remained committed to progress in a range of areas, including: furthering digital skills; developing structures in support of lifelong learning; aligning qualifications with labour market needs; improving school-to-work transition through work-based learning; enhancing skills information and setting up the structures for piloting the Youth Guarantee. These areas remain critical for the authorities as outlined in the ERP for the period 2024-2026. (It is also key to note that building basic competencies in students remains a challenge for the education system, as outlined in PISA results.) The most recent of the guiding documents remains the Action Plan 2024-2026 on the implementation of the 2030 Education Strategy, which Serbia has still to launch its Strategy for the Development of Education by 2030. Overall, this should commit the country to ongoing education and training reforms. Quality in vocational education and training (VET) is outlined as a priority in the Strategy. Focus is also placed on learning processes in vocational schools and also on the dual training model, in which one key part of practical training is carried out with employers. Enhancement in VET should be then aligned with the European Framework for Quality Assurance in VET (EQAVET). Notably, the country has been part of the EQAVET network since 2019 and has established the National Reference Point of Serbia for VET Quality. The Education Strategy and the Economic Reform Programme have as objectives the goal to establish a system to monitor and evaluate the national dual training model, in order to ensure quality. The next steps to focus on in the period 2020-2023 are the Qualifications Agency (SQA) and the Council for the National Qualification Framework of Serbia (NQFS). This is also the case for cooperation with international bodies and the referencing of the NQFS to the European Qualifications Framework, support for the Sector Skills Councils, as well as support for these qualification standards. The adoption of the Matura exam (for secondary school graduates) has now started to be implemented. As part of this move and while the examination centre has already been established more is needed in order to secure proper implementation of this reform, this includes a focus on putting in place aspects such as a functioning information system

The Employment Strategy 2021-2026 defines the reforms aiming to build an efficient labour market in line with technological development and by prioritising young people. Work on the ongoing review of the career guidance and counselling system is still being carried out. Serbia has introduced the 'Youth Guarantee' in three pilot regions. The European Commission and ETF supports this process alongside the ILO.

In the reporting period 2021-2023, the Government made progress in further developing digital skills, lifelong learning and qualifications in line with labour market needs, improving school-to-work transition through work-based learning, improving skills information and, as noted, piloting the Youth Guarantee. The Economic Reform Programme report also highlighted that tax relief may be available through which employers who enter into an employment relationship with a new employee are exempt from paying 70% tax and 100% salary contributions for the newly employed person.

During 2024 Serbia continued work on the 'strategy for creating a stimulating environment for the development of civil society' for the period 2022-2030. Work is still needed to set up and make the council for civil society cooperation operational.

Serbia has a Statistical Office, which is the main producer of primary data from the labour force survey and the survey on income and living conditions (SILC). The Institute of Public Health produces detailed statistics on public health and demographic trends. The quasi-governmental Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit processes and interprets data on poverty and inequality and develops indicators to monitor social policy. Monitoring of social policy in Serbia (including methodology and results) is carried out by academic and civil society organisations.

# 1. KEY POLITICAL, DEMOGRAPHIC, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

## Political developments

General elections were held on 23 December 2023, electing the president and the members of the National Assembly. Serbia's new parliament convened some five months later, in May 2024. The new Government continues to declare European integration as its strategic goal. It remains committed to assuming the obligations of EU membership by focusing on alignment with the EU acquis. However, issues have been raised with regard to the country's adherence to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, linked in part to the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine.

The EU is Serbia's leading political and economic partner. The EU support and partnership for development make Serbia one of the largest recipients of EU financial support in the Western Balkans. Given the European perspective of Serbia (and of the Western Balkans), the EU has continued to treat the region as a privileged partner by associating Western Balkan countries with the EU's mechanisms and instruments. The EU programmes and support are focused on the key areas that should facilitate Serbia's preparation for membership of the European Union.

## Demographics

The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS) estimates the population to be at 6 223 183 people in the third quarter of 2024. The population growth rate continues to be negative. The data for the Republic of Serbia indicate that in 2023 the share of persons aged 65 and over was 22.3% and those aged under 15 accounted for 14.4%<sup>1</sup>.

Serbia is one of the Western Balkan Six (WB6) economies attracting migrants from neighbouring economies. However, emigration has continued to increase since 2010, with emigration at the rate of 10% in 2020. The reasons for this are the unfavourable domestic labour market, in part due to low wages, difficulties in finding the required skills, a difficult business climate and a weak social and health infrastructure (OECD, 2022). This is in comparison to the pull of labour markets in the EU. Emigration and brain drain is thus an ongoing reality. Workers from across the occupational spectrum continue to emigrate. The authorities have recognised that more effective diaspora strategies are needed so as to address issues such as skills requirements.

In 2020, ETF along with the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (WIIW), conducted a study illustrating that Serbia's biggest export 'product' is people, with some 14% of Serbian natives living abroad. Private remittances increase disposable income in the country by more than 8%. Labour migration and depopulation are still a part of Serbia's economy and society, and are topics that periodically dominate public debate, implying shifts in the population structure and, consequently, customer needs (Mihail Arandarenko, ETF, 2021).

## Key economic developments

After recovery in 2023 into 2024, Serbia's ERP shows that economic growth will grow in 2024-2026. Impacted by the economic fallout of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, in particular on inflation through energy and food prices, real GDP growth slowed to 2.3% in 2022, with private consumption and stock building as the main growth drivers. The programme projects that economic growth will remain moderate at 2.5% in 2023 and gradually pick up to 3.5% in 2024 and 4.0% in 2025, thereby broadly returning to pre-pandemic growth rates. Serbia's business environment is improving, with

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<sup>1</sup> [Statistical Release | Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia](#)

regulatory and administrative burdens easing, but significant structural challenges continue to hamper the competitiveness and growth potential of the private sector and of the economy as a whole<sup>2</sup>.

The European Commission has identified the key structural challenges to competitiveness and inclusive growth, drawing on the ERP and other sources. It identified three challenges: (i) increasing employment of young people, women and vulnerable groups, with social protection to combat poverty; (ii) creating a more favourable business environment for investment; and (iii) greening Serbia's energy sector and fully opening the energy market. Serbian institutions are benefiting from the EU's long-term budget MFF (Multiannual Financial Framework) for rolling out and implementing their reform agenda as indicated in the Serbia Economic Reform Programme for the period 2021-2023 and 2024-2026.

The SME sector makes up 99.9% of companies, and employs 65.1% of workers, generates 66.4% of turnover, creates 59.2% of gross value added (GVA) and contributes by 39.5% in export and 54.7% in import in the non-financial sector economy. Compared to 2015, in 2020 the number of SMEs increased by 78,688 (24.2%); the largest growth was achieved by entrepreneurs (28.1%), and the smallest by micro-enterprises (12.5%). The number of employees increased by 163 742 (20.4%); the largest growth was recorded among small enterprises (29.3%), and the smallest among micro enterprises (10.9%). GVA increased by 46.4% (large enterprises by 37.4%), medium-sized (48.1%) and microenterprises (43.8%) recorded the highest GVA growth. Turnover increased by 22.5% (large enterprises by 22.3%); the largest increase in turnover was recorded by small enterprises (25.5%) and the smallest by micro enterprises (13.4%). Labour productivity increased by 19.9% (large enterprises by 109%) due to higher GDP growth than increase in employment; the highest real productivity growth was recorded by micro enterprises (29.7%) and the smallest by small enterprises (14.1%)<sup>3</sup>.

The country has, however, shown uneven growth and managed to catch up only in part from average EU living standards. The gross value added by sector is as follows: agriculture 6.5%, industry 25.3% and services 51.5%. The economic recovery from 2022 into 2023 has been broad-based, except for the agricultural sector, where output declined by 5.4% in real terms. Serbia is now facing challenges, including those stemming from the impact of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Real GDP growth slowed in 2022 but is now rising to 3.5% and is forecast to increase to 4% in 2025. This is due to recovering demand from EU trading partners. Driven by rising food and global energy prices, headline inflation is expected at about 12% on average in 2022. This is projected to slow in 2023 and into 2024 and then return within the National Bank of Serbia's target band in 2024. Rising energy import costs, coupled with shortfalls in domestic electricity production and weakening external demand, are expected to widen the current account deficit to about 9% of GDP in 2023. Despite the adverse global environment, financial sector stability has been maintained and the exchange rate is remaining stable (IMF, 2022).

The Government adopted its Smart Specialisation Strategy for the period 2020-2027 in February 2020. (COM, Horizon Europe key figures, 2024<sup>4</sup>). This strategy emphasises the development of skills in relevant economic sectors and one of the key pillars of the strategy is the development of required skills through reforms in education and training. The strategy defines the economic sectors that deliver high-quality and highly skilled jobs that contribute to greater and faster growth of companies. The strategy connects faculties, rectorships, science and technology parks and VET schools through the better cooperation of science and industry.

## Key social issues

Serbia's legislative and institutional framework for upholding fundamental rights is largely in place but is being monitored closely by the European Commission. The country has in place strategies for anti-discrimination and Roma inclusion, as well as action plans on gender equality and Roma inclusion.

<sup>2</sup> Serbia: [https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/ip252\\_en.pdf](https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/ip252_en.pdf) (page 193).

<sup>3</sup> Serbia, Ministry of Economy, Sector for the Development of Small and Medium Enterprises and Entrepreneurship (2022), SME Policy Index: Western Balkans and Turkey 2022: Assessing the Implementation of the Small Business Act for Europe. *Report on Small and Medium Enterprises and Entrepreneurship for 2020*. Belgrade. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/e4ae95d5-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/e4ae95d5-en>

<sup>4</sup> [Serbia - Horizon 2020 Country Profiles | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/smart-specialisation-strategy-serbia)

Action plans and related funding in other areas were initiated in 2021 (violence against women) and April 2022 (anti-discrimination; de-institutionalisation) but the impact of these steps is not clear. More efforts are needed to comply with the law on the planning system so that action plans be adopted within three months of the adoption of the respective strategies. More generally, efforts must continue regarding implementation and enforcement.

According to the latest survey on income and living conditions (SILC), the at-risk-of-poverty rate was 19.9% in 2023 (EU-27: 17.1%).

Observed by age, the at-risk-of-poverty rate shows that individuals aged 65 and over were the most exposed to the poverty risk – 23.5%, as well as individuals aged from 55 to 64 – 23.0%. The lowest at-risk-of-poverty rate was recorded for the group of persons aged from 25 to 54 – 16.8%. By the type of household, the highest at-risk-of-poverty rate was recorded for households composed of two adults with three or more dependent children – 34.7%, while the lowest at-risk-of-poverty rate was recorded for households composed of three or more adults – 13.3%. According to the activity status for persons aged 18 and over, the most exposed to the at-risk-of-poverty were unemployed persons – 50.9%. Self-employed persons were at the higher risk-of-poverty rate – 12.9%, compared to employees working for employers – 4.9%. The at-risk-of-poverty rate for pensioners was 20.3%.

Inequality in income distribution is high at 33% of the Gini<sup>5</sup> coefficient according to income in 2021, which is above the EU-27 average (30.0%). The richest 20% of the population had an income 6.1 times higher (6.5 in 2019) than the poorest 20% (5.24 in EU-27). Untargeted transfers were made during the COVID-19 pandemic and prior to the 2022 elections, but no measures were designed specifically for the protection of the most vulnerable.

According to the World Bank's from 2024, World Development Indicators (database)<sup>6</sup>, and the OECD's 'Multi-dimensional Review of the Western Balkans: Fostering social cohesion in Serbia'<sup>7</sup>, which is still valid, female employment outcomes in Serbia appear not to lag significantly regarding international benchmarks. However, women are still less likely than men to be engaged in paid work – with a gender employment gap of 15 percentage points (World Bank/WIIW, 2021). According to the same report, on average, men earn about 11% higher wages than women. The gender pay gap (in monthly average gross earnings) is wider for persons with a university degree (about 20%) (SORS, 2022). The approval – in May 2021 – of the new Law on Gender Equality has given Serbian law more explicit mandates for equal remuneration for work of equal value. Investing in additional childcare facilities and improving options for paternity leave remain essential conditions for a more equal participation in the labour market by women and men.

Public expenditure on social protection and budget transfers as a share of GDP has been decreasing in recent years. It amounted to 14.8% of GDP in 2020, the last reported figure, and the European Commission report of 2024 has noted that this has continued to fall. Means-tested social assistance programmes, with strict eligibility criteria, do not sufficiently reach poorer citizens. There are equally significant regional variations, and a large share of children living in poverty are not covered by any benefit.

In September 2021, the Equality Commissioner issued a recommendation to the Ministry of Finance, requesting that persons without a residence registration or ID card should also benefit from support measures. It is not yet fully understood if effective measures are now in place to increase the coverage and adequacy of benefits for individuals and families under the Financial Social Assistance scheme (FSA) to reduce poverty.

The Law on Social Cards entered into force in March 2022. That aims to ensure fairer distribution of social assistance and reduce fraud through the establishment of a single social card register

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<sup>5</sup> [The Gini coefficient, also known as the Gini index or Gini ratio, is a measure of statistical dispersion intended to represent the income inequality or the wealth inequality within a nation or a social group.](#)

<sup>6</sup> [World Bank \(2021\), World Development Indicators \(database\), World Bank Group, Washington, DC, https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators \(accessed on 24 June 2021\)](https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/e140fa87-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/e140fa87-en>

connecting various public databases and providing an overview of the social and material status of beneficiaries. The impact of this is not fully visible at this stage.

In February 2022, Serbia adopted a 'strategy for creating a stimulating environment for the development of civil society' for the period 2022-2030, referring also to the establishment of a council for civil society cooperation. The corresponding action plan, including specific activities and funding, has yet to be adopted to ensure the effective implementation of the strategy. However, increased efforts are still needed to ensure systematic cooperation between the Government and civil society.

Overall progress across (use of digital tools in education, healthcare, and other e-government services) has taken place. This noted that the divide among geographic areas as well as across urban/rural lines is still evident years after the pandemic. Far more emphasis is needed on improving coordinated policy planning and coordination and ensuring sufficient human and financial resources for EU accession across all institutions.

## 2. EDUCATION AND TRAINING

### 2.1 Trends and challenges

#### Education strategy and legal framework for education

In a period of 20 years, Serbia has made progress in raising overall standards in education and almost all children participate in compulsory education. Serbia also has a high proportion of students who go into upper-secondary vocational education and training (VET). Participation in adult learning, both formal and informal, is among the highest in the region but significantly below the EU average. To sustain progress in building citizens' key competencies and unleashing their full potential, this section outlines priorities for formal education and beyond. Children's critical foundational skills can be developed by providing better access to early childhood education and care (ECEC), especially in rural areas. While VET is the most popular education track in Serbia, it requires further investment.

At all education levels, Serbia must continue to invest and reform. The country should improve the quality of teaching by strengthening initial teacher education and offering more opportunities for continued professional development. Setting higher standards for entry into the profession and having clear performance and competency components for teacher compensation and career progression would improve teaching quality. In turn, Serbia has attracted significant foreign direct investment, which may have an impact on knowledge transfer and the growth of skills.

In June 2021, the Government adopted the Strategy for the National Development of Education by 2030. This strategy covers all education levels from ISCED 0 to ISCED 8 and adult education. This remains valid. The strategy focuses on education for sustainable development, digital education and entrepreneurial learning, building on partnerships between public and private actors. The objectives include increasing the quality of teaching and learning, ensuring the fairness and accessibility of pre-university education and strengthening the role of educational institutions. Furthermore, the strategy aims to improve the accessibility, quality, relevance and equity of higher education. It includes teacher education, career guidance and other horizontal aspects of the educational system. An action plan for 2023-2026 accompanies the Strategy, however no reports on its implementation has been issued by the Ministry.

Serbia participates in European frameworks (e.g. the new round of VET policy monitoring, the Osnabrück Declaration for Vocational Education and Training, the ETF Torino process, EAFA – the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, European Qualifications Framework, (ENQA)) and harmonises them with its national monitoring and reporting framework. This should help to align it with EU targets and policy exchange processes by 2030.

Serbia is committed to and has been continuously working on harmonising education system outcomes with labour market needs through the implementation of different measures. These include, notably, developing the new Qs and updating this data, as well as developing the accompanying QS-based VET educational profiles/curricula. This commitment is outlined in the country's education strategy – SEDS 2030 – and in the ERP, particularly since 2021, when further development of qualifications was recognised as one of the country's priorities. Innovation of Qs was intensified after the adoption of the 2017 Law on Dual Education and the 2018 Law on the NQFS. The enrolment of students in educational profiles based on the qualification standards appears to be growing (87% in the 2021/22 school year). One projects suggests that almost all students entering the school year 2023/24 will be taught within the VET secondary curricula based on the modernised Qs. This should be verified.

The work carried out during the development and updating of the Qs is followed by the process of continuous development and revisions of the VET curricula associated with different VET profiles. The Centre for Vocational and Adult Education Training of the Institute for Improvement of Education (IIE) prepares the new or revised version of the VET curricula that is relevant to the VET profiles concerned. This process can lead to a number of other steps to be followed, including the provision of

training to teachers teaching the revised VET curricula, preparation of training materials and preparation of teaching materials to support the VET curricula delivery in secondary VET schools.

VET in Serbia is regulated by the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System, the Law on Secondary Education (LSE), the Law on Dual Education (LDE), the Law on the Dual Model of Studies in Higher Education and the Law on the NQFS. Specific measures and activities in the field of VET are focused on: increasing the relevance of curricula and strengthening cooperation between the world of labour and education; improving the work of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) in the process of developing proposals for qualification standards; improving the quality of work-based learning and students' practice in schools; developing students' key competencies; further developing formal and non-formal adult education, including CVET; and establishing 12 regional training centres for training, reskilling and upskilling in line with labour market needs in order to support the development of dual education and lifelong learning.

Serbia participated in the ETF Torino Process 2022-24 – Policy Analysis and Progress Monitoring, which is the periodical review of policies and practices in vocational education and training (VET) in support of learners and their participation in society and the labour market<sup>8</sup>. The Torino Process monitoring covers three major areas of commitment to lifelong learning: access to learning, quality of learning and system organisation<sup>9</sup>. Regarding quality and reliability of monitoring evidence, Serbia has the most internationally comparable results of all countries in the Torino Process sample. These results are also less susceptible to bias. However, the country tends to self-assess the performance of its VET system more positively compared to other countries involved in this process. There is progress in the modernisation of the VET curriculum based on qualification standards in secondary education. The number of old profiles still to be updated can be considered high, and there is a need to develop a plan for their further modernisation and alignment with the labour market.

Some of the key findings of the Torino Process are presented below:

**Access and attractiveness:** in Serbia, a majority of young people are opting for the vocational pathway. This, however, does not mean that VET is more attractive. Rather, it is indicative of disproportionately restrictive access to other general education alternatives. Conversely, access to learning for adults, especially females, is an area of concern, although policies are, on paper, focused on facilitating access to learning opportunities in the framework of active labour market policies. Once enrolled, learners find themselves in an environment that supports their progression, graduation, and transition between various educational pathways, whether general or vocational. Although discrimination is still seen as a problem, there is no notable legal discrimination in this respect based on the gender, socio-economic background, at-risk status or country of origin of learners.

**Quality and relevance:** the quality and relevance of the skills provided through VET in Serbia varies by the targeted learner group. The system provides young learners with quality that is slightly above the average for Torino Process countries. However, it appears that adults fare better than young learners, with a higher likelihood of possessing essential basic skills and competencies for participation in information-rich societies. Strong links between learning and work, attributed to the integration of work-based learning into curricula and efficient career guidance have been noted. This has not yet translated into better employability metrics. There is still a need for refining employability support. VET programmes do display an openness to green but there is less on digital. Disadvantaged young people and migrants seem to receive a comparatively lower-quality education provision.

**Excellence and innovation:** system performance in promoting excellence and innovation varies between policy areas and priorities. Although the commitment to excellence in pedagogy and teacher development is more or less on a par with the international average, it is less clear to what extent the best practices are reaching all learners. Furthermore, although there is dedication to supporting social

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<sup>8</sup> ETF, Torino Process – Policy analysis and progress monitoring 2022–24, <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/torino-process-policy-analysis-and-progress-monitoring>

<sup>9</sup> The Torino Process is a multiannual review of vocational education and training (VET) in countries in East and South-East Europe (including Turkey), Central Asia, and the South and East Mediterranean region, which the ETF is carrying out in partnership with countries in these regions on a regular basis since 2010. For more information, see <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/what-we-do/torino-process-policy-analysis-and-progress-monitoring>

inclusion and equity, a discrepancy remains between policy intentions and the actual benefits received by learners. As for innovation, VET providers and decision-makers show a keen openness to innovation, particularly to encourage better access to learning for young people and adults. However, there are challenges in integrating these innovations into everyday operations in VET. This underscores the need for a cohesive strategy to ensure innovative practices lead to consistent, system-wide advantages for all learners.

**System management and organisation:** Serbia has more internationally comparable data than other countries, but there is room to strengthen the capacity for the use of that data. In the same vein, the VET system in Serbia has a broad set of quality assurance and accountability measures. However, the effectiveness of these measures for all the individuals and institutions involved in VET needs closer examination. The national authorities report that the private sector and other stakeholders in Serbia are actively involved in VET consultations and decision-making processes. There is also a strong emphasis on placing qualified staff in leadership positions – an area where many countries in the Torino Process report challenges, especially in maintaining a high standard of professionalism among school managers. While Serbia shows commitment to the adequate provision of staff and to financial investments in VET, enhancing the material base for VET providers is an area for consideration, indicating opportunities for more targeted fund allocation.

The development of qualification standards still needs more efforts in order to be in line with the national Methodology for Qualification Standard Development at all levels (including higher education qualifications). The updating process is continuing on the remaining vocational qualification standards adopted by the end of 2019 as a precondition for State Matura and Final Exam implementation and to link them to the occupations determined by the ISCO-08 occupational classification.

Full implementation of the Law on Dual Education was launched in the 2019/2020 school year, marking a significant step in the regulation of work-based learning in Serbia. However, the capacities of schools and companies to fulfil all the provisions of the Law on Dual Education are still to be assessed. It still needs to be understood if changes to the Law on Secondary Education (2020) have limited the exposure to practical training in companies to 25% for approximately 95% of VET students (non-dual VET profiles).

The Government established the Office for Dual Education and Qualifications in November 2022, taking over the competence for dual education and the NQFS from the Ministry of Education.

The regulation of the accreditation of companies, the training and licensing of instructors and the creation of the Framework for Monitoring and Evaluation of the National Dual Education Model provide significant support for the implementation of dual education and assurance of the high quality of work-based learning. Within the development of the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, the accent has been placed on the micro level of dual education that is implemented in schools and companies, and which was missing from the quality assurance system for all educational institutions within secondary vocational education.

Since the implementation of the previous strategy failed to achieve its goals in the areas of adult education, RPL (recognition of prior learning) and coverage increase, the accessibility and quality of adult education and training programmes remain priorities. Another issue is the development of short-cycle study programmes at NQFS level 5 to support further harmonisation of the NQFS with European policies and facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications. Following SED 2030, such programmes prepare students to enter the labour market or become one of the ways to enter higher education<sup>10</sup>.

To enhance skills, the Strategy on Scientific and Technological Development 2021-2030, Employment Strategy 2021-2026 and SED 2030 have been adopted; and by adopting the Economic Reform Programme – ERP 2021/2023 – the Serbian authorities have committed to: implementing activities for the development of digital skills and support for lifelong learning; improving school-to-work transition through WBL; piloting the Youth Guarantee (YG); and improving skills information. In the chapter on

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<sup>10</sup> [Serbia National Implementation Plans for the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET and Osnabrück Declaration: https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/news-and-events/events/osnabruck-declaration-and-recommendation-vet-follow-national-implementation](https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/news-and-events/events/osnabruck-declaration-and-recommendation-vet-follow-national-implementation)

Education and Skills, qualifications oriented to the needs of the labour market and the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Dual Education are explicitly mentioned among the reform priorities.

The main policy initiatives and reforms that have been initiated are the result of a multisector approach and are supported by international funding in addition to the funds from the national budget. There is an increase in budgeting to support the quality, relevance and efficiency of education. Serbia remains committed to broader education and training reforms in line with the EU Accession agenda.

## Education expenditure

On average, Serbia allocates fewer resources to education than EU and OECD countries. Public expenditure for education as a percentage of GDP decreased from 4.3% in 2010 to 3.8% in 2015 and 3.3% in 2021 (latest data available). The share of education in total public expenditure in 2021 was 7.1% (latest data available).

The EU has been the largest donor in the sector in recent years, including through sector budget support. In addition to EU-funded projects, the Ministry of Education is currently managing loans provided by the World Bank (WB), European Investment Bank (EIB) and Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) to finance education infrastructure. Coupled with investments from the general state budget and local municipalities, the total education budget exceeds the official figure of 3.3% of GDP, according to the Ministry of Education (MoE).

## Access, participation and early school leaving

In 2019, the gross enrolment rate reached 100% in primary education and 94% in secondary education. Serbia has also made progress in expanding access to pre-primary and higher education.

The early school leaving rate, which had decreased from 7.5% in 2015 to 5.6% in 2020, increased again to 5.8% in 2023, but is still well below the EU average of 9.7%.

A network of state early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions is provided by the local self-government units in accordance with the criteria established by the Government, as specified in the Law on the Foundations of the Education System. In addition to these public institutions, there are also private ECEC institutions in Serbia. There is no legal guarantee of a place in a nursery or kindergarten until children attend the compulsory preschool preparatory programme. Attendance at such classes has been compulsory for all children since the 2006/2007 school year. It starts around one year prior to a child's enrolment in the first grade of primary school<sup>11</sup>. Reports from the OECD in 2022 OECD (2022) argues that the still-limited availability of ECEC facilities, especially in rural areas, hampers the acquisition of foundational skills and may affect later learning. There are high rates of attendance, but there are still challenges for underprivileged students, including those coming from Roma communities.

While the student population continues to decrease, participation in compulsory education is now virtually universal. Serbia also has a remarkably high proportion of students (about 74%) who go into upper secondary vocational education and training (VET), with the EU average standing at 48.7% in 2020 (ibid). VET is the majority upper secondary programme in Serbia, serving 75% of students in each cohort. VET in Serbia is provided through upper secondary VET schools, where students spend a total of three or four years (depending on their occupational profile). The Law on Dual Education was introduced in 2017 to add a dual VET programme to Serbia's upper secondary landscape. Before the Law on Dual Education was introduced (2017), upper secondary VET in Serbia comprised only VET schools delivering school-based VET. After the introduction of the law, VET schools could deliver school-based VET under the previous law and/or dual VET under the new law, the latter regulating work-based learning<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/serbia/access>

<sup>12</sup> For more information see 'Dual education: New knowledge for the new age' by the Government of the Republic of Serbia, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/tekst/en/129780/dual-education.php>

Tertiary-level qualifications for people aged 30 to 34 are increasing. This has led to some fears that young tertiary graduates more likely to be over-skilled (i.e. to hold jobs requiring lower levels of formal qualifications).

At the same time, not all individuals have the same opportunities to attend and obtain high-quality education. This especially affects persons living in rural areas and Roma communities. The lack of transport and weak learning resources – including poor teaching – are key obstacles.

While Serbia has the highest share, among the regional economies, of adults who participate in adult learning (4.8% in 2021, up from 3.7% in 2020), this remains well below the EU average level of 10.8%, and many adults lack the skills necessary to thrive in the labour market. A large share of long-term unemployment demonstrates that there are inadequate opportunities to upskill, re-skill or acquire new competencies based on labour market needs. Access to adult learning is particularly limited for low-skilled individuals (only 0.5% of whom attended training) and the unemployed (4.4% of whom attended training) (ETF, 2022c).

## PISA results

According to the 2022 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)<sup>13</sup>, there was still a significant share of students in Serbia who continued to leave school without having mastered basic competencies. The average results in 2022 were about the same as in 2018 in mathematics, reading and science. Over the most recent period (2018 to 2022), the gap between the highest-scoring students (the 10% with the highest scores) and the weakest students (the 10% with the lowest scores) narrowed in mathematics and reading, while it did not change significantly in science. In mathematics, high achievers became weaker, while performance did not change significantly amongst low achievers. Compared to 2012, the proportion of students scoring below a baseline level of proficiency (Level 2) did not change significantly in mathematics, reading and science. Serbia participated in PISA 2022<sup>14</sup>. The PISA 2022 results were released on 5 December 2023 and are available at Serbia | Factsheets | OECD PISA 2022 results. PISA results in preparation.

## Young people not in employment, education or training (NEET)

The share of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) for the age group 15-29 has decreased constantly in Serbia from 20% in 2020 to 15.2% in 2023, with a higher incidence among young women. School-to-work transitions remain, as in other economies of the region, more difficult being also reflected in higher incidence of skills mismatch (overqualification) and work in informal contexts among young people.

The introduction of the Youth Guarantee aims to address such challenges, and implementation is now under way. Additionally, workers across all areas of employment are continuing to emigrate, and the impact of the circular migration initiative cannot yet be fully assessed.

## 2.2 Initial VET and adult learning

More than 70% of secondary school students choose VET, indicating that it plays an important role in Serbia's education system. The sector enjoys substantial support from international and bilateral donor organisations. However, many VET profiles are still outdated despite the positive interest by donors and by citizens. Programmes are found to be more relevant to labour market needs due to the theoretical nature of VET curricula, with limited practical training. Many schools lack the infrastructure and resources necessary to provide students with the competencies needed to thrive in the labour market (OECD 2022, page 191). More investment is still required in order for the sector to leverage its full potential. Another concern for the system is the quality of initial teacher education and offering more opportunities for their continued professional development.

<sup>13</sup> 'Education GPS, OECD, 24/10/2023, 16:22:31 <http://gpseducation.oecd.org/>'

<sup>14</sup> [Serbia | Factsheets | OECD PISA 2022 results](#)

The VET system lacks post-secondary and short-cycle courses at higher skill levels, which are in demand by employers and individuals. It is found that people enrol in higher education programmes to make up for the limited offer of higher VET.

## Strategic and legal framework for initial VET and adult learning

Serbia's Strategy for the Development of Education by 2030 also covers VET. Here, as mentioned before, the emphasis is on digital skills, improving skills information, bringing qualifications in line with labour market needs, improving school-to-work transition through dual vocational training and apprenticeships, lifelong learning, and piloting the Youth Guarantee.

Not all the actions provided for in the Strategy's Action Plan for the period from 2021 to 2022 have been implemented. The planned practice of graduation exams was not standardised for the planned period to introduce the state graduation exam with 12 grades. The introduction of final state graduation exams covers general and vocational education. It is expected – this is not certain – to be implemented for the generation of students who have enrolled in high school in the 2022/2023 academic year<sup>15</sup>.

The National Education Council participates in formulating the national policy and legal frameworks, as well as in adapting the general subjects and curricula of the VET curriculum. The Institute for the Improvement of Education plays an important role in drafting technical documents for VET implementation and is partially involved in the other key functions, in addition to the mobilisation of financial resources. The Institute of Educational Quality and Evaluation contributes to defining educational standards for general education and conducts evaluations and research and development activities. Regional School administrations play a role in monitoring and evaluating schools, including VET schools, and participate in managing public-private partnerships for VET and in research & development. The Educational Research Association of Serbia brings together researchers in the field of education and training and is continually active in connecting with international organisations in the field of education and training and in promoting cooperation between researchers from Serbia and colleagues from the EU. These bodies provide evidence to the Government of Serbia to inform policymaking in the field of education<sup>16</sup>.

Social partners, including employers' national and sectoral organisations, are represented in bodies such as the VET Council. The Serbian Chamber of Commerce is active and participates in several processes and governance functions at both a national and regional level. In total, 12 sector skills councils were established by the end of 2021<sup>17</sup>. At present, it is found that the sectoral and local aspects of VET governance are functional and working. The 12 sector skills councils define qualification needs within each sector in secondary, vocational, higher and adult education. The sector skills councils and the Serbian Qualification Agency are supported by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in Serbia. The bank provides long-term financial and technical support to the Serbian Qualification Agency and sector skills councils to upgrade qualifications and competencies for developing new qualification standards within each sector, in direct cooperation with the private sector.

Funded by the state, VET continues to be financed through cost-sharing schemes, including national/sectoral training funds, training tax incentives for companies and workers, and loans. The state allocates funds for education based on a formula that considers the type of school, student numbers, salaries, etc. The Serbia ETFP 2022-2024 and the EU's assessment suggest that more investment is still required to achieve agreed targets. VET programmes tend to be more resource-intensive due to higher spending requirements on technology and learning equipment. In addition, local governments partly cover schools' running costs and staff development. This may mean that municipalities cannot fully cover these expenses.

<sup>15</sup> <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/serbia/ongoing-reforms-and-policy-developments>

<sup>16</sup> Overview of laws and bylaws under the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia: <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/dokumenta-i-propisi/zakonski-okvir/>  
National Qualifications Framework in Serbia: <http://noks.mpn.gov.rs/en/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://noks.mpn.gov.rs/en/decisions-on-the-establishment-of-sector-skills-councils/>

## Qualifications, validation, and recognition

The Serbian Qualifications Agency (SQA)<sup>18</sup> was established in September 2018, pursuant to Article 14(1) of the Law on the National Qualifications Framework of Serbia (NQFS). The Agency provides professional support and quality in implementing the NQFS. In the development of qualifications, a particular focus is placed on adult qualifications and the re-qualification of unemployed people. The SQA supports the work of the sector skills councils who develop qualifications or verify the quality of qualifications developed by other stakeholders. The Agency equally provides up-to-date online information on career profiles and related standards and qualifications.

Foreign qualifications are recognised by the ENIC/NARIC Centre, housed within the Qualifications Agency. The NQFS Law distinguishes between the recognition of foreign school certificates and those from foreign higher education establishments. The Law stipulates the recognition procedures and criteria for access to further education. The foreign qualifications that obtain recognition are considered equivalent to the corresponding public certificates obtained in Serbia.

An NQFS register has been established and is available to citizens through the NQFS Portal<sup>19</sup>. It has a functional connection with the Unified Information System on Education and other databases, such as the Central Register of Compulsory Social Insurance and the National Employment Service. The current register consists of several sub-registers, including a National Qualifications sub-register (which records data on qualifications, classified by level and type, in accordance with CLASSNQFS). It includes a Qualification Standard sub-register and a sub-register of Publicly Recognised Organisers of Adult Education Activities. The NQFS register will form an integral part of the Unified Information System of Education for the Republic of Serbia, which aims to facilitate the exchange of data between the sub-registers of the Ministry of Education. The bylaw on the NQFS register has been forwarded for publication in the Official Gazette Register<sup>20</sup>.

As mentioned above, 12 sector skills councils were established between 2020 and 2022 to harmonise the supply and demand for knowledge, skills, and competencies. The European Commission and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) joined efforts to support the sector skills councils. The first and most active sector councils belong to the ICT and agribusiness sectors, which are also those with the fastest job growth. Most of the qualifications for which the qualification standard has been developed are acquired through dual education, e.g. electrician, baker, cook, carpenter, installer of telecommunication networks, metal fitting, turning, and machine operators, industrial mechanic (NQFS 3), aircraft mechatronics technician, multimedia technician, logistics and freight forwarding technician, press technician (NQFS 4). No specific qualification standards are being developed for dual education. The dual education/apprenticeship model of education is integrated into educational policy as a model of curriculum implementation. This identifies the characteristics of four main forms of VET delivery in relation to the role of work-based learning and suggests ways in which countries could promote apprenticeships within the context of their educational, social and economic frameworks.

Both the Education Strategy 2030 and the ERP for the period 2021-2024 list as priorities the further development of qualifications in line with labour market needs. More than 200 qualification standards have been developed, of which almost 100 are according to the new methodology. There are over 100 educational profiles based on the qualification standard, and many of these are now being updated. The Serbian Qualifications Agency has launched the work to develop standards in higher education at the level of the sector skills councils and following the Serbian Government Education Strategy 2030. However, although envisaged strategically, the higher education sector is yet to be fully integrated with the NQF system, including the alignment of the development of qualification standards with the accreditation processes and the development of curricula in higher education.

<sup>18</sup> <http://noks.mpn.gov.rs/en/about-the-agency/>

<sup>19</sup> National Qualification Framework, noks: <https://noks.azk.gov.rs/en.html>

<sup>20</sup> [NQFS web presentation \(mpn.gov.rs\)](#), see [Quality assurance in higher education](#)

Also, one of the priorities in SEDS 2030 is the development of short-cycle study programmes at NQFS level 5 to support further harmonisation of the NQFS with European policies and facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications. Such programmes are to be built upon secondary education, should be practice-based, and should prepare students to enter the labour market or higher education. Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) is an area where work has advanced in the past two years. During a pilot, self-assessment, exam methodologies and instruments were designed based on learning outcomes of qualification standards. The piloting of recognition of prior learning (RPL) began in February 2021. It will be important that this opportunity should be made accessible to the most vulnerable population without qualifications.

### Quality and quality assurance

Improvements in VET will be harmonised with the European Framework for Quality Assurance in VET (EQAVET). Serbia has been part of the EQAVET network since 2019 and has established the National Reference Point of Serbia for the Quality of VET. Both the Education Strategy 2030 and the Economic Reform Programme 2022-2024 outline the aim to set up a system to monitor and evaluate the national dual training model to ensure quality.

Progress has been made in ensuring compliance with the quality assurance system in higher education. In this regard, Serbia has followed the recommendations of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). Detailed developments within the reporting period are updated on the EURYDICE website<sup>21</sup>.

### Work-based learning arrangements

The Government established the Office for Dual Education and Qualifications in November 2022, taking over the competencies of dual education and the National Qualifications Framework in Serbia from the Ministry of Education.

The Law on Dual Education has been implemented since the 2019/2020 school year. At present, the national work-based learning model in VET has been further developed with a particular focus on setting up quality assurance and monitoring mechanisms. While in the 2019/20 academic year there were 183 000 students enrolled in vocational upper secondary schools, 46% of whom were female updates are needed on the latest data. VET students represent nearly 73% of the total enrolment in upper secondary education. VET programmes are offered in 311 upper secondary schools; 104 schools offer dual profiles. Around 7 000 students follow one of the 37 dual profiles. 95 out of 201 profiles have recently been modernised and are based on new qualification standards<sup>22</sup>. The employment rate of VET graduates (aged 20-34) remains low at 53.6%, significantly below the EU average of 76.8% (2021). Again further updates will be required for the latest data.

The introduction of final examinations in secondary education was envisaged in the 2020 strategy and 2030 strategy as a milestone initiative. However, it has been postponed to the 2024/2025 school year (for 3-year VET programmes) and to the 2025/2026 school year (for all secondary schools), and may be postponed further.

The regulation of the accreditation of companies, training and licensing of instructors and creation of the Framework for Monitoring and Evaluation of the National Model of Dual Education provide significant support for the implementation of dual education and assurance of the high-quality of work-based learning. Within the development of the Framework for Monitoring and Evaluation, the focus has been placed on the micro level of dual education that is implemented at the level of schools and companies, and which was missing within the system for assuring the quality of work of all educational institutions within secondary vocational education.

The commitment to expanding the work-based learning scheme in Serbia has been strengthened. Attention has been paid to the introduction of dual education in areas such as digitised processes and

<sup>21</sup> [Quality assurance in higher education | Eurydice \(europa.eu\)](https://www.eurydice.eu/quality-assurance-in-higher-education/).

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-09/wbl\\_factsheet\\_serbia\\_2020.pdf](https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-09/wbl_factsheet_serbia_2020.pdf)

knowledge acquisition in Industry 4.0. The advantages offered by dual education are licensed instructors, motivated teachers, and financial compensation as a reward for successful learning in the company. This is why the strategy of the Government of the Republic of Serbia encourages the establishment of successful companies, increasing opportunities for young people from dual education to prove that they can build a career in their country (Grujic, 2020).

The Law on the Dual Model of Studies in Higher Education (Official Gazette of the RS No 66/19) also introduces dual education in higher education. The Law responds to the demand by national and foreign companies operating in Serbia for adequate, highly educated staff with practical and applicable knowledge. The first accredited dual study programmes have been implemented since the school year 2021-2022 in various fields, such as IT, the textile industry, mechanical engineering and aviation. For an overview and updated information on the continuous developments, please refer to the link to the Government's interactive website<sup>23</sup>.

The various forms of WBL present challenges, particularly against the backdrop of pandemic-related health restrictions and the weak capacity of companies to engage in cooperation with schools and host young learners and workers. Widening the availability of on-the-job training and work experience is critical for the swift and sustainable integration of young graduates into employment.

## Digital education and skills

Serbia's digital workforce makes it a high performer locally in the platform economy rankings, with 19% of its young people working mostly in technology, graphics, internet design and media. A digitalisation and education reform remain amongst the priorities, as the Government view digitalisation and education as the way to turning Serbia into a knowledge-based economy with high-quality jobs. Planned under the reform are an upgrade of the digital infrastructure for education and training, a move towards a new education management information system (EMIS) and the establishment of an analytical unit to carry out regular analyses.

On 27 February 2020, Serbia adopted the Strategy for Digital Skills Development in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2020-2024. The overall objective is to improve the digital knowledge and skills of all citizens, including members of vulnerable social groups, to enable the monitoring of the development of ICT technologies in all fields and to meet the needs of the economy and the labour market. The first action plan for the period 2021-2022 has been rolled out and will be followed by the second action plan for the period 2023-2024.

The key pillars are the following:

1. improving digital competencies in the education system (by providing the conditions for learning and acquiring such skills in the education system); upgrading curricula for the acquisition of digital competencies in pre-university education;
2. improving basic and advanced skills for all citizens, by providing the conditions for the development of different levels of digital skills by citizens; accrediting digital skills training programmes for citizens; raising citizens' awareness of the need to learn digital skills; improving digital skills for citizens at the local self-government level;
3. developing digital skills in relation to the needs of the labour market, meeting the needs of the labour market for digital skills at all levels and promoting opportunities in the ICT sector; improving cooperation between relevant institutions (public sector, private sector, civil society);
4. developing the digital skills of employees, including public administration employees, with a focus on skills that are related to the specifics of the workplace; and
5. lifelong learning of ICT professionals: monitoring the needs of the economy and the ICT sector; monitoring the number of young people, especially women, educated and trained in ICT

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<sup>23</sup> [Technological Development, available at: http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Nacionalni-model-dualnogobrazovanja-za-odobrenje-za-stampu1.pdf](http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Nacionalni-model-dualnogobrazovanja-za-odobrenje-za-stampu1.pdf)

professions; increasing research capacity in the ICT field and, finally, improving the skills of ICT professionals and promoting lifelong learning.

### Statistics on education and training

The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS) is a specialised organisation established in accordance with Article 26 of the Law on Ministries (Official Gazette of the RS No 44/14, 14/15, 54/15 and 96/15).

SORS is the institutional source of data and analyses for Serbia's education and training system, labour market, etc. It shares its data and analyses with European Commission structures, the ETF and international organisations, including the UN, the International Monetary Fund, UNESCO, the World Bank, the World Health Organization, OECD, etc. For more information, see <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/>.

They perform all the functions in presenting and analysing the status of the education management information system (EMIS) / VET Management Information System. The development of a Serbian Educational Management Information System (EMIS) is ongoing. The legal framework necessary for the development of EMIS and the integration of student data (by introducing the Unique Educational Number/UEN) should be further complemented with respect to other sectors (social welfare, healthcare, etc). This is relevant to monitor the employment of students after they have graduated, and it is very important to link it with labour market statistics (employment rate, sectors, trends for the next five years). SORS data are available to a variety of target groups and for various uses.

It is necessary to further increase the transparency of EMIS development and functions, to ensure its utility. Stronger involvement of key external stakeholders, including social partners, the academic community, and civil society, should be ensured in relation to data collection, analysis, and reporting.

## 3. LABOUR MARKET AND EMPLOYMENT

### 3.1 Trends and challenges

#### Labour market characteristics

Prior to the pandemic, economic growth (averaging 4.3% in 2019), together with a shrinking population caused by migration and ageing, had an impact on activity and employment rates, pushing down unemployment figures. There remain a number of measures now proposed to address this, including active labour market measures and the Youth Guarantee. Emigration of skilled workers remains an issue. The number of people at risk of poverty remains high, and social benefits remain insufficient and are underfunded. The lower labour market participation of women should still be addressed.

The unfavourable situation of women in the labour market is evidenced by a 43.8% activity rate in 2023, well below the 57% rate among male peers (age group 15+).

A sizeable portion of the labour force, particularly young people, are employed in insecure or informal, low-paying jobs that offer limited career prospects, prompting people to look for better options abroad. The improvement in employment rates was matched by a rise in formal employment in recent years. However, new jobs often fall into the category described by the ILO as 'precarious and vulnerable employment'. For example, the incidence of vulnerable employment remained almost the same in 2023 at 18.5%, compared to 18.8% in the previous year.

Flexible forms of employment, such as service contracts, temporary and occasional employment contracts, vocational training or internship contracts, and employment contracts through student or youth cooperatives, are sometimes misused by employers (i.e. they are used instead of standard labour contracts). As stated in the ex-post analysis of the National Employment Strategy 2011-2020<sup>24</sup>, 'legal regulations, already deficient, are interpreted too broadly and arbitrarily by employers; this practice is tolerated by state bodies and spreads to the public sector so that these forms of work are becoming more prevalent and the labour and social rights of those involved are becoming seriously violated'. The situation is further exacerbated by the absence of inspections, which means that unscrupulous employers are not being forced to comply with existing legislation, however potentially inadequate.

Annual employment growth remained positive in most sectors, with a particularly robust performance in the ICT sector at 11.5% growth, the professional, scientific, and technical activities sector at 6.5% and administrative and support services at 6.3% (European Commission, 2023).

Overall, unemployment rates (LFS) have been decreasing since 2021, reaching 9.5% in 2023, with a slightly higher incidence among women and persons with medium and low levels of educational attainment.

Similar decreasing trends are also present when it comes to the registered unemployed. After a constant trend between 2019 and 2021 of slightly above 500 000, in 2022 there was a sharp decrease, and the total number dropped to 448 618. The same trend continued in 2023 and the number of registered unemployed reached 404 977 persons. As a trend over the years, there are more females registered as unemployed than males. With regard to educational level, the lowest number of registered unemployed individuals are people in possession of a higher education qualification. In 2023, the highest number of unemployed individuals are those with a medium level of educational attainment (207 000 people), and the number has been steadily declining since 2021. The second largest group is people who have low qualification levels (ISCED 1-2), 142 749 persons.

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<sup>24</sup> [Ex-post analysis of the national employment strategy for the period 2011-2020.](#)

In 2022, Serbia participated in the European Skills and Jobs Survey (ESJS) conducted by the European Training Foundation in collaboration with CEDEFOP. Based on the main skills gaps identified in the Serbia survey<sup>25</sup>, ESJS data shows there is a large scope for re/upskilling, especially in digital skills training/digitalisation/social skills. While noting that Serbia performs relatively lower in certain areas, there is still a sizeable learning potential. This is the first skills survey conducted by ETF in its partner countries. ESJS encompasses three key EU monitoring frameworks: Skills Agenda, Digital Strategy and VET-OD. Its design incorporates the EU's growth, sustainability, and resilience ambitions, and it aspires to become a key tool for evidence-based policymaking<sup>26</sup>. At the time of writing, a focused ESJS seminar was scheduled to take place in Belgrade in September 2024.

**Remote work:** An average level of post-pandemic remote work incidence (29%) and good labour market resilience were observed in 2022. However, sizeable inequalities in post-pandemic remote work patterns still exist by educational level/occupation/economic sector (i.e. gaps between high-low educated/high-low skilled). Remote work tends to be most common among highly educated workers holding high-skilled jobs (e.g. three programmers out of four worked remotely in 2022). As not all jobs could be performed remotely, ESJS data shows a larger adverse impact for workers holding low- and medium-skilled jobs than for those in skilled occupations.

**Digital upskilling:** this is not yet systematically in place: only one in nine employees (13%) had to learn to use new digital technologies at work (WB5 lowest). Serbia is a low performer in new digital technologies introduced at work (WB5 lowest), and numbers seriously drop when it comes to learning how to use them (i.e. digital upskilling). ESJS data also show a relatively low level of digitalisation of jobs compared to EU27, this is a common pattern for all WBCs.

**Skills mismatch:** With one in four workers overqualified, Serbia has a relatively high level among the countries surveyed (the EU average was 34% in 2023 – according to Eurobarometer)<sup>27</sup>. In Serbia the skills mismatch incidence remains high overall (i.e. the jobs offered fail to match the over-supply of tertiary graduates) and seems to be becoming structural. The high, persistent incidence of skills mismatch seems to be recurrent in ETF evidence (even if skills mismatch was measured differently in ESJS compared to prior ETF work based on LFS data). The ESJS numbers (2022) remain relatively high and correspond to the LFS estimates (2019). This shows that one in four workers is overqualified. ETF's previous findings show that half of those entering the labour force (young people aged 15-24) are already over qualified (about 49% in 2019, the highest rate in the Western Balkans), suggesting skills mismatch is likely becoming a structural issue and present in many types/forms. Prior ETF work also documented a high incidence of mismatch by field of study for women.

**Skills gaps:** One third of workers reported high unmet learning needs in 2023. The first training needs are: social skills (for one third of workers), IT/digital skills, albeit relatively lower (one fourth of workers) and job-specific skills (one fifth of workers). SMEs typically train less/have fewer training needs.

**Workplace training** is not sufficiently developed. Only one third of workers took part in digital skills training (WB5 lowest). A gap between training 'Intention/Need' (25%) and 'Engagement' (34%), could suggest the presence of obstacles (e.g. of a sectoral/institutional/personal nature). The IT training gap (Intention vs Engagement) is nine percentage points, quite large and unusual, and needs further investigation. Inequalities in (digital) training provision are sizeable; this is a major concern based on ESJS data<sup>28</sup>. About 40% of skilled workers (e.g. managers/teachers/IT specialists) reported significant digital skill gaps/substantial unmet learning needs, contrasting sharply with workers holding elementary jobs/jobs with no or little digital intensity (i.e. often low-educated/low-skilled workers). Inequalities in (digital) skills training chiefly affect workers holding low-skilled jobs (e.g. cleaners/food preparation) who are not aware of the changes in the world of work (e.g. nine in ten stated they did not need to further develop their computer/IT skills); these patterns suggest the need for re/upskilling.

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<sup>25</sup> [Mircea Badescu \(ETF\) prepared this brief note.](#)

<sup>26</sup> [More information on the survey is available here: European skills and jobs survey \(ESJS\) | CEDEFOP \(europa.eu\).](#)

<sup>27</sup> [ETF Skills mismatch determinants in the ETF partner countries. A cross-country analysis.](#)

<sup>28</sup> [Inequalities in \(digital\) training provision is a major concern based on ESJS data/findings.](#)

**Job insecurity** is relatively low, with only one fifth of employees reporting high/moderate job insecurity due to the digital transition. This is linked to the lack of digital skills (outlined in the work related to the ETF's Skills and Jobs survey)<sup>29</sup>.

## Employment and labour market statistics

The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS) produces reliable labour market data through annual and quarterly labour force surveys (LFS). SORS also produces available administrative data on registered jobseekers and vacancies. SORS has the capacity and procedures in place to cooperate and exchange with its EU partners.

Until recently, SORS did not include flexible forms of work, irrespective of whether they were rare (for instance on-call work) or quite prominent (such as platform work). In June 2021, SORS announced changes to the LFS methodology, aligning it with that of Eurostat. These are to start in 2025. This will include 'small' jobs and jobs conducted casually (remote platform work, transport services offered through web applications, translation services, distribution of flyers, caring for children, the elderly, pets, etc.). Even if these jobs fall outside the traditional concept of employment, the new methodology is taking note of their presence in the labour market. As noted above, Serbia takes part in the ESJS.

## 3.2 Employment policy and institutional settings

### Strategy and legal framework in the employment policy field

The Employment Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2021-2026 dates from August 2021. The Action Plan 2024–2026 for the Implementation of the Employment Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2021–2026 (hereinafter: Action Plan) is a policy document adopted with the aim to achieve the overall goal and objectives of the Employment Strategy<sup>30</sup>.

This Strategy tries to define the reform steps needed to put in place a more efficient labour market in line with changing technological developments. It aims at increasing labour demand, as well as high-quality jobs and relevant labour supply through better cooperation between the various sectors, including education, the economy, finance, social protection and local authorities. Specific measures are envisaged for the improvement of the labour market standing of women, young people, disabled persons, social aid beneficiaries, as well as the Roma population. Other vulnerable groups of unemployed people will also receive additional support with their job search to help them enter or return to the labour market.

Each year, the Serbian Government drafts a National Employment Action Plan, which includes activities assigned to the National Employment Service (NES).

### Initiatives to boost employment

Serbia is taking steps to implement the Youth Guarantee scheme, one of the flagship social programmes of the Economic and Investment Plan 2021 to 2027 for the Western Balkans. This is a scheme used throughout the EU. The YG aims to secure all young NEETs aged 15 to 29 in decent quality offers of employment, traineeship, apprenticeship, or continuing education, within four months of becoming unemployed. Serbia is working on building a full YG implementation plan and carrying out pilot initiatives.

In 2023, the NES continued implementation of its labour market services and measures as per the national plan for employment.

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<sup>29</sup> ETF (forthcoming), *Digitalisation and digital transition. Key findings from the European skills and jobs survey in selected ETF partner countries.*

<sup>30</sup> *Employment Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, 2021–2026*, [https://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Strategija\\_zaposljavanja\\_u\\_Republici\\_Srbiji\\_2021-2026\\_engleski.pdf](https://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Strategija_zaposljavanja_u_Republici_Srbiji_2021-2026_engleski.pdf)

Interjob brokerage is used to connect supply and demand by matching jobseekers with employers who express this need. The aim of this is to increase the number of vacancies that employers report to the job matching service and create adequate assessment of jobseekers' employability and capabilities; this is in order to identify needs of other services and active employment policy measures that are determined in the individual employment plan. This work is carried out online and in person. The access to job matching services recorded an upwards trend from 2020 to 2022, while in 2023 the number of participants decreased to 198 789 registered unemployed. Both online and in-person delivery of intermediation services have been accessed by jobseekers, mostly holding medium and high education qualifications. The NES delivered around 830 000 sessions of employment counselling and individual employment plans.

The total number of participants in professional orientation and counselling on career planning in 2023 was 61,374, lower than previous years. The decrease is attributable to lower participation in online counselling services.

Female participation in labour market services is consistently higher compared to males. By educational attainment, in 2023, numbers highlight that persons with a low level of educational attainment get higher access to counselling services.

Information about career development opportunities aims to prevent the wrong choice of education opportunities or occupations, strengthening the user's competence in making purposeful career decisions.

Counselling has the aim of increasing competency in the choice of occupation/educational path for all interested individuals, encouraging their professional adaptation and career development. Selection refers to the psychological assessment procedure for employment selection and inclusion in APZ<sup>31</sup> measures (additional education and training programmes, training for the development of entrepreneurship). The goal is to match the candidates' professional potential with the workplace/training programme requirements.

The NES implements three larger sets of active labour market measures:

- a. Active Job Search Measures, combining short-term training to increase the ability for job searching, self-employment and labour market reintegration.
- b. Additional Education and Training, including various types of courses, professional practice and internships.
- c. Subsidised Employment and Self-Employment; public work and incentives for employment and the development of entrepreneurship.

As regards the provision of active job search measures, in 2023 106 572 unemployed people participated in such measures. These included training for active job search, self-efficacy training, job search clubs and job fairs, workshops for overcoming stress due to job loss and short training courses to raise the level of information and competence for the potential development of entrepreneurial activities. With the exception of the latter measure (focused on entrepreneurship), more women than men participate in such measures, as well as jobseekers with a low and medium level of education. Since 2020, the number of participants has steadily but strongly increased from around 38 000 to over 100 000. Considering the overall constant decrease in the total number of unemployed people, this trend reveals better performance by the NES in delivering these activation measures to jobseekers.

Data on additional education and training shows that in 2023 the NES provided (re)training and other forms of skills development to 6 989 persons, a strong decrease from 2019 when 16 344 jobseekers accessed these types of measures. Typology and participation levels are as follows: professional practice (1 733), internships for young people with higher education (631) and for unemployed people with secondary education (281), acquisition of practical knowledge (628) and training for the labour

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<sup>31</sup> According to the Annual National Report, APZ is the abbreviation for the Action Plan, the basic instrument for the implementation of the active employment policy. [Action Plan 2024–2026 for the Implementation of the Employment Strategy ....pdf](#)

market (1 616). Other programmes include 'Functional basic education of adults', with 1 120 participants.

The overall objectives of the category of LMM 'Additional education and training measures' are to (a) improve the quality of the workforce (i.e. raising the level of competitiveness and employability of unemployed persons on the open labour market); (b) acquire practical knowledge and skills for work, by performing specific jobs for the employer; (c) raise the level of competence, competitiveness and employability of unemployed people by acquiring additional theoretical and practical knowledge and skills for performing tasks within the same or new profession, in accordance with the needs of the labour market and employers, as well as the needs of the person; (d) acquire additional knowledge and skills required for the performance of jobs and tasks with the aim of maintaining employment with the employer; (e) encourage the employment and social inclusion of hard-to-employ persons, i.e. persons without basic education and qualifications; (f) encourage the employment of young people.

As regards the subsidised employment and self-employment measures, the total number of participants was 8 326 in 2023, a slight increase compared to 2022, out of which most were subsidies for the employment of jobseekers from difficult-to-employ groups (3 458 persons) and subsidies for self-employment (4 228 persons). A lower number of beneficiaries came from the group of jobseekers with disabilities. The National Employment Service has implemented these measures in order to encourage the employment of persons from the unemployment register, persons who are difficult to employ and, especially, persons with disabilities. Investment in public works is a measure aiming to support unemployed persons. In 2023, 2 928 people benefited from this measure.

13 844 unemployed people participated in the development of entrepreneurship skills programmes, which included either informative and advisory services in the area of entrepreneurship incentives and support for the establishment of small and medium-sized enterprises, entrepreneurship support, social entrepreneurship and cooperatives, or mentoring, specialist training and assistance to newly-established business entities and beneficiaries of the self-employment subsidy to survive and develop in the first years of business.

As regards ALMP expenditure, two main destinations of expenditure are reported for active labour market measures. The first, and much larger, is Support Programme III (Active Employment Policy). This includes: (1) programmes and measures for active employment policy; (2) programmes and measures for professional rehabilitation and the grant for the encouragement of employment of persons with disabilities from the budget of the Republic of Serbia; (3) programmes and measures for active employment policy from local self-government funds; (4) other employment incentives; (5) support for the NES employment programme (IPA 2013); (6) other projects funded by donations.

In 2023, there were 172 411 job vacancies reported to the NES – twice as many as in 2021. By economic activity, the most significant number of vacancies was reported in (i) information and communication; (ii) manufacturing; and (iii) construction. By occupational groups, most vacancies were reported for ISCO group 2 – Professionals; group 7 – Crafts and related trades workers; and Group 9 – Elementary occupations.

As regards the NES' performance in helping unemployed people move into employ the percentage of females successfully moving to employment was slightly higher in 2021, 2022 and 2023; furthermore, the percentage of people under 30 years old is almost double (66.9%) the percentage of people over 30 years old (35.3%) in 2023. By level of educational attainment, the percentage of registered jobseekers/unemployed people who moved from unemployment into employment is lowest for people with low education (22.8%) and highest for those with tertiary degrees (73.8%).

The age and qualification structure of registered unemployment underlines the need for ever more tailored activation measures and employment-friendly social protection measures. Furthermore, upskilling or reskilling is necessary for first-time jobseekers and for older workers who are most exposed to skill depletion and inadequacy due to labour market and technological changes.

The Education to Employment (E2E) programme is an 8-year partnership project between the Swiss and Serbian governments. This brings together key stakeholders involved in youth employment from the government, the private sector and civil society and promotes the better positioning of young

people in the labour market. The aim is to better match demand and supply via modernisation of youth employment policies, the development of competences in line with private sector demand and the promotion of work-based learning. Several Job Info centres have been opened in Serbia for young jobseekers<sup>32</sup>.

### **Initiatives to increase the capacity of public employment services**

The Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs (MLEVSA) oversees employment policies. The NES is its executive agency. Private employment agencies are also active.

The NES, which has a clear mandate also has a developed monitoring system. However, in an evolving labour market context there is scope for development in a number of areas focused on adapting them to the changing needs of the population and regional variations.

A challenge ahead is the roll out of the Youth Guarantee now under way. The ministries in charge of employment and education affairs and the NES are key institutions for delivery. However, adequate staffing and budgeting still has to be prioritised, in addition to the development of partnerships for implementation with municipalities, youth organisations, trade unions and employers' organisations.

For further information, please contact Gordon Purvis Human Capital Development Expert - Country Liaison for Serbia and Türkiye ETF, email: [gordon.purvis@etf.europa.eu](mailto:gordon.purvis@etf.europa.eu)

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<sup>32</sup> <https://znanjemdoposla.rs/en/post/e2e-opened-additional-three-job-info-centres-in-serbia-for-young-persons>

# STATISTICAL ANNEX – SERBIA

Annex: The Annex includes annual data from 2015, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 or the last available year.

	Indicator	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	
1	Total population (in thousands) <sup>(1)</sup>	7095.4	6945.2	6899.1	6834.3	6664.4	6618.0	
2	Relative size of youth population (age group 15-24 and denominator age 15-64, %) <sup>(1) c</sup>	16.4	16.2	16.0	15.7	15.4	15.4	
3	GDP growth rate (%)	1.8	4.3	-0.9	7.7	2.5	2.5	
4	Gross value added by sector (%)	Agriculture	6.7	6.0	6.3	6.3	6.5	5.2
		Industry	25.8	25.6	24.9	25.0	25.6	26.4
		Services	50.9	51.2	51.9	51.4	52.0	51.2
5	Public expenditure on education (as % of GDP)	M.D.	3.6	M.D.	3.3	M.D.	M.D.	
6	Public expenditure on education (as % of total public expenditure)	M.D.	8.6	M.D.	7.1	M.D.	M.D.	
7	Adult literacy (%)	M.D.	99.5	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	
8	Educational attainment of total population (aged 15+) (%) <sup>(5)(6)</sup>	Low <sup>(2)</sup>	26.7	24.7	24.1	24.7	23.5	22.6
		Medium <sup>(3)</sup>	54.8	55.1	55.5	54.2	55.1	55.2
		High <sup>(4)</sup>	18.5	20.2	20.5	21.2	21.5	22.2
9	Early leavers from education and training (aged 18-24) (%) <sup>(6)</sup>	Total	7.5	6.6	5.6	7.7	5.7	5.8
		Male	7.7	6.5	5.4	8.7	6.5	5.8
		Female	7.2	6.7	5.8	6.6	5.0	5.9
10	Total NET enrolment rate (%)	Lower secondary	99.4	98.7	97.7	97.8	95.4	M.D.
		Upper secondary	90.8	87.2	86.0	86.2	83.8	M.D.
11	Share of VET students in upper secondary education (ISCED level 3) (%)	75.1	73.8	73.5	73.2	72.7	M.D.	
12	Low achievement in reading, mathematics and science – PISA (%) <sup>(7)</sup>	Reading	N.A.	37.7	N.A.	N.A.	36.4	N.A.
		Mathematics	N.A.	39.7	N.A.	N.A.	43.1	N.A.
		Science	N.A.	38.3	N.A.	N.A.	35.1	N.A.
13	Total	51.7	54.6	54.0	53.8	54.7	55.4	

	Indicator		2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
	Activity rate (aged 15+) (%) <sup>(6)</sup>	Male	60.4	62.7	62.0	61.8	62.6	62.7
		Female	43.6	47.1	46.5	46.3	47.3	48.6
14	Inactivity rate (aged 15+) (%) <sup>C(6)</sup>	Total	48.3	45.4	46.0	46.2	45.3	44.6
		Male	39.6	37.3	38.0	38.2	37.4	37.3
		Female	56.4	52.9	53.5	53.7	52.7	51.4
15	Employment rate (aged 15+) (%) <sup>(6)</sup>	Total	42.6	49.0	49.1	47.8	49.5	50.2
		Male	50.3	56.6	56.6	55.5	56.9	57.0
		Female	35.4	41.9	42.1	40.7	42.5	43.8
16	Employment rate by educational attainment (aged 15+) (%) <sup>(5)(6)</sup>	Low <sup>(2)</sup>	29.6	34.8	34.0	29.0	29.6	30.1
		Medium <sup>(3)</sup>	49.3	55.9	56.6	55.9	57.0	57.7
		High <sup>(4)</sup>	63.2	70.5	69.6	71.0	74.1	74.6
17	Employment by sector (%) <sup>C(6)(8)</sup>	Agriculture	19.4	15.6	14.6	14.2	13.9	13.1
		Industry	24.5	27.4	28.0	29.6	29.7	29.4
		Services	56.1	56.9	57.5	56.2	56.4	57.4
18	Incidence of self-employment (%) <sup>C(6)</sup>		30,2	27.7	27.0	22.7	22.4	22.2
19	Incidence of vulnerable employment (%) <sup>C(6)</sup>		26,3	24.3	23.9	19.2	18.8	18.5
20	Unemployment rate (aged 15+) (%) <sup>(5)(6)</sup>	Total	17.8	10.5	9.1	11.2	9.6	9.5
		Male	16.9	10.0	8.8	10.3	9.1	9.1
		Female	18.8	11.2	9.5	12.2	10.1	9.9
21	Unemployment rate by educational attainment (aged 15+) (%) <sup>(5)(6)</sup>	Low <sup>(2)</sup>	15.6	11.2	9.1	14.1	12.7	13.0
		Medium <sup>(3)</sup>	19.4	11.2	9.6	11.7	10.5	10.0
		High <sup>(4)</sup>	15.3	8.4	8.0	8.5	6.1	6.8
22	Unemployment rate (aged 15-24) (%) <sup>(6)</sup>	Total	43.2	27.5	26.6	26.0	24.3	25.0
		Male	40.1	26.1	25.0	24.2	23.3	23.8
		Female	48.4	29.9	29.5	28.9	26.0	27.0
23	Proportion of people aged 15-24 not in employment, education or training (NEETs) (%) <sup>(6)(9)</sup>	Total	20.1	15.3	15.9	17.0	13.3	12.4
		Male	20.3	14.9	17.0	17.1	13.4	12.7
		Female	19.8	15.8	14.8	17.0	13.3	12.2

	Indicator		2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
	Proportion of people aged 15-29 not in employment, education or training (NEETs) (%) <sup>(6)(9)</sup>	Total	24.6	19.0	20.0	19.1	15.4	15.2
		Male	23.0	17.1	18.4	17.3	13.4	14.0
		Female	26.2	20.9	21.6	21.0	17.5	16.6
24	Participation in training/lifelong learning (% aged 25-64) <sup>(10)</sup>	Total	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	12.4	M.D.
		Male	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	10.7	M.D.
		Female	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	M.D.	14.1	M.D.
25	Human Development Index		0.794	0.812	0.806	0.804	0.805	M.D.

Last update: 19/08/2024

#### Sources:

Indicators 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7: The World Bank, World Development Indicators database

Indicators 10, 11: UNESCO, Institute for Statistics

Indicators 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 (2015-2020), 24: Eurostat

Indicator 12: OECD PISA 2018 Results (Volume I) Annex B1; OECD PISA 2022 Results (Volume I)

Indicators 23 (2021-2023), 24: LFS SORS

Indicator 25: UNDP

#### Notes:

(1) Estimation.

(2) Low – ISCED 0-2

(3) Medium – ISCED 3-4

(4) High – ISCED 5-8

(5) refers to age group 15-74

(6) 2021: break in time series

(7) PISA: 2019 refers to 2018

(8) Totals do not add to 100 due to economic activities not allocated by sector; Services (TOTAL and FEMALE) do not include "Activities of extraterritorial organizations and bodies; Services (MALE) do not include "Activities of extraterritorial organizations and bodies".

(9) Please be advised that data for 2021-2023 are calculated in regard to the method used in Eurostat databases as requested by the user. Data for these particular years are given because the data is revised and unavailable on Eurostat website. Data for the previous years are available on the Eurostat website and as such can be downloaded - see edat\_ifse\_21 and edat\_ifse\_20.

(10) Data only available on even years, from 2022

#### Key:

C = ETF calculations

N.A. = Not Applicable

M.D. = Missing Data

## ANNEX: DEFINITIONS OF INDICATORS

	Description	Definition
1	Total population (in thousands)	The total population is estimated as the number of people having their usual residence in a country on 1 January of the respective year. When information on the usually resident population is not available, countries may report legal or registered residents.
2	Relative size of youth population (age group 15–24) (%)	This is the ratio of the youth population (aged 15–24) to the working-age population, usually aged 15–64 (or 15–74 or 15+).
3	GDP growth rate (%)	Annual percentage growth rate of GDP at market prices based on constant local currency. Aggregates are based on constant 2010 U.S. dollars. GDP is the sum of gross value added by all resident producers in the economy plus any product taxes and minus any subsidies not included in the value of the products. It is calculated without making deductions for depreciation of fabricated assets or for depletion and degradation of natural resources.
4	Gross value added by sector (%)	The share of value added from Agriculture, Industry and Services. Agriculture corresponds to ISIC divisions 1–5 and includes forestry, hunting, and fishing, as well as cultivation of crops and livestock production. Value added is the net output of a sector after adding up all outputs and subtracting intermediate inputs. It is calculated without making deductions for depreciation of fabricated assets or depletion and degradation of natural resources. The origin of value added is determined by the International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC), revision 3 or 4. Industry corresponds to the International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC) tabulation categories C-F (revision 3) or tabulation categories B-F (revision 4), and includes mining and quarrying (including oil production), manufacturing, construction, and public utilities (electricity, gas, and water). Services correspond to ISIC divisions 50-99 and they include value added in wholesale and retail trade (including hotels and restaurants), transport, and government, financial, professional, and personal services such as education, health care, and real estate services. Also included are imputed bank service charges, import duties, and any statistical discrepancies noted by national compilers as well as discrepancies arising from rescaling.
5	Public expenditure on education (as % of GDP)	Public expenditure on education expressed as a percentage of GDP. Generally, the public sector funds education either by directly bearing the current and capital expenses of educational institutions, or by supporting students and their families with scholarships and public loans as well as by transferring public subsidies for educational activities to private firms or non-profit organisations (transfer to private households and enterprises). Both types of transactions together are reported as total public expenditure on education.
6	Public expenditure on education (as % of total public expenditure)	Public expenditure on education expressed as a percentage of total public expenditure. Generally, the public sector funds education either by directly bearing the current and capital expenses of educational institutions, or by supporting students and their families with scholarships and public loans as well as by transferring public subsidies for educational activities to private firms or non-profit organisations (transfer to private households and enterprises). Both types of transactions together are reported as total public expenditure on education.
7	Adult literacy (%)	Adult literacy is the percentage of the population aged 15 years and over who can both read and write a short simple statement on his/her everyday life, and understand it. Generally, 'literacy' also encompasses 'numeracy' – the ability to make simple arithmetic calculations.
8	Educational attainment of total population (aged 15+) (%)	Educational attainment refers to the highest educational level achieved by individuals expressed as a percentage of all persons in that age group.

	Description	Definition
		This is usually measured in terms of the highest educational programme successfully completed, which is typically certified by a recognised qualification. Recognised intermediate qualifications are classified at a lower level than the programme itself.
9	Early leavers from education and training (aged 18-24) (%)	Early leavers from education and training are defined as the percentage of the population aged 18–24 with at most lower secondary education who were not in further education or training during the four weeks preceding the survey. Lower secondary education refers to ISCED 1997 levels 0–2 and 3C short (i.e. programmes lasting under two years) for data up to 2013 and to ISCED 2011 levels 0–2 for data from 2014 onwards.
10	Total NET enrolment rate	Total number of students of the official age group for a given level of education who are enrolled in any level of education, expressed as a percentage of the corresponding population.
11	Share of VET students in upper secondary education (ISCED level 3) (%)	Total number of students enrolled in vocational programmes at a given level of education (in this case, upper secondary), expressed as a percentage of the total number of students enrolled in all programmes (vocational and general) at that level.
12	Low achievement in reading, maths and science – PISA (%)	Low achievers are the 15-year-olds who are failing to reach level 2 on the PISA scale for reading, mathematics and science.
13	Activity rate (aged 15+) (%)	The activity rate is calculated by dividing the active population by the population of the same age group. The active population (also called 'labour force') is defined as the sum of employed and unemployed people. The inactive population consists of all people who are classified as neither employed nor unemployed.
14	Inactivity rate (aged 15+) (%)	The inactivity/out of the labour force rate is calculated by dividing the inactive population by the population of the same age group. The inactive population consists of all people who are classified as neither employed nor unemployed.
15	Employment rate (aged 15+) (%)	The employment rate is calculated by dividing the number of employed people by the population of the same age group. Employed people are all people who worked at least one hour for pay or profit during the reference period or were temporarily absent from such work. If a different age group is used, this should be indicated.
16	Employment rate by educational attainment (aged 15+) (%)	The employment rate is calculated by dividing the number of employed persons by the population of the same age group. Employed persons are all persons who worked at least one hour for pay or profit during the reference period or were temporarily absent from such work. If a different age group is used, this should be indicated. Educational levels refer to the highest educational level successfully completed. Three levels are considered: Low (ISCED level 0–2), Medium (ISCED level 3–4) and High (ISCED 1997 level 5–6, and ISCED 2011 level 5–8).
17	Employment by sector (%)	This indicator provides information on the relative importance of different economic activities with regard to employment. Data are presented by broad branches of economic activity (i.e. Agriculture/Industry/Services) based on the International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC). In Europe, the NACE classification is consistent with ISIC.
18	Incidence of self-employment (%)	The incidence of self-employment is expressed by the self-employed (i.e. employers + own-account workers + contributing family workers) as a proportion of the total employed.
19	Incidence of vulnerable employment (%)	The incidence of vulnerable employment is expressed by the own-account workers and contributing family workers as a proportion of the total employed.
20	Unemployment rate (aged 15+) (%)	The unemployment rate represents unemployed people as a percentage of the labour force. The labour force is the total number of people who are employed or

	Description	Definition
		unemployed. Unemployed people comprise those aged 15–64 or 15+ who were without work during the reference week; are currently available for work (were available for paid employment or self-employment before the end of the two weeks following the reference week); are actively seeking work, i.e. had taken specific steps in the four-week period ending with the reference week to seek paid employment or self-employment, or had found a job to start later (within a period of, at most, three months).
21	Unemployment rate by educational attainment (aged 15+) (%)	The unemployment rate represents unemployed people as a percentage of the labour force. The labour force is the total number of people who are employed or unemployed. Unemployed people comprise those aged 15–64 or 15+ who were without work during the reference week; are currently available for work (were available for paid employment or self-employment before the end of the two weeks following the reference week); are actively seeking work (had taken specific steps in the four-week period ending with the reference week to seek paid employment or self-employment, or had found a job to start later (within a period of, at most, three months)). Educational levels refer to the highest educational level successfully completed. Three levels are considered: low (ISCED level 0–2), medium (ISCED level 3–4) and high (ISCED 1997 level 5–6, and ISCED 2011 level 5–8).
22	Unemployment rate (aged 15-24) (%)	The unemployment rate represents unemployed people as a percentage of the labour force. The labour force is the total number of people who are employed or unemployed. Unemployed people comprise those aged 15–24 who were without work during the reference week; are currently available for work (were available for paid employment or self-employment before the end of the two weeks following the reference week); are actively seeking work, i.e. had taken specific steps in the four-week period ending with the reference week to seek paid employment or self-employment, or had found a job to start later (within a period of, at most, three months).
23	Proportion of people aged 15–24/15-29 not in employment, education or training (NEETs) (%)	The indicator provides information on young people aged 15–24 who meet the following two conditions: first, they are not employed (i.e. unemployed or inactive according to the ILO definition); and second, they have not received any education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey. Data are expressed as a percentage of the total population of the same age group and gender, excluding the respondents who have not answered the question on participation in education and training.
24	Participation in training/lifelong learning (% aged 25-64)	Participants in lifelong learning refers to persons aged 25–64 who stated that they received education or training in the 12 months preceding the survey (numerator). The denominator is the total population of the same age group, excluding those who did not answer the question on participation in education and training. The information collected relates to all education or training, whether or not it is relevant to the respondent's current or possible future job. If a different reference period is used, this should be indicated.
25	Human Development Index	The index is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living.

# STATISTICAL ANNEX 2 – SERBIA – Labour Market Policies – Indicators

## 2023 update

This fact sheet includes an overview of the main trends in the implementation of Active Labour Market policies and key indicators pertaining to the Public Employment Service (PES). It provides a summary of data through tables and visual representations, along with definitions and outlines of existing trends.

The key indicators are the number of registered unemployed persons by sex, age and education; participants in counselling activities; participants in labour market measures; expenditure on labour market policies; transition from unemployment to employment; number of job vacancies by major occupational groups and economic activities. Where applicable and available, datasets are disaggregated by sex, age and level of education.

The document was prepared using data collected by ETF from public sources (websites of PES, ministries of labour, statistical offices and/or shared by relevant country institutions).

## Number of registered unemployed persons

**Definition:** registered unemployed persons are all persons who are registered with the Public Employment Services and do not have a job, excluding other categories of persons wanting to change jobs (e.g. employees) or who are not actively looking for a job (inactive). Data refer to registered unemployed persons at the end of the year (reference period); it is an accumulated number, meaning the sum of the number of unemployed persons as of 1 January and the number of registered persons for each month.

As per the applicable definition in Serbia, an unemployed person is a person aged between 15 and the age eligible for retirement (or 65 at most), capable and immediately ready to work, who has not entered into an employment contract or exercised the right to work in any other way, who is on the unemployment register and who is actively looking for a job.

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Unemployed persons (total)	529 508	509 179	512 844	448 618
Male	242 636	227 960	227 521	197 204
Female	286 872	281 219	285 323	251 414
under 30 years	109 573	105 819	105 959	88 241
30 + years	419 934	403 360	406 885	360 378
Low level of education includes: 1) without education; 2) 1-3 grades of primary education; 3) 4-7 grades of primary education; 4) primary education (8 years).	160 455	155 584	158 892	143 118
Lower secondary education lasting 1-2 years;	17 569	16 056	15 619	13 468
Lower secondary education lasting 3 years;	113 948	106 924	106 392	91 742
Upper secondary education lasting 4 years;	156 778	152 053	155 146	136 305
Specialisation after secondary education, school for highly qualified workers;	3 471	3 188	2 999	2 494

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Applied higher education (2-3 years)	15 421	14 153	13 495	11 284
Applied higher education (3 years); first level of university	12 523	12 643	12 705	10 772
University, academy, integrated studies (medicine, pharmacy, stomatology and veterinary science)	48 556	47 823	46 876	38 806
Academic Masters studies	625	593	557	471
Academic Doctoral studies	163	162	164	160
Low educational attainment	178 023	171 639	174 511	156 585
Medium educational attainment	274 197	262 165	264 537	230 541
High education attainment	77 287	75 374	73 796	61 492

Source: National Employment Service of the Republic of Serbia <https://nsz.gov.rs/>

Note: Annual average data (the sum of all values reported in a twelve-month period divided by 12).

## Participants in labour market services

**Definition:** Labour market services refer to labour market services where the participants' main activity is related to job seeking and where participation usually does not result in a change of labour market status. Within this scope of data collection, job matching and counselling were taken into account. Data refer to registered unemployed persons and jobseekers at the end of the year (reference period).

### Participants in job brokerage

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Job brokerage at the request of the employer - Total	119 950	82 295	107 667	231 725
Job brokerage at the request of the employer (online)	25 889	19 968	29 501	67 222
Job brokerage at the request of the employer (in person),	94 061	62 327	78 166	164 503
Low educational attainment	31 688	19 211	26 043	40 588
Medium educational attainment	50 989	34 655	41 209	99 455
High educational attainment	11 384	8 461	10 914	24 460
Employment counselling	1 005 288	910 786	1 047 659	893 238
Individual employment plan	898 167	855 095	1 025 251	885 002

Source: National Employment Service of the Republic of Serbia <https://nsz.gov.rs/>

## Participants in orientation and counselling services

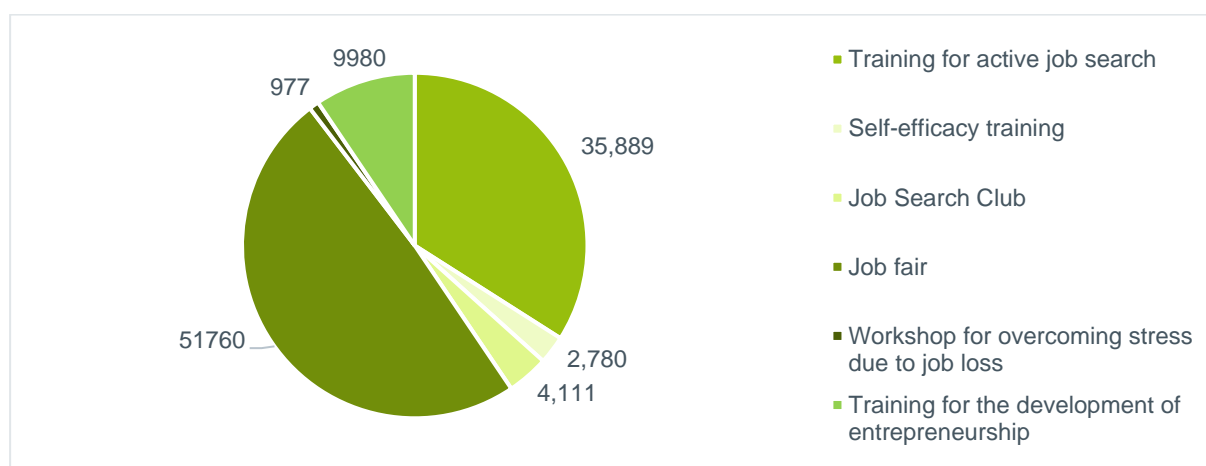
Professional orientation and counselling on career planning	2019	2020	2021	2022
Professional orientation and counselling on career planning - Total	100 682	137 178	119 345	99 868
Professional orientation and counselling on career planning - Total not including online	28 481	32 033	24 856	26 841
Male	9 859	8 708	6 558	8 200
Female	18 622	23 325	18 298	18 641
Under 29 years	15 567	13 312	11 773	13 470
29 + years	12 914	18 721	13 083	13 371
Low educational attainment	10 841	6 607	7 976	9 411
Medium educational attainment	9 977	9 284	7 977	8 976
High educational attainment	7 663	16 142	8 903	8 454
Information about opportunities for career development	7 605	5 775	5 700	6 338
Counselling on opportunities for career development	10 692	6 920	8 479	9 976
Selection for employment and inclusion in APZ measures	10 184	19 338	10 677	10 527
Information about opportunities for career development (online)	72 201	105 145	94 489	73 027

Source: National Employment Service of the Republic of Serbia <https://nsz.gov.rs/>

## Participants in labour market measures

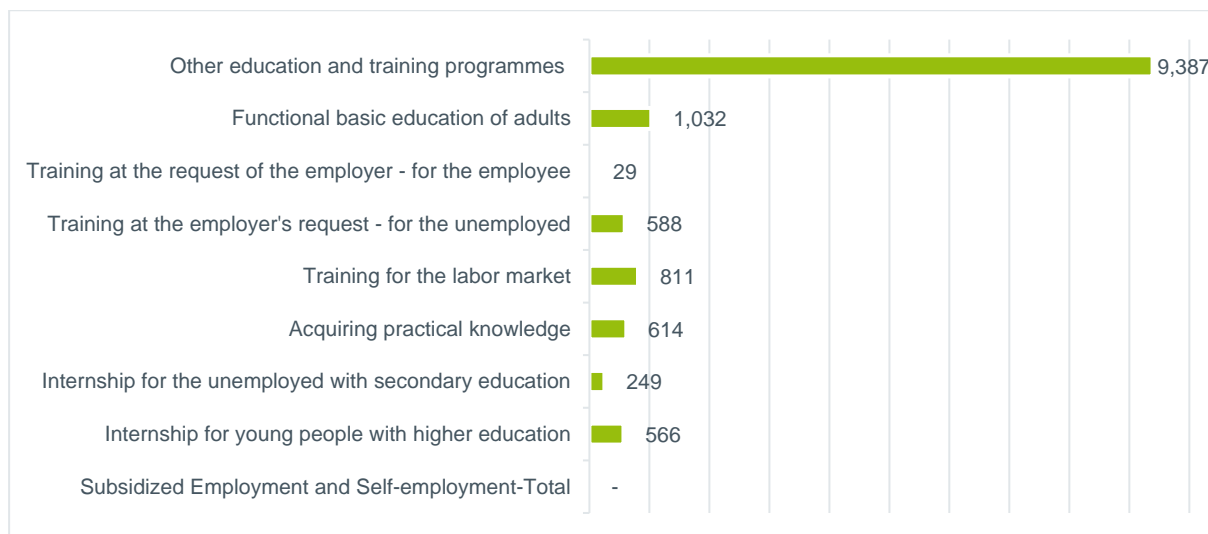
**Definition: Labour market measures (LMM)** cover services that provide temporary support for groups that are disadvantaged in the labour market and which aim to get the unemployed into work, help people move from involuntary inactivity into employment, or maintain the jobs of persons threatened by unemployment. Such measures include training, employment incentives, supported employment and rehabilitation, direct job creation and start-up incentives.

### Participants in active job search measures, 2022



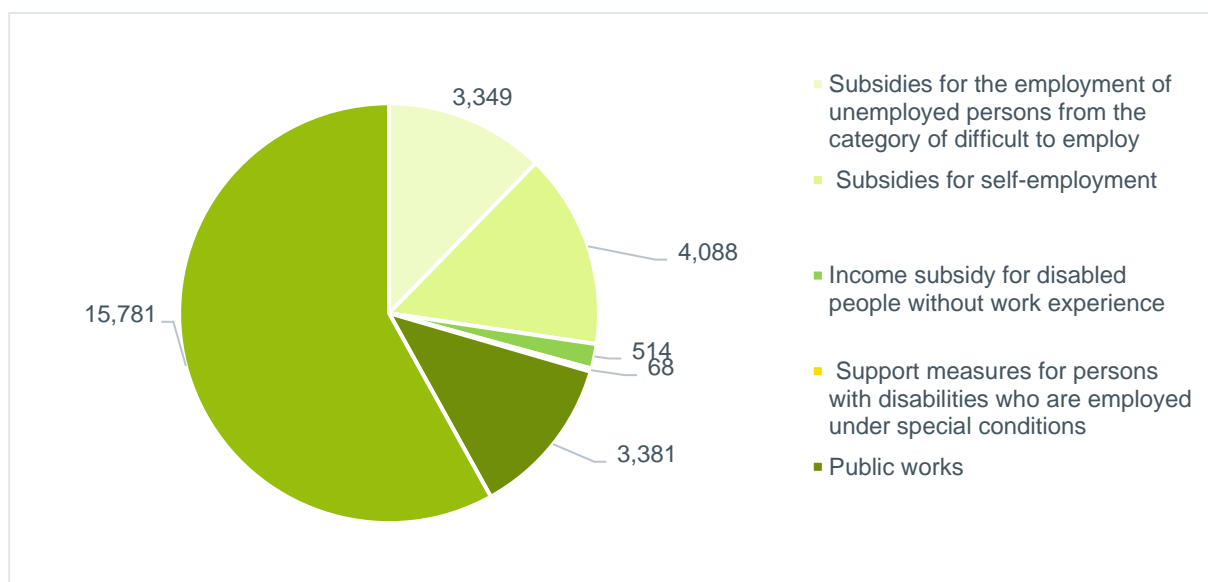
Source: National Employment Service of the Republic of Serbia <https://nsz.gov.rs/>

## Participants in additional education and training programmes, 2022



Source: National Employment Service of the Republic of Serbia <https://nsz.gov.rs/>

## Participants in subsidised employment and self-employment; public work, incentives for employment and development of entrepreneurship, 2022



## Expenditure on labour market policies

**Definition:** Expenditure on labour market policies is limited to public services that are explicitly targeted at groups of persons with difficulties in the labour market: the unemployed, the employed at risk of involuntary job loss and inactive persons who would like to enter the labour market.

Within the scope of this data collection process, the LMP (labour market policies) expenditure indicator refers to the cost of LM services (LMS) and measures (LMM). Expenditure on LMP support (such as unemployment benefits) are excluded.

Expenses and expenditure incurred during the year	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total expenditure of NES	22 600 067 697.88	21 329 011 061.93	26 543 919 082.87	23 407 249 296.37
SUPPORT PROGRAMME III: Active Employment Policy	4 671 208 170.28	4 301 234 472.31	5 775 684 457.49	6 846 782 098.05
Programmes and measures of active employment policy	3 151 278 654	3 076 531 696	4 529 229 484	5 420 088 412
GDP at current prices, amount in millions (data extracted from World Bank)	5 421 851.30	5 504 430.6	6 270 096.9	m
Total expenses and expenditure incurred during the year (% of GDP) c)	0.42	0.39	0.42	m
SUPPORT PROGRAMME III: Active Employment Policy (% of GDP) c)	0.09	0.08	0.09	m
Programmes and measures of active employment policy (% of GDP) c)	0.06	0.06	0.07	m

Source: National Employment Service of the Republic of Serbia (expenditure of the agency) and National Statistical Office (GDP data)

## Transition from unemployment to employment

Definition: Number of registered unemployed persons who moved from unemployment into employment per age group and gender, as a share of the number of registered unemployed persons.

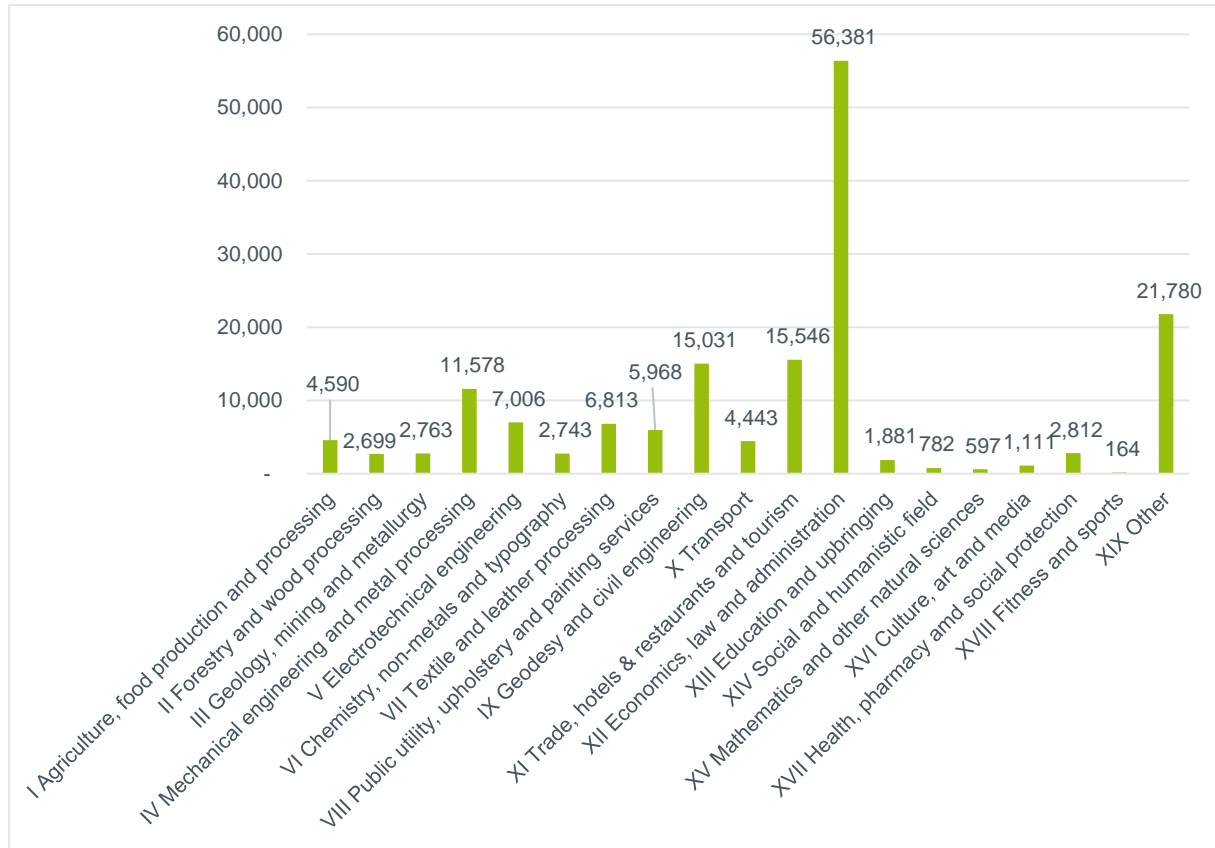
%	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total	46.0	40.9	43.0	44.1
Male	46.1	41.1	42.1	41.7
Female	45.9	40.7	43.8	46.0
Under 30 years	71.1	64.3	68.5	70.0
30 + years	39.4	34.7	36.4	37.8
Low educational attainment	26.1	22.4	23.1	22.9
Medium educational attainment	51.2	46.1	47.0	48.2
High educational attainment	73.1	64.6	75.7	82.9

Source: National Employment Service of the Republic of Serbia <https://nsz.gov.rs/>

## Number of job vacancies

**Definition:** A **job vacancy** is a post, either newly created, unoccupied, or about to become vacant, which an employer actively seeks to fill with a suitable candidate from outside the enterprise (including any further necessary steps), immediately or in the near future. Although the definition states that a job vacancy should be open to candidates from outside the enterprise, this does not exclude the possibility of appointing an internal candidate to the post. A post that is open to internal candidates only, however, is not considered a job vacancy.

### Number of registered vacancies by economic activity, 2022



Source: National Employment Service of the Republic of Serbia <https://nsz.gov.rs/>

Note: Registered vacancies refer to the number of persons for whom employers reported the need for job-matching services in the reporting period.

The data presented are cumulative data (registered vacancies during the year) and the annual data are calculated using the monthly data present in the statistical bulletins.

# KEY DONOR PROJECTS IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Donor funding is key to filling resource gaps and also opportunities in Serbia's education, training, and employment sectors.

The EU Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) provides financial and technical resources to enhance skills for employment and support education reforms. Serbian financial assistance under education, employment and social policies and other areas of support will be fully supported. It is well noted that there are also multi-country programmes. It is also noted that within the Growth Plan and Reform Agenda new funds may be made available in the future. More detailed information under the IPA 2021-2027 can be found here: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/serbia-financial-assistance-under-ipa\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/serbia-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en).

The European Investment Bank (EIB) has invited in the School Digitalisation Project in Serbia ([EIB supports digitalisation of Serbian schools with EUR 65 million](#)). The investment will encompass the introduction into schools of internet connections, new IT equipment, e-books, e-classrooms, and e-diaries. It will also include the training of teachers on how to conduct digital education. This project will enable primary and secondary schools across Serbia to conduct online teaching without interruption, including in situations of natural or other disasters. The EIB financial package will also be used to finance the rollout of the EU SELFIE tool for the further digitalisation of school based and work-based learning. The European Bank for Reconstruction is also active through programmes in access to skills and finance, especially related to the green and digital transitions, as well as through targeted programmes with partner commercial banks to support women- and youth-led enterprises.

'From Education to Employment (E2E)' is a 2015 Swiss-funded project which is still ongoing. It is designed to create preconditions for faster recruitment and youth employment. Under this project, EUR 12.3 million has been made available and the Serbian Government has contributed EUR 6 million. ([EN E2E Znanjem do posla](#)).

GIZ (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH*) supports skills for employment in a range of activities, notably via the ongoing programme entitled 'Dialogue on Employment Creation, Initiative and Dual Education / Sustainable Economic Growth and Employment', and provides direct support to VET schools and the private sector in Serbia (<https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/86542.html>).

UNICEF Serbia, in cooperation with the NES, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs and other partners, implemented a programme on 'Promoting Youth Employability through Internships', running from 1 November 2021 until the end of 2022. The programme aimed to build links between at least 2,000 young people and 500 employers. The platform 'Biram uspeh (I Choose Success) – Promoting Youth Employability' is available at [www.biramuspeh.com](http://www.biramuspeh.com).

The *Western Balkans Fund (WBF)* is an international organisation located in Tirana, Albania, which was founded by the governments of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo<sup>33</sup>, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. They co-fund with the EU many country/regional projects on skills. One of the pillars of this substantial programme funds VET support, exchange and cooperation among the Western Balkan countries. For more information, see the [WBF Flyer: https://webalkans.eu/en/about/](https://webalkans.eu/en/about/)

The [Regional Challenge Fund \(RCF\) \(rcf-wb6.org\)](http://rcf-wb6.org) finances investments for training providers that jointly engage in cooperative training activities with partnering enterprises in the Western Balkans, thus promoting dual cooperation within and across countries in the region. Established in late 2020, the RCF launched its first two open funding calls in 2021 and 2022, which are expected to operate for five years in total. Another one was launched during 2024. The goals of the RCF call are to strengthen

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<sup>33</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

the labour market relevance of VET, as well as to increase the employability of VET students by bridging the gap between skills demand and supply, reducing youth unemployment in the Western Balkans.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ALMP	Active labour market policy
APZ	Abbreviation of the annual report on employment in Serbian language
CEB	Council of Europe Development Bank
Cedefop	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CLASSNQFS	Classification of Qualifications System in NQFS
COVID_19	Corona Virus Pandemic
CVET	Continuous vocational education and training
E2E	Education to Employment
EAFA	European Alliance for Apprenticeships
EC	European Commission
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EIB	European Investment Bank
EMIS	Education management information system
ENIC/NARIC	Qualifications recognition system
ENQA	European Qualifications Framework
EQAVET	European Framework for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training
ERP	Economic Reform Programme
ESJS	European Skills and Jobs Survey
ETF	European Training Foundation
ETFP	Technical Education and Vocational Training ( <i>Enseignement Technique et Formation Professionnelle</i> )
EU	European Union
EURYDICE	Education Information Network in Europe
FSA	Financial Social Assistance scheme
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIZ	<i>Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH</i>
GVA	Gross value added
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IIE	Institute for Improvement of Education
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund

IPA	Instrument of Pre-Accession
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
ISIC	International Standard Industrial Classification
IT	Information Technology
LDE	Law on Dual Education
LFS	Labour force surveys
LM	Labour market
LMM	Labour market measures
LMP	Labour market policies
LMS	Labour market services
LSE	Law on Secondary Education
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MLEVSA	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs
MoE	Ministry of Education
NEET	Not in employment, education or training
NES	National Employment Service
NQFS	National Qualification Framework of Serbia
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PES	<i>Public Employment Service</i>
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
QS	Qualification standards
RCF	Regional Challenge Fund
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RS	Serbia (Republic of Serbia)
SEDS 2030	Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2030
SELFIE	Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the Use of Innovative Education
SILC	Survey of Income and Living Conditions
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SORS	Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia
SQA	Serbian Qualification Agency
SSCs	Sector Skills Councils
UEN	Unique Educational Number

UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VET-OD	VET and Osnabrück Declaration
VNFIL	Validation of non-formal and informal learning
WB	World Bank
WBF	Western Balkans Fund
WBL	Work-Based Learning
WIIW	Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies
YG	Youth Guarantee

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