

LABOUR MARKET (RE-)INTEGRATION AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES – SERBIA

Country note

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Manuscript completed in February 2026.

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When citing this report, please use the following wording:

European Training Foundation (2026), *Labour market (re)integration and skills development for persons with disabilities – Serbia*, Turin

CONTENTS

CONTENTS	3
PREFACE	5
1. CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES	6
2. STRATEGIC AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK	8
2.1 Institutional framework	8
2.2 Coordination and cooperation mechanisms	8
2.3 Legislative framework	9
2.4 Strategic framework	11
2.5 Sources of financing	12
3. POLICIES SUPPORTING THE EMPLOYABILITY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES	14
3.1 Services supporting the employability of persons with disabilities	14
3.2 Measures supporting the employability of persons with disabilities	15
3.3 Measures addressing the needs of war veterans	18
3.4 Enhancing the capacity of main stakeholders	18
3.5 Best practices	19
4. POLICIES SUPPORTING DEMAND FOR THE EMPLOYMENT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES	20
4.1 Quota system	20
4.2 Self-employment grant	20
4.3 Wage subsidy for persons with disabilities without work experience	20
4.4 Subsidy for hiring hard-to-employ individuals	21
4.5 Reimbursement of workplace support costs	21
4.6 Exemption from mandatory social insurance	23
4.7 Special types of employment and work engagement	23
5. LINKS BETWEEN EMPLOYMENT AND OTHER POLICY AREAS	25
5.1 From school to the labour market	25
5.2 How social benefits support the employment of persons with disabilities	25
5.3 Access to social services	26
5.4 Accessibility	26
5.5 Gender dimension of policies supporting the employment of persons with disabilities	27
6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	28
6.1 Conclusions	28
6.2 Recommendations	29
ANNEX	32
List of interviewees and organisations	32

ACRONYMS	33
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REFERENCES	35
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PREFACE

The Country Note presents the situation in Serbia related to labour market (re-)integration and skills development for persons with disabilities with special attention on the role of Active Labour Market Policy and Measures.

The European Training Foundation (ETF) initiated a mapping of policies and programmes for labour market (re-)integration and skills development for persons with disabilities in several Partner countries, in response to the European Union's priority to foster social inclusion and economic autonomy of persons with disabilities through employment, as per priorities set out in the EU Disability Employment Package.

The main objectives were to conduct a systemic, comparative policy analysis of the support for employment of persons with disabilities and to identify needs for strengthening the capacity of actors in selected EU neighbouring countries.

The analysis was conducted in accordance with the framework proposed by the EU Disability Employment Package, with a particular focus on Active Labour Market Policies and skills development dimensions.

In Serbia, the methodology consisted of desk review and face-to-face and online interviews with main stakeholders active in the area of promotion of employment and inclusion of persons with disabilities.

1. CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

In 2023, Serbia counted 6.6 million inhabitants, of which 51.4% were women¹, with an average population age of 43.9 years. The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (RZS) reports that the population of Serbia is ageing and has been shrinking consistently since 2002. In 2023, men aged 45–49 years and women aged 65–69 years accounted for the largest shares of the overall population.

Serbia is an upper-middle income country². In 2024, its GDP per capita stood at 25 596 (PPP, constant 2021 international \$)³, with a very high human development index⁴. Total employment among 20–64 year-olds reached 69.6% in 2023⁵, while the unemployment rate among this group fell to 9.5%⁶.

According to the 2022 census, the country was home to 356 404 persons with disabilities (PwD), representing 5.46% of the population. In comparison, the 2011 census recorded 571 780 persons with disabilities, or 7.95% of the population. This decrease of 38% is likely attributable to changes in the methodology⁷.

According to Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) for Serbia for 2022, 12.3% of the population reported activity limitation due to some level of disability⁸. Almost half were experiencing poverty or social exclusion (45%) and nearly one third were living in severe material and social deprivation (29.7%).

The majority of people with some level of disability were excluded from the labour market, with the inactivity rate amounting to 75%, compared with the EU-27 average of 45%. Among those who were active, 19% were unemployed, in contrast to 9.4% in the EU-27 (Labour Force Survey). The disability employment gap in Serbia was 35.8 percentage points in 2022 (compared to 21.4 percentage points in the EU)⁹. There are no publicly available national sources on the employment or unemployment of persons with disabilities, although the competent authorities could generate such administrative data through the Central Register of Mandatory Social Insurance. While the RZS regularly publishes statistics on the number of employed persons, these are not disaggregated by disability.

In December 2023, 387 764 individuals were registered in the NES registry of unemployed persons, of which 17 054 (4.4%) were persons with disabilities (42.4% of them women), 11 494 of whom reported actively looking for a job (the registry differentiates between persons actively looking for a job and those who are temporarily unable to work for different reasons). It is assumed that the number of persons with disabilities who are unemployed and unregistered is much higher than the number of persons with disabilities on the NES registry. To get registered as a job seeker with the NES and be considered as an active jobseeker, a person needs to fulfil several requirements, such as not declining

¹ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2023), 'Procenjeni broj stanovnika 2023' (Assessed number of inhabitants 2023), available at: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/vesti/statisticalrelease/?p=15196&a=18&s=1801?s=1801>.

² The World Bank Group (2023), World Bank Open Data. Accessed 23 June 2023 at: <https://data.worldbank.org/>.

³ World Bank Group (2023), World Bank Open Data, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.KD?locations=RS>.

⁴ United Nations Development Programme (2020), 'Human Development Report 2020: The Next Frontier Human Development and the Anthropocene'.

⁵ 15–29-year-olds 40.2%, 55–64-year-olds 56.7%.

⁶ EUROSTAT (n.d.), European Commission Database, accessed 10 December 2024 at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/data/database>.

⁷ According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, the questionnaire regarding disability was created following the set of questions of the Washington Group on Disability Statistics.

⁸ EU-SILC collects annual data on long-standing activity limitation due to health problems and makes it possible to monitor poverty, social inclusion and living conditions of persons with disabilities through the Global Activity Limitation Instrument (GALI).

⁹ EUROSTAT (2024), 'Disability employment gap by level of activity limitation and sex (European Commission)', accessed on 10 December 2024 at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tepsr_sp200/default/table?lang=en&category=tepsr.tepsr_spi.tepsr_spi_hi.

offers of job, education or training; personally reaching out to the NES at least once every three months and responding to all their calls; and participating in active labour market measures.

Commenting on the likely discrepancy between the actual number of unemployed persons with disabilities and those on the NES registry, a NES representative stated that 'the number of persons with disabilities is much higher but that they do not apply to the NES for some reason', while according to a representative of a social enterprise, persons with disabilities often perceive the NES as unable to provide effective support due to rather restrictive approaches and limited proactivity.

2. STRATEGIC AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Institutional framework

The **Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs** (MOLEVSA) is responsible for managing employment relations and workplace rights across all forms of employment (except in government, local administration, public agencies and public services) and ensuring health and safety in the workplace. The Ministry administers social protection, integrates persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, and oversees pension and disability insurance systems.

The Ministry has a **Department for the Protection of Persons with Disabilities**, which creates and manages policies related to persons with disabilities. It issues licences for enterprises involved in the rehabilitation and employment of persons with disabilities and distributes budgetary financial assistance to those enterprises. The Department also distributes budgetary resources for promoting the employment of persons with disabilities.

The MOLEVSA **Department for Work and Employment** is responsible, for developing labour and employment policies, fostering social dialogue and collective bargaining, monitoring the National Employment Service and employment agencies, and assisting in the work of the Republic Employment Council.

Centres for Social Work (CSWs) are social protection institutions established by local governments. They decide on entitlement to social protection benefits and services, and also provide some social services. Although they are one of the most significant institutions in Serbia's social protection system, they have no role in the policies supporting employment of persons with disabilities.

The National Employment Service (NES) was established by the Law on Employment and Unemployment Insurance, which outlines its responsibilities¹⁰. The NES implements ALMPs, although all policy decisions regarding ALMPs are made by the MOLEVSA. The NES also manage unemployment insurance, granting entitlements and maintaining employment records¹¹. Interviewees working in the NES emphasised issues with staffing shortages, especially outside major cities, which limits the NES's capacity to support persons with disabilities. The findings suggest that the NES's advisors on the employment of persons with disabilities handle excessive caseloads, which compromises service quality.

Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) are non-profit organisations, representing and managed by persons with disabilities. They do not have a public mandate in relation to the employment of persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, many persons with disabilities find employment in such organisations. OPDs serve as indispensable sources of knowledge and expertise regarding the needs and challenges that persons with disabilities encounter in the labour market and can also offer employment support services for persons with disabilities, as demonstrated by the Youth with Disabilities Forum (YDF) (in Serbian, Forum mladih sa invaliditetom - FMI)¹².

2.2 Coordination and cooperation mechanisms

The **Republic Employment Council** is an advisory body re-established in 2019 to support the government in developing employment policies, including ALMPs¹³. The Council had not been active

¹⁰ Law on Employment and Unemployment Insurance (2021). *Official Gazette RS*, No 36/2009, last amend. 49/2021).

¹¹ Article 8 of the Law on Employment and Unemployment Insurance.

¹² See section 10.2 "Best practices".

¹³ Decision on the Establishment of the Republic Employment Council (*Official Gazette RS*, No 46/2019).

for 11 years, between 2008 and 2019. It is made up of government representatives, trade unions, the NES, associations operating in the field of employment and other experts.

The **Council for Persons with Disabilities** is an advisory body that was last appointed in 2019 for a period of four years¹⁴. It supports the government on issues pertaining to the social and economic well-being of persons with disabilities. The Council is also tasked with coordinating state bodies when developing new strategic documents and regulations, monitoring the implementation of regulations and international standards and liaising with civil society organisations. Due to absence of senior officials among its members and the limited authority of its recommendations, its actual impact has been disputed¹⁵. Moreover, its activities are irregular: although the Council was first established in 2005, it has undergone long periods of inactivity.

In October 2024, Members of Parliament formed an informal parliamentary group for improving the position of persons with disabilities. The purpose of the group is to analyse existing laws and draft new pieces of legislation, strategies and action plans and to prepare new standards. The results of the parliamentary group's work are not yet published.

2.3 Legislative framework

The Labour Law is an umbrella legislation in the sphere of work and employment in Serbia; it prescribes the conditions of employment of persons with disabilities and provides special protection for employed persons with disabilities¹⁶. The law prohibits direct and indirect discrimination in the context of work and employment, including based on disability¹⁷. The legislation provides that the employer must ensure that the work is compatible with the working capacity of their disabled employee¹⁸. However, if the employer cannot guarantee such a job for a disabled employee, that employee will be considered technologically redundant¹⁹.

The **Law on the Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities**²⁰ (**LPREPD**), adopted in 2009, is a *lex specialis* in the field of work and employment. This law regulates incentives for employers to create conditions for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market, work capacity assessment, professional rehabilitation, the obligation to employ persons with disabilities, and conditions for establishing and operating enterprises focused on the professional rehabilitation and employment of persons with disabilities, as well as other special forms of employment and work engagement for persons with disabilities²¹. The law brought several significant changes to the legal framework, including a change regarding the assessment of the ability to work and the quota system for the employment of persons with disabilities.

The major change in the work capacity assessment considered introducing multidisciplinary committees that assessed a person's capacity to one of 4 degrees:

- **Level 0** – difficulties and obstacles are negligible and do not affect work capacity;
- **Level 1** – difficulties and obstacles are minor and affect work capacity in relation to the occupation and tasks the person can perform, but employment is possible under general conditions;

¹⁴ Decision on the Establishment of the Council for Persons with Disabilities (*Official Gazette RS*, No 51/2021).

¹⁵ United Nations-Serbia (2024), 'Situational Analysis of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Serbia Country Brief', 2024, p. 5.

¹⁶ Article 12(4) Labour Law (*Official Gazette RS*, No 24/2005, last amend. 95/2018 – authentic interpret.)

¹⁷ Article 18 of the Labour Law.

¹⁸ Article 101 of the Labour Law.

¹⁹ Article 102 of the Labour Law.

²⁰ Law on the Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities (*Official Gazette RS*, No 36/2009, 32/2013).

²¹ Article 1 of the Law on the Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities.

- **Level 2** – difficulties and obstacles are moderate or significant and affect work capacity in relation to the occupation and tasks the person can perform, and employment is possible under special conditions;
- **Level 3** – difficulties and obstacles are either complete or multiple and affect work capacity to the extent that work performance is less than one-third of the work performance of an employee in a usual work setting, meaning that the person cannot be employed or maintain employment under either general or special conditions.

The assessment is widely criticised primarily because individuals whose work capacity is assessed as Level 3 are considered unemployable. They can only be included in **work centres** that are defined in the LRPED, but these have never been set out in a by-law²². As work centres do not exist in Serbia, Level 3 persons with disabilities are not counted as unemployed. It should be noted that work centres, as provided for by the law, would contravene the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Interviewees indicated that these centres could provide transitional or therapeutic employment for those persons with disabilities whose work capacity was determined as level 3 (unemployable). However, reforming the work capacity assessment could change the approach by possibly abolishing Level 3 altogether or acknowledging that persons with such severe disability can still work. Therefore, reforming the working capacity assessment is a prerequisite to expanding the work centres.

According to interviews, **many persons with disabilities fear taking the assessment as they may be deemed unemployable**, especially those with intellectual disabilities. Moreover, the process itself is based on a medical approach and often the decision is made just by looking into medical documentation. Additionally, facilities where the assessments are made are more often than not inaccessible, so the members of the work capacity commissions have to assess people in car parks in front of the facilities. NES advisors also spoke about the lack of staff to conduct these assessments during working hours, so they are often conducted out of working hours for individuals who do not live in cities where the commissions are based. **The UN Committee for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has called upon Serbia to eliminate the medicalised approach to disability in work capacity assessments**²³.

The Law on Pension and Disability Insurance establishes eligibility for disability pensions in cases of permanent and complete loss of work capacity due to work-related injury, occupational illness or non-work-related conditions that cannot be treated or rehabilitated²⁴. It includes financial compensation for physical impairment resulting from such injuries, with disability benefits structured according to the degree of impairment²⁵.

A universal definition of disability does not exist in Serbian legislation. The LRPED offers one definition of a person with a disability in the context of work and employment²⁶, while the Law on Pension and Disability Insurance offers a different one²⁷.

The Law on Employment and Unemployment Insurance regulates the NES, employment agencies and the rights and obligations of unemployed individuals²⁸. It addresses active employment policies, provisions for unemployment insurance and measures to enhance employment rates and reduce long-term unemployment.

²² Article 2 of the Law on the Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities.

²³ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Concluding observations on the initial report of Serbia CRPD/C/SRB/CO/1, 2016, para. 54.

²⁴ Article 2 of the Law on Pension and Disability Insurance (*Official Gazette RS*, No 34/2003, last amend. 76/2023).

²⁵ Article 4 of the Law on Pension and Disability Insurance.

²⁶ Article 3 of the Law on the Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities.

²⁷ Article 21 of the Law on Pension and Disability Insurance.

²⁸ Law on Employment and Unemployment Insurance.

The Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, adopted in 2009 and amended in 2021, contains several provisions related to the work and employment of persons with disabilities, apart from the general prohibition of discrimination on the basis of disability in all spheres²⁹. This law requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations as necessary in individual cases to ensure access, workplace adaptation, participation, lifelong learning and advancement for persons with disabilities and others in vulnerable situations³⁰.

The law also stipulates that an accommodation is not considered a 'disproportionate burden' if supported by public funding³¹. This provision strengthens reasonable accommodation rights under Serbian law, aligning with International Labour Organization (ILO) recommendations³².

The Law on the Prevention of Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities (LPDPD) deems it discriminatory for employers to refuse 'technical adaptations' to the workplace for disabled employees, yet this can happen under specific conditions³³. Notably, a refusal is not considered discriminatory if the employer bears the cost of the adaptation, or if these costs are disproportionate to the perceived benefits of employing the individual³⁴. This provision has its limitations; indeed, 'technical adaptation' is narrowly defined, excluding broader reasonable accommodations like job training support or flexible hours, as outlined in the ILO's 2016 guidance³⁵. Additionally, linking discrimination to the employer's cost-benefit calculation makes the law vulnerable to subjective interpretations, potentially allowing employers to argue that no accommodation is financially justified in most, if not all, cases. Therefore, without state-funded support for such adaptations, Article 22(4) of the LPDPD risks being ineffective³⁶.

2.4 Strategic framework

The **2021-2026 Employment Strategy for Serbia** is the overarching framework for employment policy, with the detailed 2024-2026 Action Plan³⁷. This plan includes measures for improving the position of persons with disabilities on the labour market, including through ALMPs, developing new measures for supported employment, making existing NES services more accessible and conducting an initial analysis of the work capacity assessment rules and procedures in order to improve it³⁸.

The **2025–2030 Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities in Serbia** (Disability Strategy) and the corresponding 2025–2027 Action Plan include measures on the employment of persons with disabilities³⁹. Enhancing their economic independence is one of the Strategy's specific objectives. Notably, it envisages an improved transition from special forms of employment to the open labour market, while also planning to establish 10 work centres by 2030 for persons categorised by the competent commission as lacking work capacity even with reasonable

²⁹ Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination (*Official Gazette RS*, No 22/2009, 52/202).

³⁰ Article 14 (3) of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Stefanovic, L. (2023), 'Unlocking Workplace Inclusivity: Exploring the Legal Imperative of Reasonable Accommodation at Work for Persons with Disabilities in Serbia', Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research and Vojvodina Bar Association, Belgrade – Novi Sad. p. 504.

³³ Article 22(4) of the Law on the Prevention of Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities (*Official Gazette RS*, No 33/2006, 13/2016).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ See footnote 18, Stefanovic, L. (2023) 'Unlocking Workplace Inclusivity: Exploring the Legal Imperative of Reasonable Accommodation at Work for Persons with Disabilities in Serbia'.

³⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the concept of reasonable accommodation in Serbian law see Stefanovic, 'Unlocking Workplace Inclusivity: Exploring the Legal Imperative of Reasonable Accommodation at Work for Persons with Disabilities in Serbia'.

³⁷ The 2021-2026 Employment Strategy for Serbia (*Official Gazette RS*, No 30/21), accessed 29 January 2025 at: <https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2025-01/Strategija%20zaposljavanja%20u%20RS%202021-2026.pdf>.

³⁸ 2024-2026 Action Plan for Implementing the Employment Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2021 to 2026 (*Official Gazette RS*, n°: 22/2024). <https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2024-07/Action%20Plan%202024%E2%80%932026%20for%20the%20Implementation%20of%20the%20Employment%20Strategy%20....pdf>.

³⁹ The 2025-2030 Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities in Serbia (*Official Gazette RS*, No 6/2025).

accommodation. Other measures include reforming the work capacity assessment, strengthening enterprises for professional rehabilitation, expanding the number of social enterprises, and increasing state funding for ALMPs and professional rehabilitation enterprises.

The 2020-2024 Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities in Serbia⁴⁰ also contained measures related to the work and employment of persons with disabilities. However, the implementation of those measures was insufficient, as reported in the current 2025-2030 Disability Strategy. The previous Disability Strategy foresaw the amendment of the work capacity assessment rules and procedures and planned for it to be implemented the Q3 of 2024. However, those rules and procedures were not implemented and have therefore been recast in the current 2025-2030 Disability Strategy.

Autonomous provinces and local self-governments (LSGs) may adopt action plans for employment. The autonomous province of Vojvodina adopted a provincial action plan for employment in September 2024 for 2024, and in March 2025 for the ongoing year⁴¹. The current provincial action plan mentions improving the employment of persons with disabilities only in general terms, without outlining any specific measures. On a local level, it is not clear how many LSGs currently have local action plans for employment.

2.5 Sources of financing

The MOLEVSA and the NES are both directly financed by state budget. Some measures to support the employment of persons with disabilities that are implemented by LSGs are funded or co-funded by LSGs. LSGs have own-source revenue, shared revenues and different forms of transfers from the central or provincial budgets⁴².

The most significant source for financing employment policies pertaining to persons with disabilities is the **Fund for Professional Rehabilitation and Employment** (the Fund). The Fund's revenue comes from employers' contributions, in accordance with the LPREPD⁴³. The Fund is neither an institution nor a separate budgetary line; instead, the resources collected are transferred into the general state budget controlled by the Ministry of Finance, despite the legal provision prescribing the establishment of the Fund under the responsibility of the MOLEVSA⁴⁴. The State Audit Agency published data from the tax office on contributions paid into this fund from 2018 to 2020 (RSD 3.8 billion, RSD 4.3 billion and RSD 5 billion respectively), noting that each year, RSD 1.25 billion from this Fund was earmarked for the professional rehabilitation and employment of persons with disabilities⁴⁵. This implied that most of the Fund's financial means were not allocated in line with the Law on the Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities (LPREPWD). To this day there is a lack of transparency surrounding how the Fund was allocated.

The NES receives around RSD 550 million annually to implement measures to promote the employment of persons with disabilities. This amount has remained stagnant for nearly a decade. In 2023, the NES spent approximately RSD 494.4 million of that budget. However, this is not the only budget used to support the employment of persons with disabilities, as the NES has another budget for the implementation of ALMPs amounting to RSD 7 billion (in 2024)⁴⁶.

⁴⁰ The 2020-2024 Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities in Serbia (*Official Gazette RS*, No 44/2020); 2024-2026 Action Plan for Implementing the Employment Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2021 to 2026 (*Official Gazette RS*, No 59/2023).

⁴¹ Decision on the adoption of the Provincial Action Plan for Employment (*Official Gazette AP Vojvodina* No 42/2024); Decision on the adoption of the Provincial Action Plan for Employment (*Official Gazette AP Vojvodina* No 15/2025).

⁴² The Law on Financing Local Self-Government (*Official Gazette RS*, No 62/2006, last amend. 97/2023).

⁴³ Article 28 of the Law on the Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities.

⁴⁴ Article 28(2) of the Law on the Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities.

⁴⁵ 'Izveštaj o reviziji svrishodnosti poslovanja Profesionalna rehabilitacija i podsticanje zapošljavanja osoba sa invaliditetom' (Report on the performance audit Professional Rehabilitation and Promotion of Employment of Persons with Disabilities), 400–436/2021–05/58, 2021, State Audit Agency, pp. 10, 26.

⁴⁶ The National Employment Service (2024), 'Program rada za 2024' (2024 Work Programme).

Other sources of funding for employment measures include foreign state agencies, intergovernmental organisations and foundations. According to the last report by the NES, the most significant external donor is the EU⁴⁷. A project co-funded by the EU through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance is currently being implemented by the NES. This project is valued at EUR 5.5 million, of which EUR 4 million is provided by the EU and the rest by the state⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ National Employment Service, 2024. pp. 72-73.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

3. POLICIES SUPPORTING THE EMPLOYABILITY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

3.1 Services supporting the employability of persons with disabilities

Services supporting the employability of persons with disabilities include counselling information, job matching and counselling. Serbia suffers a lack of specialised services aimed at persons with disabilities. However, those persons can benefit from the general services offered by the NES.

In 2023, over 40 000 persons benefited from **information** services, receiving information about their career development opportunities, including 6 293 persons who received information at Information and Career Counselling Centres, which are situated inside 13 local NES branches and are part of the NES.

Additionally, 10 085 individuals received **career counselling**. These services help people choose occupations or educational paths, support career development and assist in setting goals and making decisions. Unfortunately, there is a lack of publicly available data on the number of persons with disabilities benefiting from such services.

Persons with disabilities also benefit from other services offered by the NES with the aim of improving their employability and motivation by encouraging active job-searching. The most popular services include **participation in job fairs** and short (1 or 2-day) **workshops on active job-searching**.

The number of persons with disabilities benefiting from those services has been steadily growing in recent years, from 5 300 in 2015 to 6 300 in 2023, with a significant drop in 2020 and 2021 due to Covid-19.

Table 1: Professional rehabilitation and employability of persons with disabilities: list of measures and activities planned for 2024 and list of measures and activities planned and implemented in 2023.

Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities	Number of Participants			
	2021	2022	2023 (implemented)	2024 (planned)
1. Professional rehabilitation measures and activities	2 743	5 529	6 281	4 880
1.1. Active job seeking	1 615	1 598	1 488	1 300
1.2. Self-efficacy training	96	133	106	80
1.3. Job seeking club	252	239	249	200
1.4. Job fairs	474	3 275	4 204	2 950
1.5. Workshop on coping with the stress of job loss	27	26	28	50

Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities	Number of Participants			
	2021	2022	2023 (implemented)	2024 (planned)
1.6. Entrepreneurship development training	279	258	206	300

Source: National Employment Service, 2024 Work Programme, 2024, p. 52, Table 16, adjusted; National Employment Service, 2023 Annual Report, 2024, p. 53 Table 16, adjusted.

In December 2023, persons with disabilities accounted for 4.4% of those registered with the NES. They were overrepresented in most job-search services, especially at job fairs and in low-skilled job-search training (item 1.3 in Table 2), which should be assessed positively, as an instrument supporting the integration of persons with disabilities into the labour market.

Table 2: persons with disabilities who participated in services supporting employability as a percentage of all unemployed persons who participated in the given service

Measure for active job seeking	Planned (2023)	Actual (2023)
1. Active job seeking	4.0%	4.2%
1.2. Job search training for qualified individuals	2.7%	3.2%
1.3. Motivational activation training for individuals without qualifications and low-skilled individuals	6.7%	6.1%
2. Self-efficacy training	2.9%	4.0%
3. Job seeking club	5.0%	6.0%
4. Employment fair	5.7%	7.8%
5. Workshop on coping with the stress of job loss	5.6%	3.0%
7. Entrepreneurship development training	2.9%	2.2%

Source: National Employment Service, 2023 Annual Report, p. 18, Table 5, adjusted

3.2 Measures supporting the employability of persons with disabilities

In addition to the aforementioned services, there are various measures and activities aimed at improving the employability of job seekers, including persons with disabilities (PwD). These measures include a range of targeted interventions. This chapter focuses on measures supporting skills development, such as training and internships.

The following table shows planned and actual participation levels between 2021 and 2024. In 2023, 297 persons with disabilities participated, falling short of the target of 630. Participation has declined in relation to past years; for example, there were 418 participants in 2015, peaking at 653 in 2018. The pandemic caused a significant drop, and numbers haven't returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Labour market training emerged as the most popular measure in 2023, with 265 persons with disabilities participating.

Table 3: Professional rehabilitation and employability of persons with disabilities: list of measures and activities planned for 2024 and list of measures and activities planned for and implemented in 2023

Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities	Number of Participants				
	2021	2022	2023	2023 (planned)	2024 (planned)
2. Additional education and training	27	357	297	630	530
2.1. Professional internship	9	15	8	30	30
2.2. Youth traineeship for university graduates	9	4	5	20	20
2.3. Traineeship for unemployed persons with secondary education			3	30	30
2.4. Practical knowledge acquisition	4	8	8	20	20
2.5. Labour market training for persons with disabilities ⁴⁹	0	322	265	500	400
2.6. Employer-requested training for the unemployed	5	8	10	30	30

Source: National Employment Service, 2024 Work Programme, 2024, p. 52, Table 16, adjusted; National Employment Service, 2023 Annual Report, p. 53, Table 16, adjusted.

To assess the actual access of persons with disabilities to employability support measures, their share among programme participants can be compared with their proportion among the registered unemployed, which stood at 4.4% in December 2023. Persons with disabilities are significantly underrepresented in most cases, except for labour market training, where they accounted for over 16% of all participants. It is important to note that the actual participation of persons with disabilities was significantly lower than planned. This may suggest a problem with the recruitment of persons with disabilities to such measures, which warrants closer examination.

Table 4: persons with disabilities, who participated in measures supporting employability as a percentage of all unemployed individuals who participated in the given measure

Additional education and training	Planned for 2023	Actual for 2023
1. Professional internship	0.7%	0.5%
2.1. Youth traineeship for university graduates	3.1%	0.8%
2.2. Traineeship for unemployed persons with secondary education	5.0%	1.1%
3. Practical knowledge acquisition	2.2%	1.3%

⁴⁹ Encompasses training for individuals to increase their theoretical and practical skills in accordance with the need of the labour market and personal preferences.

Additional education and training	Planned for 2023	Actual for 2023
4. Labour market training	41.7%	16.4%
5. Employer-requested training for the unemployed	4.3%	1.7%

Source: National Employment Service, 2023 Annual Report, p. 53, Table 16 adjusted.

Public works

This measure aims to enhance work capacities by involving unemployed individuals, including those with disabilities, in beneficial activities like social protection, cultural events and environmental conservation. In 2023, 819 persons with disabilities participated, accounting for 28% of all participants, reflecting a high level of representation. However, participation in 2023 was lower than in previous years: 1 300 persons with disabilities participated in 2015, and 1 800 in 2017.

Since 2024, municipalities have been implementing this measure on their own, in accordance with local action plans for employment, with co-funding from the NES. According to the plan for 2024, a total of 500 persons with disabilities should be included in public works, indicating a further decrease in the scale of this initiative.

This measure is viewed by NES advisors as beneficial for socialising persons with disabilities, but it provides limited job experience, especially for individuals with higher support needs⁵⁰. Public works typically do not lead to permanent employment. Moreover, the findings of this study indicate that public works are often used by OPDs to temporarily activate some of their members and provide them with an income. Individuals who use this kind of activation may ‘accumulate’ 5 years of work experience and thus qualify for a disability pension⁵¹.

Professional activation of persons with disabilities

NES-registered persons with disabilities who need significant help entering the labour market are eligible for targeted assistance. Employers can hire these individuals and receive a wage subsidy equal to the minimum wage for four months. In 2024, the NES aims to involve 400 persons with disabilities in this measure, replacing the national public works programme. This programme offers higher minimum remuneration, different contracts and a duration of four months as opposed to the three-month public works contracts.

Table 5: Numbers of persons with disabilities included in measures for activation on the job market in 2024 (planned) and 2023 (planned and implemented)

Measures for the activation of persons with disabilities on the job market	2024	2023	
	Planned	Planned	Implemented
Total	900	800	819
Work activation	400	/	/
Public works	500	800	819

Source: National Employment Service, 2023 Annual Report, 2024, p. 53, Table 16, adjusted; National Employment Service, 2024 Work Programme, 2024, p. 43.

⁵⁰ Pajić and Stefanović, Interview 3, NES, conducted on 4.10.2024.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Other initiatives supporting the employability of persons with disabilities

The Youth Disability Forum (YDF), as part of the project funded by the USAID, has opened six career centres for PwDs in six cities since 2023. These centres provide individual and group support for career planning, skills development, job-seeking, workplace adaptation and CV and interview preparation to improve both employability and integration into working and social environments. The career centres are institutionally unrelated to the NES and are an entirely NGO-led, project-based initiative, the financial sustainability of which could be in jeopardy due to changes in the way the USAID functions as of January 2025.

Initiatives like the UN-funded Job Fit scheme also promote equal opportunities to access the labour market and promote entrepreneurship, while the Incentive Fund in Kragujevac provides financial aid and mentorship for self-employment. Additionally, the UNDP's IT retraining programmes equip participants with digital skills, opening doors to opportunities in the tech industry.

3.3 Measures addressing the needs of war veterans

War-disabled veterans have the same employment rights as other persons with disabilities, as well as entitlement to additional benefits. They are entitled to additional disability allowances when employed full-time or part-time, as per the law⁵². Unemployed war-disabled veterans can also receive an additional allowance if they register with the NES and follow its job-seeking rules⁵³.

Additionally, the law prescribes prioritising war-disabled veterans in the process of employment by state administration bodies, bodies of the autonomous province and LSG bodies, while war-disabled veterans are given priority after the children of fallen soldiers. The impact of this policy is currently unknown.

3.4 Enhancing the capacity of main stakeholders

The NES has been involved in capacity-building activities to better serve persons with disabilities. For instance, the Technical Assistance for Capacity Building in Employment Policy (implemented from 2017 to 2020) project provided training for NES advisors working with low-skilled unemployed individuals, including persons with disabilities. This training aimed to equip advisors with the necessary skills to support persons with disabilities in their pursuit of employment. However, this was a project-based initiative and it is not conducted continuously.

The UNDP-funded Autonomy, Voice and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Serbia project, implemented (from 2018 to 2020) by the UN agencies in collaboration with local NGOs, focused on capacity building for these organisations. The project aimed to empower NGOs to effectively advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities and participate in public discourse, thereby enhancing their ability to support persons with disabilities in employment-related matters. The results of the project included increased awareness among stakeholders, training for OPDs, CSOs and social enterprises on the employment of persons with disabilities, and the creation of a job coaching service⁵⁴. Despite these immediate results, a job coaching service has not yet become available through the NES. The YDF is, however, providing such a service, as explained in the section entitled *Best Practices*.

NES advisors who participated in this research exhibited serious discontent with the lack of training and knowledge exchange with their colleagues from Serbia and abroad, highlighting that more capacity-building activities were needed.

⁵² Article 10 of the Law on the Rights of Veterans, War-disabled Veterans, War-disabled Civilians and their Family Members (*Official Gazette RS*, No 18/2020).

⁵³ Article 70 of the Law on the Rights of Veterans, War-disabled Veterans, War-disabled Civilians and their Family Members.

⁵⁴ UNDP (2022), 'Autonomy, Voice and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Serbia', accessed 6 November 2024 at: <https://www.undp.org/serbia/projects/autonomy-voice-and-participation-persons-disabilities-serbia>.

3.5 Best practices

The YDF, an NGO established in 2005 in Belgrade by young persons with disabilities, provides a range of tailored services to support young persons with disabilities in securing employment⁵⁵. Although the organisation did not initially focus on employment, it became an undisputed leader in its field among Serbian NGOs and best known for its persons with disabilities employment programme. Its programme begins with profiling each job seeker and assessing their skills, qualifications and any additional support needs they might have. The YDF's approach focuses on psychosocial rehabilitation to build the confidence, motivation and social skills that are so essential for individuals who may face isolation or lack experience with social interaction. It also offers career guidance and one-on-one counselling to prepare persons with disabilities for the job market, ensuring they have the skills and readiness to succeed. These services are established and provided through a USAID-funded project entitled Economic Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (implemented since 2022), which aims to increase the capacities of various stakeholders. Its plan was to enhance the employment skills of up to 1 500 persons with disabilities and strengthen the capacities of up to 200 employers to improve inclusive employment practices. The latest information about the project implementation was published in late 2025.

The YDF stands out for the individualised and continuous support it offers. Advisors follow each candidate through months of training and preparation, helping them identify suitable opportunities and overcome personal and systemic barriers. They work closely with each individual to ensure they are ready to transition to the open job market, often providing post-employment support should any issues arise, such as the need for workplace adjustments, or in the event of conflict.

The YDF programme addresses major gaps in the Serbian employment system for persons with disabilities, such as the absence of tailored support and insufficient employer engagement. The state could improve its services by adopting the YDF's individual support model and outsourcing services to specialist organisations like the YDF.

The YDF also advocates for outsourcing, as practised in countries like Slovenia and Croatia, which, according to them, allows for a broader, more flexible support network that meets the varied needs of persons with disabilities.

⁵⁵ 'Forum mladih sa invaliditetom, O nama' (About us). Accessed 11 December 2024: <https://fmi.rs/o-nama/>.

4. POLICIES SUPPORTING DEMAND FOR THE EMPLOYMENT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

4.1 Quota system

Quotas for the obligatory employment of persons with disabilities and the corresponding employers' contributions to the Fund was the major measure introduced with the LPREPWD in 2009. Companies are required to employ one person with a disability if they have between 20 and 49 employees⁵⁶. If they have 50 or more employees, they must employ two persons with disabilities and then an additional person with a disability for each additional 50 employees. An employer can opt to fulfil the employment obligation by paying 50% of the national average monthly salary to the Fund. New companies do not have this duty for the first 24 months⁵⁷.

Interviews suggest that the introduction of the quotas was one of the most significant advancements in relation to the employability of persons with disabilities. However, the interviewees consistently highlighted issues with their implementation, particularly with respect to employers' engagement. Quotas motivate compliance to a degree, but many employers opt to pay penalties rather than hire persons with disabilities or invest in improved accessibility. There is a consistent pattern of employers preferring to employ persons with disabilities with minimal impairments, primarily to avoid the financial and logistical burden of workplace adaptations. Quotas are therefore not as effective in promoting the genuine inclusion of people with different disabilities. This attitude of employers towards quotas is likely amplified by the lack of transparency of the Fund to which they pay those contributions, implying a form of 'para-fiscal burden', which may encourage some of them to find creative ways to avoid it, according to one interviewee⁵⁸.

4.2 Self-employment grant

Unemployed individuals may receive a grant of RSD 300 000 to establish a business, cooperative or other entrepreneurial venture, with a requirement to maintain the business and pay social security contributions for at least 12 months. For persons with disabilities, this amount is 10% higher. In 2024, the NES plans to provide self-employment grants to 4 000 individuals, including 100 persons with disabilities⁵⁹. In 2023, 95 persons with disabilities benefited from the scheme. The uptake has been more or less stable throughout the years.

4.3 Wage subsidy for persons with disabilities without work experience

This subsidy aims to increase employment levels among PwDs who have no work experience and to facilitate the acquisition of practical knowledge and skills in a specific job. Employers who hire a person with a disability (from the NES registry) on a permanent basis (without the need for prior work experience) are eligible for a wage subsidy for up to 12 months, covering up to 75% of their total wage costs, capped at the minimum wage. This is the most significant subsidy, given the amount an employer can benefit from and the amount of funds spent on this measure by the NES. The first-time

⁵⁶ Article 24 of the Law on the Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities.

⁵⁷ Article 25 of the Law on the Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities.

⁵⁸ Protic, J., Interview 1, ILO, conducted on 26.08.2024.

⁵⁹ The National Employment Service, 2024, p. 34.

employment subsidy is attractive for employers with budget limitations as it provides immediate financial relief and reduces the risk of hiring inexperienced persons with disabilities. For people with disabilities, it offers a chance to gain professional skills and real work experience.

In 2024, the financial relief an employer can get from this subsidy is approximately RSD 650 000 per employee with a disability and per year. The NES allocated RSD 226.4 million to this measure in 2023. In 2023, 544 persons with disabilities benefited from the measure, which was 144 more than planned. In 2024, 380 persons with disabilities are expected to be supported by this measure⁶⁰. **The numbers indicate that this a key tool in supporting employment for persons with disabilities in Serbia.**

4.4 Subsidy for hiring hard-to-employ individuals

This subsidy is available to private sector employers for hiring unemployed individuals from hard-to-employ categories, including persons with disabilities. Subsidy amounts range from RSD 240 000 to 280 000 per person, depending on the level of development of the local municipality. For persons with disabilities, this amount is 20% greater. In 2023, the NES spent RSD 75.5 million on this measure. In total, 3 461 persons benefited from this measure, including 372 persons with disabilities, accounting for 10.7% of beneficiaries. The NES planned that in 2024, 3 000 hard-to-employ individuals would benefit from this measure, including 300 persons with disabilities (10%)⁶¹. This indicates that persons with disabilities are significantly overrepresented among beneficiaries of this measure, which may suggest effective targeting.

However, it should be underlined that an employer can combine the wage subsidy for persons with disabilities without work experience with the subsidy for hiring hard-to-employ individuals, amounting to a total of approximately RSD 900 000 or more per year in subsidies per new employee with a disability, making this combination of measures particularly attractive, according to interviewees⁶². This suggests that a person with disabilities may be counted twice in those two measures.

4.5 Reimbursement of workplace support costs

Persons with disabilities whose work capacity has been assessed as Level 2 might need workplace adaptations and additional support. There are two measures designed to address this issue⁶³.

Programme A – Work assistance: employers who hire persons with disabilities requiring professional support are eligible for reimbursement of the professional assistant's salary costs for up to 12 months at up to RSD 50 000 per month of net salary, plus social security contributions and tax. An assistant is a person already employed in the company who assists a newly employed person with a disability in conducting their work. In 2023, the NES allocated RSD 35.6 million to this measure, benefiting 60 people—double the planned number. In 2024, the NES plans to support 25 individuals with disabilities using this scheme. The low uptake of this measure may result from the situation of the target group, considering that employers prefer employing individuals with minimal disabilities who do not require additional assistance or adaptations.

Programme B – Workplace adaptation (reasonable accommodation): Employers can receive reimbursement of up to RSD 400 000 per person with a disability for reasonable workplace adaptations, including technical and technological adjustments. Interviewees from the NES and the

⁶⁰ The National Employment Service, 2024, p. 32.

⁶¹ The National Employment Service, 2024, p. 32.

⁶² Pajić and Stefanović, Interview 3, NES, conducted on 04.10.2024.

⁶³ Article 23 of the Law on the Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities.

MOLEVSA claimed that reimbursements for adaptations rarely exceeded RSD 200 000⁶⁴. Also, this type of measure is poorly represented given that, in 2023, only RSD 11 million was spent by the NES on this measure and only 35 persons with disabilities benefited. In 2024, the NES plans to include 25 persons with disabilities in this programme across the entire country⁶⁵. Employers are dissatisfied with the procedure. They find it burdensome, and reimbursements are delayed due to budget cycles⁶⁶, making the measure less attractive.

Table 6: Numbers of persons with disabilities included in active employment policies in 2024 (planned) and 2023 (planned and implemented).

	2024	2023	
	Planned	Planned	Implemented
Active employment policies for persons with disabilities employed under special conditions	50	55	95
Workplace adaptation (reimbursement of appropriate workplace adaptation costs)	25	25	35
Provision of professional support for newly employed persons with disabilities (reimbursement of salary costs for an individual providing professional workplace support – work assistance)	25	30	60

Source: National Employment Service, 2023 Annual Report, 2024, p. 48, Table 15, adjusted; National Employment Service, 2024 Work Programme, 2024, p.37.

Lastly, employers are allowed to combine of several benefits when employing a person with a disability. Interviewees argued that employers opt for measures that bring with them more financial benefits. Therefore, they seldom use workplace adaptations, which carry less financial incentive than a wage subsidy for persons with disabilities without work experience or the work assistance subsidy. The combination of measures that employers may use can be changed each year and is published on the NES website.

Table 7: Employment subsidies for non-disabled persons and persons with disabilities in 2024 (planned) and in 2023 (planned and implemented).

Employment subsidies	Non-disabled	Persons with disabilities		
	2024	2024	2023	
	Planned	Planned	Planned	Implemented
Total	6 900	780	800	1 106
Self-employment subsidy	3 900	100	100	95
Subsidy for hiring unemployed persons from hard-to-employ categories	3 000	300	300	372
Active employment policies for persons with disabilities				
Wage subsidy for persons with disabilities without work experience	/	380	400	544

⁶⁴ Todorović, B., Interview 4, NES, conducted on 29.07.2024; Vasić, J., Interview 5, MOLEVSA, conducted on 28.08.2024.

⁶⁵ National Employment Service, 2024, p. 38.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Employment subsidies	Non-disabled	Persons with disabilities		
	2024	2024	2023	
	Planned	Planned	Planned	Implemented
Workplace adaptation (reimbursement of appropriate workplace adaptation costs)	/	25	25	35
Provision of professional support for newly employed persons with disabilities (reimbursement of salary costs for an individual providing professional workplace support – work assistance)	/	25	30	60

Sources: National Employment Service, 2023 Annual Report, 2024, p. 42, 48, Table 13, 15 adjusted; National Employment Service, 2024 Work Programme, 2024, p. 32, 37.

4.6 Exemption from mandatory social insurance

A company employing a person with disabilities on an unlimited employment contract may benefit from mandatory social insurance⁶⁷. The employer is exempt from paying mandatory social insurance for three years. State bodies, public enterprises and institutions are not eligible to participate in this measure. This benefit was used by 127 employers to employ 131 persons with disabilities in 2023⁶⁸.

4.7 Special types of employment and work engagement

There are three types of special types of employment and work engagement aimed at persons with disabilities:

- enterprises for the professional rehabilitation and employment of persons with disabilities,
- social enterprises,
- work centres⁶⁹.

Enterprises for the professional rehabilitation and employment (EPREs) of persons with disabilities are publicly or privately owned work organisations whose role is to provide professional rehabilitation and employment services to persons with disabilities. They are funded by the state Fund for Professional Rehabilitation and Employment and by selling goods and services. EPREs started as public enterprises but most of them have been privatised. The network of EPREs was significantly larger in the past, with most of those entities having ceased to operate in the past 20 years⁷⁰. Currently there are 56 EPREs, employing around 1 100 PwDs⁷¹. PREs should ideally serve as a bridge for persons with disabilities, helping them to gain skills and experience before securing a job in the open labour market. However, persons with disabilities rarely move to the open labour market from EPREs⁷².

It should be noted that EPREs and other forms of sheltered employment are incompliant with Article 27 of the CRPD. The CRPD Committee recommended the shift to the open labour market to Serbia's authorities in 2016⁷³.

⁶⁷ Article 45b of the Law on Mandatory Social Insurance (*Official Gazette RS* No 84/2004, last amend. 6/2024).

⁶⁸ National Employment Service, 2023, p. 50.

⁶⁹ Article 34 of the Law on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities.

⁷⁰ Interview with M. P., conducted on 16.8.2024.

⁷¹ [Sector for the Protection of Persons with Disabilities | Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs](#)

⁷² Interview with M. P., conducted on 16.8.2024.

⁷³ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, para. 56.

Work centres are not operational in Serbia as there are no by-laws regulating the rules and conditions of their functioning. The Law on Social Entrepreneurship was adopted in 2022⁷⁴. This type of work organisation is still in its infancy, with only 24 such businesses registered in Serbia as of December 2024⁷⁵.

⁷⁴ Law on Social Entrepreneurship, *Official Gazette RS*, No 14/2022.

⁷⁵ 'APR: U Srbiji registrovana 24 socijalna preduzeća' (BRA: 24 social enterprises registered in Serbia), <https://forbes.n1info.rs/vesti/apr-u-srbiji-registrovana-24-socijalna-preduzeca/>.

5. LINKS BETWEEN EMPLOYMENT AND OTHER POLICY AREAS

This chapter recognises that employment of persons with disabilities is a complex, multidimensional issue shaped by a wide range of policy factors beyond labour market measures alone. Outcomes in employment are closely linked to developments in education and skills systems, the design of social protection schemes, the availability of social services, and the level of accessibility within society and the workplace. For this reason, the analysis looks beyond employment policies in a narrow sense and examines how these interconnected areas of the public policy mix influence opportunities, incentives, and barriers to participation in work.

5.1 From school to the labour market

Over the course of the interviews, the absence of any effective career guidance or transitional programmes for young persons with disabilities stood out as a major gap. Schools provide limited support for career planning, leaving persons with disabilities unprepared for employment. This is compounded by a lack of coordination with the NES, resulting in missed opportunities for early intervention and workforce readiness.

Many persons with disabilities enter the labour market with outdated or irrelevant skills due to segregated, narrowly focused vocational training, especially for those who did not attend inclusive mainstream schools. Advisors from the NES report that older persons with disabilities often have skills (e.g. dactylography) with little applicability, while younger persons with disabilities lack practical experience⁷⁶. Efforts to bridge this gap are limited by insufficient funding for requalification and retraining.

One interviewee highlighted that universities and faculties maintain a degree of elitism and ableism, barring persons with disabilities from accessing training in certain fields, particularly those with hands-on requirements⁷⁷. This exclusion affects the overall career readiness of persons with disabilities graduates, who are often ill-prepared for competitive employment.

The influence of overprotective family attitudes on the transition process can also hamper employment prospects, given that families may discourage young persons with disabilities from pursuing employment due to concerns about potential challenges or discrimination⁷⁸. This protective attitude can limit motivation and opportunity among young persons with disabilities to seek employment or participate in training.

5.2 How social benefits support the employment of persons with disabilities

The YDF found that persons with disabilities often think that they will lose some of their social protection benefits if they get a job, indicating that they are not always well informed about their social protection rights⁷⁹. One of the most important benefit for persons with disabilities in Serbia, a disability assistance grant ('dodatak za pomoć i negu drugog lica'), is not dependent on employment status. Conversely, for example, if a persons with disabilities has a disability pension, this will be discontinued

⁷⁶ Pajić and Stefanović, Interview 3, NES, conducted on 04.10.2024.

⁷⁷ Mihajlovska, L., Interview 6, University Centre for Students with Handicap at the University of Belgrade, Special advisor to the Minister without portfolio, conducted on 27.08.2024.

⁷⁸ Mihajlovska, L., Interview 6, University Centre for Students with Handicap at the University of Belgrade, Special advisor to the Minister without portfolio, conducted on 27.08.2024.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 50-51.

when the person enters an employment contract. However, a person with a disability can work under other type of contracts, such as a service contract or author's work contract, without jeopardising their disability pension.

The Law on Social Protection grants a right to support for work rehabilitation ('pravo na pomoć za osposobljavanje za rad') for children, young people and adults with disabilities who are assessed as able to learn specific skills based on their abilities and age⁸⁰. This comes in the form of financial support to cover the costs of transport, student dormitory accommodation or rehabilitation at an enterprise for the professional rehabilitation and employment of persons with disabilities or other work organisation⁸¹. This support is administered by social work centres. The YDF finds that this support is mainly available to those with mild physical or intellectual disabilities and typically covers only transportation costs, with accommodation expenses rarely included if training is held outside the individual's hometown⁸². Around 500 people exercise this right annually, according to the YDF⁸³.

5.3 Access to social services

Services to support independent living are crucial to the social and work inclusion of persons with disabilities. Two major services of this kind available in Serbia are 'personal assistance' and 'supported living'. All services are defined by the Law on Social Protection. The purpose of the personal assistance service is to help with basic needs and to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in education, work and society⁸⁴. The way, how this law is interpreted and applied in some regions practically excludes people with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities from the opportunity to use this service by assuming that beneficiaries have to be able to make decisions on their own which disproportionately affects people with intellectual or severe psychosocial disabilities⁸⁵. This has been raised as a **practical barrier** rather than a clear legal prohibition. This type of service is also underutilised, considering that, according to the last data from 2023, only 411 persons with disabilities used it⁸⁶.

Supported living services play a key role in preventing the institutionalisation of persons with disabilities and, in turn, reducing their exclusion from the labour market. Supported living arrangements mean that several people live together in the community with professional support, enhancing their chances of being included both in society and at work. This service in Serbia is meagrely represented, with only 21 users in 2022⁸⁷. The limited availability has an unfavourable impact on the employment opportunities for certain groups of persons with disabilities.

5.4 Accessibility

Accessibility is still a major obstacle for participation of persons with disabilities in different spheres of life. In 2015 a rulebook containing construction standards to ensure the accessibility was adopted in 2015. The standards pertain to buildings in public use, business and residential buildings, and public spaces (streets, squares, parks, etc.)⁸⁸. The 2021-2026 Employment Strategy acknowledges that mobility obstacles and limited accessibility to various facilities, as well as barriers in accessing

⁸⁰ Article 5 of the Law on Social Protection.

⁸¹ Article 109 of the Law on Social Protection.

⁸² Stanić, K. *et al.* (2023), 'Analiza politika i preporuke za unapređenje položaja osoba sa invaliditetom na tržištu rada' (Analysis of policies and recommendations for improving the position of persons with disabilities in the labour market), Youth with Disabilities Forum, 2023, <https://fmi.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Analiza-politika-i-preporuke-za-unapredenje-polozaja-osoba-sa-invaliditetom-na-trzistu-rada.pdf>, p. 21-22.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Article 99 of the Rulebook on Detailed Conditions and Standards for the Provision of Social Protection Services.

⁸⁶ Republic Institute for Social Protection, 'Punoletni u sistemu socijalne zaštite u 2023. godini' (Adults in the social protection system in 2023), 2024. p. 31.

⁸⁷ Republic Institute for Social Protection, 2023, p. 36.

⁸⁸ 'Rulebook on Technical Standards for Planning, Design and Construction of Facilities Ensuring Unhindered Movement and Access for Persons with Disabilities, Children and the Elderly' (*Official Gazette RS*, 22/2015).

services, information, education and professional training, all of which are critical for meaningful participation in the labour market, are major impediments.

Also, interviewees highlighted that local public infrastructure often lacks the necessary accessibility for persons with disabilities⁸⁹. This may hamper persons with disabilities' ability to travel to and participate in work, even if workplace adaptations are available. Local governments show inconsistency in their commitment to improving accessibility, with some, particularly in rural areas, not prioritising this need.

Multinational corporations are one of the drivers for changes, beginning to adopt accessibility standards, driven by requirements such as the EU Accessibility Act⁹⁰. Some companies are increasingly implementing accessibility measures, which could set a precedent for other local employers. However, this trend is largely limited to multinational entities, with most local businesses and public sector employers failing to follow suit.

The interviews revealed significant barriers to physical and systemic accessibility to PwD in Serbia. The low uptake of workplace adaptation funds due to complex bureaucracy, insufficient local public infrastructure and a lack of widespread adoption of accessibility standards all contribute to ongoing challenges to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market.

5.5 Gender dimension of policies supporting the employment of persons with disabilities

Several interviewees observed that women with disabilities often attain higher qualifications than men. These findings mirror a study by the YDF that found that across of the local governments observed, women with disabilities tended to have a slightly higher level of education than men⁹¹. The YDF also argued that the educational profile of persons with disabilities registered with the NES was generally low and mirrored the Serbian average, with the majority having received only secondary education⁹². However, there are significant variations among municipalities; for instance, Belgrade and Niš show a more favourable educational profile among persons with disabilities, especially women⁹³.

Although women with disabilities are slightly better educated than men with disabilities, systemic and attitudinal barriers still disproportionately affect the employment opportunities of women in rural areas, where they are often insured through their husbands' agricultural insurance and thus are not considered unemployed by the NES, limiting their access to employment services⁹⁴.

No other gender-specific barriers were identified across the interviews. The primary distinctions noted, however, were industry-based preferences, with the textile industries favouring women and more physically demanding roles favouring men. These tendencies seem driven by the traditional division of labour rather than outright discrimination.

⁸⁹ Mihajlovska, L., University Centre for Students with Handicap at the University of Belgrade, Special advisor to the Minister without portfolio, Interview conducted on 27.08.2024; Pantelić, M., Association of Companies for Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities, Interview conducted on 26.08.2024.

⁹⁰ Mihajlovska, L., University Centre for Students with Handicap at the University of Belgrade, Special advisor to the Minister without portfolio, Interview conducted on 27.08.2024.

⁹¹ Stanić, K. *et al* (2023), *Analiza politika i preporuke za unapređenje položaja osoba sa invaliditetom na tržištu rada* (Analysis of policies and recommendations for improving the position of persons with disabilities in the labour market), Youth with Disabilities Forum, 2023, p. 44.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Pajić and Stefanović, Interview 3, NES, conducted on 04.10.2024.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusions

The analysis of ALMPs for persons with disabilities in Serbia reveals an ambitious but uneven approach to improving their employability and participation in the labour market. While a variety of measures exist, including job-seeking support, vocational training, workplace adaptation subsidies and employment quotas, the overall impact remains constrained by implementation challenges, financial sustainability concerns and employer reluctance.

A key strength of Serbia's ALMP framework is the broad array of interventions designed to support persons with disabilities at different stages of labour market integration. The NES plays a central role, offering professional rehabilitation services, wage subsidies and training programmes. However, discrepancies between planned and actual participation rates in 2023 highlight inefficiencies, particularly where additional education and training initiatives are concerned. Despite exceeding targets in job-seeking programmes, the underutilisation of entrepreneurship training and workplace adaptation funds may indicate a lack of incentives for long-term labour market inclusion.

The quota system has been a significant policy intervention, but its effectiveness is undermined by employers' preference to pay penalties rather than hire persons with disabilities, particularly those requiring workplace adaptations. This signals a need for stronger employer engagement strategies, potentially through enhanced financial incentives, targeted awareness campaigns and more transparent use of employer contributions to the Fund for Professional Rehabilitation and Employment. Interviewees consistently pointed to the lack of transparency in the use of the Fund for Professional Rehabilitation and Employment, with up to 80% of its resources allocated to non-disclosed purposes, thus eroding employer and public trust. Moreover, budget allocations, such as the approximately RDS 550 million earmarked for persons with disabilities employment initiatives, have stagnated over the past decade, undermining the capacity of the NES and the relevant ministry to adequately support these measures. Further examination of capacities in local NES branches is warranted given the alleged high volume of cases that each advisor for the employment of persons with disabilities handles.

The low uptake of workplace adaptation funds, due in part to cumbersome administrative requirements and delayed disbursements, reflects a disconnection between the financial support theoretically available and the practical hurdles facing employers. Additionally, measures such as wage subsidies for first-time employment attract employers largely because of their immediate financial appeal, rather than due to a commitment to inclusive hiring practices.

One of the most notable policy shifts in 2024 has been the introduction of the professional activation measure, replacing the traditional public works programme. While this measure offers a longer contract duration and higher remuneration, its success in providing sustainable employment opportunities is yet to be assessed. Additionally, NGO-led initiatives, such as the YDF's career centres, fill critical gaps in career guidance and skill development but face financial uncertainty, raising concerns about their long-term viability.

Cross-sectoral links between employment policies and other social policies, particularly education and social protection, remain weak. The lack of effective transitional programmes between education and employment, particularly for young persons with disabilities, exacerbates labour market exclusion. Many persons with disabilities enter the workforce with outdated or inadequate skills, and requalification efforts are insufficient to bridge this gap. Additionally, the interplay between social benefits and employment remains a deterrent, as some persons with disabilities fear losing entitlements upon securing employment, despite the fact that certain disability-related benefits are not linked to employment status.

Beyond ALMPs, the report highlights the critical absence of social services essential for the independent living of persons with disabilities and their integration into the workplace. Key services, such as personal assistance and supported living, remain severely under-resourced, limited to a fraction of the population and with some actual barriers in access to those services. Insufficient access to social service hinders the independence of persons with disabilities and limits their readiness and capacity to participate in the workforce.

There are also gender disparities when it comes to the employment of persons with disabilities, with women with disabilities often attaining higher educational qualifications. Women face additional barriers in rural areas, where traditional gender roles and reliance on spousal agricultural insurance limit their access to employment services.

Going forward, Serbia's ALMPs for persons with disabilities should prioritise greater coordination between stakeholders, increased employer engagement and enhanced financial sustainability for effective initiatives. More robust monitoring and impact assessment mechanisms are needed to assess the long-term impact of measures and address inefficiencies in their implementation. Furthermore, policy adjustments should focus on improving transitional support between education and employment, ensuring that ALMPs better reflect the diverse needs of persons with disabilities and contribute to their meaningful and sustainable inclusion in the labour market.

In conclusion, while Serbia's ALMPs reflect a structural commitment to improving persons with disabilities employment rates, a critical reassessment is necessary. Policies should address transparency in fund allocation, improve social service support for independent living and personal assistance, streamline access to financial incentives, and strengthen coordination with educational institutions for better transition planning. A transformative shift in both policy and societal attitudes toward the rights of persons with disabilities in the labour market is essential to improving Serbia's employment measures.

6.2 Recommendations

The analysis has uncovered certain challenges in the employment of persons with disabilities. Based on the strengths and weaknesses identified in the analysis, competent authorities may consider the following measures:

1. Enhancing financial sustainability and transparency

- Increase budget allocations for persons with disabilities employment programmes, ensuring that funds keep pace with inflation and evolving labour market needs.
- Improve transparency in the allocation and use of the Fund for Professional Rehabilitation and Employment by publishing annual reports on spending and ensuring employer contributions directly benefit persons with disabilities employment measures.
- Reduce administrative barriers and delays in fund disbursement, particularly for workplace adaptations, to encourage greater employer participation.

2. Strengthening employer engagement and incentives

- Provide additional incentives for employers hiring persons with disabilities with higher support needs to reduce the systemic avoidance of workplace accommodations.
- Expand employer training and awareness programmes, ensuring companies understand the benefits of inclusive hiring and available support measures.
- Introduce employer benefits for businesses that demonstrate a commitment to sustained persons with disabilities employment and inclusive workplace practices, especially for employers with higher support needs and offering workplace adjustments.

3. Improving vocational training and the labour market transition

- Develop structured transition programmes from education to employment, including early career guidance for young persons with disabilities.
- Expand requalification and vocational training programmes to align the skills of persons with disabilities with evolving market demands, ensuring that outdated skills do not hinder employment opportunities.
- Ensure that university and vocational training programmes actively include persons with disabilities, removing structural barriers that prevent their participation in diverse fields.
- Encourage stronger collaboration between the National Employment Service, educational institutions and employers to create direct pathways from training to employment.

4. Scaling up personalised support services

- Consider adopting the YDF's model of individual employment support and expanding it nationwide, including through partnerships with specialist non-profit organisations.
- Establish a sufficiently resourced job coaching service within the NES, providing long-term support for persons with disabilities transitioning into the labour market throughout Serbia.
- Provide continuous post-employment support for persons with disabilities and their employers to ensure successful long-term labour market integration.
- Consider outsourcing employment support services to specialist non-profit organisations.

5. Work capacity assessment reform

- Change the rules and procedures governing the work capacity assessment and introduce a socio-contextual, rights-based approach to assessment.
- Assessments should be highly individual and aimed at facilitating employment.
- Assessments should account for barriers to the employment of persons with disabilities and identify any necessary adjustments, supports or retraining as far as possible.
- No outcome of any capacity assessment should restrict the right of a person to work in the open labour market.
- Involve persons with disabilities in the processes of drafting and adopting legislative amendments, as well as later on in the functioning of bodies tasked with performing work capacity assessments.

6. Addressing social services and accessibility gaps

- Expand the availability of personal assistance and supported living services to enable persons with disabilities to live independently and access employment opportunities.
- Remove restrictive eligibility criteria that exclude persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities from personal assistance services.
- Improve accessibility to public transportation, municipal infrastructure and workplaces to facilitate the mobility and participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market.

7. Strengthening monitoring, evaluation and policy coordination

- Establish a robust monitoring and evaluation framework for ALMPs, including performance indicators to measure the impact of employment policies on persons with disabilities, and publicly report on it.
- Conduct regular reviews of the effectiveness of NES-led initiatives and make evidence-based policy adjustments to improve outcomes.

- Enhance coordination between the employment, education and social protection sectors to ensure holistic support for persons with disabilities.
- Consider undertaking an analysis of the capacities and needs of local NES branches, particularly concerning persons with disabilities employment advisors where capacity limitations appear, and take action in line with the findings.
- Increase data collection and research on gender-specific barriers to persons with disabilities employment, particularly for women in rural areas.
- Explore reasons for the lower levels of education attained by men with disabilities when compared to women and consider undertaking gender-sensitive measures to improve their educational achievements.

ANNEX

List of interviewees and organisations

The interviews were carried out with the following institutions and organisations:

- Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs
- National Employment Service
- National Employment Service, Kragujevac branch
- Naša Kuća Association, Naša Kuća Social Enterprise
- University Centre for Students with Disabilities of the University of Belgrade
- Association of Companies for the Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities
- Youth with Disabilities Forum
- International Labour Organization Office for Serbia

ACRONYMS

ALMM	Active Labour Market Measures
ALMP	Active Labour Market Policy
APR	Agencija za Privredne Registre (Business Registers Agency)
CIPS	Centres for Information and Professional Counselling
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CSW	Centres for Social Work
DES	Drustvo za zapošljavanje invalida DES (Society for the Employment of Persons with Disabilities)
DPO	Disability Persons Organisation
EAA	European Accessibility Act
EC	European Commission
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
EUROSTAT	Statistical Office of the European Union
EU-SILC	EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions
FPN	Faculty of Political Science
GALI	Global Activity Limitation Instrument
GAP III	Gender Action Plan 2021-2025
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation)
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOE	International Organisation of Employers
IOP	Individualni Obrazovni Plan (Individual Education Plan)

IT	Information Technology
LPDPD	Law on the Prevention of Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities
LPREPD	Law on the Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities
LSG	Local Self-Governments
MOLEVSA	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs
MSs	Member States
NALED	National Alliance for Local Economic Development
NES	National Employment Service
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OPD	Organisation of Persons with Disabilities
PCs	Partner Countries
PES	Public Employment Services
PIO Fund	Penzijsko i Invalidsko Osiguranje Fond (Pension and Disability Insurance Fund)
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
PRPD	Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
PwD	Persons with Disabilities
RSD	Serbian Dinar
RZS	Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia
SIPRU	Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit
SNS	Srpska napredna stranka (Serbian Progressive Party)
UN	United Nations
UN CRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
YAP	Youth Action Plan
YDF	Youth with Disabilities Forum

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