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FOR
ALL



2030

SERBIA

2030 AGENDA IN SERBIA:

IS THE END GOAL IN SIGHT?



Немачка
сарадња
DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT



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The report was prepared within the framework of the SDGs for All Platform, which offers significant social actors, such as civil society, the business sector, academia and the research community, professional associations, the media, and citizens, with a space for broad social dialogue on aligning Serbia's development priorities with the goals outlined in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Platform is structured around three thematic pillars corresponding to the three dimensions of sustainable development: social, economic, and environmental protection dimensions, but it operates in an integrated manner, considering the close interconnection and interweaving of the sustainable development goals.

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Introduction

Following the establishment of the concept of sustainable development and the first attempts to operationalize and achieve it, from Agenda 21 through the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations (UN) defined a new global development agenda – the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It was adopted on September 25, 2015, and is based on three fundamental pillars:

- Eradicate poverty,
- Protect the planet, and
- Ensure prosperity for all.

The key difference compared to the Millennium Development Goals is that 2030 Agenda applies to all countries in the world, not just the developing countries. Its main promise is *leave no one behind*. The Agenda has 17 ambitious Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are further operationalized through 169 associated targets. The progress is monitored using 248 (progress) indicators. By signing the UN resolution Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development the Republic of Serbia committed to its implementation. Considering that there are only six years left for implementation, it is crucial to assess how far Serbia has come in this significant process and how dedicated it has been to it.

In the latest Progress Report on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 in the Republic of Serbia issued by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (hereinafter: SORS), the progress was presented based on

data collected by SORS for a total of 137 indicators (Babović, 2023). This is an improvement compared to 2022, when the number of indicators was 125. However, progress is not monitored in relation to the nation-specific goals – since Serbia has not yet defined them – but rather based on the trend of change for which data is available.

Additional information on Serbia's progress in achieving the SDGs can also be found in international reports. One of such reports is the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24, prepared by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network which assesses the progress of EU member states, candidate countries, EFTA members and the United Kingdom in implementing the SDGs according to the methodology and indicators of Eurostat.

According to the latest Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24, the Republic of Serbia ranks 30th out of 34 European countries analysed in the report, an improvement of one position compared to the last year's report. For five goals, it is noted that they are on track for achievement, for five goals there has been slight progress, while five goals are assessed as stagnant. Data is not available for SDG 2: Zero Hunger and SDG 14: Life Below Water (Lafortune et al, 2024).

Recognizing the importance of Agenda 2030 and its implementation in Serbia, the SDGs for All Platform has prepared three reports over the past four years on the Republic of Serbia's readiness to implement Agenda 2030, as well as one report pre-

senting the development priorities proposed by the non-state sector. In 2020, two documents were prepared, titled Serbia 2030: Readiness for Implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report. The first report on the Republic of Serbia's readiness to implement Agenda 2030 provides an overview of preparedness for achieving the SDGs through the analysis of public policy documents, the legal and institutional framework, and mechanisms for monitoring progress. The aim of the second document Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report was to propose key development priorities based on the 2030 Agenda that Serbia should pursue to ensure a better quality of life for its citizens, as well as to demonstrate how the 2030 Agenda and SDGs can be utilized to formulate national development priorities and policies.

The second report on readiness of the Republic of Serbia to implement Agenda 2030 was prepared in 2022 and it analysed changes in strategic, legislative and institutional framework compared to the first report, as well as in the mechanisms for monitoring progress in the implementation of the SDGs during the period from September 2020 to September 2021. The third report was prepared in 2023, and it also include the analysis of changes in strategic, legislative and institutional framework, as well as in the mechanisms for monitoring progress in the implementation of the SDGs during the period from September 2021 to December 2022. In addition, an assessment was conducted of progress in achieving the prioritized targets within the development priorities proposed by the non-state sectors gathered around the SDGs for All Platform, which was published in 2020.

In this fourth report, which builds on the previous analyses, we explored what has happened from January 2023 to February 2024. Have there been changes in public policies, the legislative, or institutional framework? Has Serbia defined its priority targets and made progress in achieving them? How far have we progressed in reaching the goals, and what more needs to be done to successfully implement Agenda 2030?

Data for the report were collected up to February 2024. The report is organized according to development priorities (i.e., priority areas), within which an assessment of progress in specific priority targets has been made, as well as assessment of changes in the strategic, legislative, and institutional framework for the implementation of individual SDGs. As in the previous report, an analysis of the alignment of the Economic Reform Programme 2024 - 2026 (hereinafter: ERP) has been prepared, as it is currently the highest publicly available planning document of the Republic of Serbia. The aim is to gain insight into how the implementation of the structural reforms from the ERP will contribute to the implementation of Agenda 2030. Like the previous one, this report is intended for representatives of the public and private sectors, the academic community, civil society organizations (CSOs), as well as citizens who wish to gain insight into how prepared the Republic of Serbia currently is to achieve the SDGs, whether progress has been made in specific priority areas, and what possible next steps could be taken.

Methodology

The report was prepared in three phases.

1) Initial analysis of public policy documents and relevant data

The preparation of this report involved an analysis of public policy documents and relevant data. The basis for analysing national-level processes that support the achievement of the SDGs consisted of guidelines and manuals published by international organizations and research institutions. These documents describe processes that are important for ensuring preparedness for implementation of Agenda 2030, including aligning national planning documents and legal frameworks with sustainable development goals, establishing institutional mechanisms and coordination mechanisms, as well as methods for monitoring and reporting on progress. Additionally, an analysis of the alignment of the ERP 2024–2026 with the sustainable development goals and their associated targets was conducted. The analysis pertains to key changes that occurred from January 2023 to February 2024.

The initial report was prepared as a result of analysing the framework for achieving each of the SDGs, which are organized into priority areas presented in the publication Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report, which was published by the Platform in 2020. The Report includes a description of the status of each SDG based on the analysis of the most recent data related to the indicators set for

each target. For each priority area, recommendations for improving the framework and processes for achieving the SDGs in the Republic of Serbia have been formulated, along with the status of recommendations made in previous reports of the SDGs for All Platform.

2) Consultations with stakeholders

The initial report was sent to representatives of stakeholders. The goal of that part of the report's preparation was to provide stakeholders with an opportunity to share their experiences and, based on their expertise, offer suggestions regarding whether all relevant documents had been analysed, share data sources that are useful for the analysis with researchers, and provide their opinions on the findings. Independent experts and representatives of public and private sectors, as well as academic community and civil society organizations (CSOs) were involved in consultations.

3) Preparation of the final report

The draft report was revised in accordance with the comments and suggestions from stakeholders. In addition to the revised findings, the final report also includes the results of the analysis of national-level processes that support the achievement of the SDGs.

**PLANNING
DOCUMENTS,
INSTITUTIONAL
MECHANISMS, AND
MONITORING PROGRESS
AND REPORTING ON
THE ACHIEVEMENT
OF SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

The Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda are very complex. To achieve them, it is essential to adapt them to national circumstances. Adapting the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda to the national context involves defining development priorities and associated targets at the national level that reflect the national priorities of the Republic of Serbia. The adaptation process should be carried out with as broad as possible societal consultations. Public Policy Secretariat of the Republic of Serbia (hereinafter: PPS) conducted an analysis of the alignment of planning documents with the SDGs for the first time in 2018. The purpose of this analysis is to determine which goals are or are not included in the national planning documents. The analysis was last updated in February 2024 based on current public policy documents (PPS, 2024).

The conclusion of the latest analysis is that the overall coverage of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets within the planning framework of the Republic of Serbia increased from 78% in 2022 to 82.7% in 2023. The analysis indicated that when determining the coverage of the SDGs, the goals identified as irrelevant for the Republic of Serbia were not taken into account. Within Sustainable Development Goal 14, Life Below Water, there are no valid planning documents that contribute to achieving the targets relevant to the context of the Republic of Serbia. It was also highlighted that the ERP has the greatest relative importance for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. This document is relevant for a total of 36 targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (PPS, 2024).

Key documents for prioritizing the SDGs are the development planning documents. According to the Law on the Planning Sys-

tem of the Republic of Serbia (hereinafter: LPS) (NARS, 2018a), in terms of hierarchy, the Development Plan is the highest, long-term development planning document in the country (NARS, 2018a, Article 6). The Development plan should define development priorities of the Republic of Serbia and its regions, as well as the guidelines for their achievement. When drafting the Plan, it is important to ensure that the document is aligned with assumed international commitments, which presents an opportunity for alignment with the 2030 Agenda. Following the Development Plan is the Investment Plan, which is prepared in accordance with specific development priorities for the period of seven years. The third document in development planning is the Spatial Plan, which should be aligned with the Development Plan.

Although the Government of the Republic of Serbia (hereinafter: GRS) was supposed to submit the Draft Development Plan to the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia (hereinafter: NARS) for consideration and adoption by 1 January 2020 (NARS, 2018a, Art. 53, Para. 1), this has not yet been done, without a clear reason or explanation. The Law on the Planning System does not provide for penalties in the event of non-implementation of the obligations stipulated by it, which may be one of the reasons for the delay. In 2023, the initial steps were taken towards the preparation of the Development Plan of the Republic of Serbia. GRS adopted the Regulation on the Procedure for Preparing the Draft Development Plan of the Republic of Serbia at its session held on 29 June 2023. This regulation more closely defines the procedure for preparing the Draft Development Plan. It also mandates conducting a broad consultative process to ensure transparency, as this document regulates the long-term impact on the development of the econo-

my and society. Special attention is given to development planning in accordance with the 2030 Agenda (PPS, 2023). Despite the adoption of the mentioned regulation, the process it prescribes has not yet begun, as the announcement of elections in November 2023 halted the establishment of a governing body for the preparation and monitoring of the Development Plan, which should consist of ministers and state secretaries. It was expected that the new government would continue the process, but considering the previous developments, there are reasonable doubts that the Development Plan will be adopted in the near future. This is a significant challenge in achieving the SDGs, as there are only six years left to implement the 2030 Agenda, and the Republic of Serbia still lacks a public document that defines long-term national development priorities.

Localizing the SDGs or integrating them into local planning documents according to the development priorities of local communities, would represent the next step in implementing the 2030 Agenda. This represents a significant step considering the assessment that around 65% of the SDGs can only be implemented at the local level (Prorok et al., 2019). LPS stipulates the adoption of Development Plan of local self-government units (hereinafter: LSGUs) and long-term development planning documents, which are to be adopted for a period of at least seven years (NARS, 2018a, Art. 9). The recommendation from the PPS in the Guidelines for the Preparation of LGU Development Plans is to incorporate the 2030 Agenda during their preparation (Radomirović et al., 2020). Although many local governments were delayed, breaching the legal deadline of 1 January 2021, several local self-government units have adopted local development plans. In addition to the underdeveloped capacities of LSGUs, an

additional problem is the fact that a national development plan has not been adopted, which significantly hampers long-term planning for local governments, as they lack key information about the state's plans for a specific city or municipality.

It is important to note that the NARS has not yet adopted a higher-level document, such as a declaration or resolution, which was announced in 2017, as well as accompanying documents of a binding nature (NARS, 2017). This has resulted in a missed opportunity to give additional significance and place to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals within the legislative framework and planning system of the Republic of Serbia.

The obligations of the Republic of Serbia regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda are complementary to the commitments arising from the process of accession to the European Union (EU). With the document *Next Steps for a Sustainable European Future*, the EU confirmed that it would integrate the SDGs into its plans and public policy documents (European Commission, 2016). The fact that these two processes are inseparable was recognized in the first Voluntary National Review of the Republic of Serbia on the Implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (GRS, 2019). In accordance with this, the PPS, in addition to mapping the country's strategic framework in relation to the SDGs, also mapped the SDGs in relation to the negotiation chapters in the EU accession process. In addition, one of the goals of the national Development Plan should be to harmonize the achievement of the SDGs with the fulfilment of other assumed international obligations and the successful completion of accession negotiations with the EU.

During this reporting period, insufficient importance was given to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals in the public documents and public appearances of representatives of the GRS and

other state bodies. The work plan of the GRS for 2023 did not clearly incorporate the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs tailored to national circumstances.

Establishing Institutional Mechanisms and Coordination Mechanisms for Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

The complexity of the 2030 Agenda itself makes establishing institutional mechanisms and coordination mechanisms a high priority for achieving the SDGs. Adapting to the national context when establishing these mechanisms is widely accepted, highlighting the necessity of cooperation with non-government actors, civil society, the scientific community, and other stakeholders. They should be largely involved in the process of monitoring the achievement of the 2030 Agenda goals. Vertical coordination is also of great importance due to the fact that almost two-thirds of the SDGs cannot be fully achieved without public policies enacted and implemented by regional and local authorities.

During the reporting period, there was no progress in establishing an appropriate institutional framework, although more than half of the period allocated for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda has elapsed. By decision of the GRS, the Inter-Ministerial Working Group for the Implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, was timely established, but has not been functioning since 2020 (GRS, 2015). This was the key coordinating body with the authority to monitor and work on the implementation of this globally significant document. The working group was

responsible for proposing the process for developing the National Sustainable Development Strategy (a document not provided by the LPS, because the law introduces a significantly more detailed National Development Plan), as well as for consolidating opinions and coordinating the activities of all ministries related to the 2030 Agenda. In addition, its task includes reporting on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, preparing the Voluntary National Reports on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as regularly informing the UN Resident Coordinator in Serbia about the results of work in this area.

The focus group of the NARS for developing mechanisms to control the implementation of the SDGs, which operated from 2017 until the dissolution of the parliament in February 2022 due to snap elections, was still not established during 2023. Its task was to oversee and control the work of Inter-Ministerial Working Group for the Implementation of UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, while it was operational, as well as to adopt laws related to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and secure additional funding in this area through the preparation of the Budget Law. In addition, its function was to raise

awareness of the importance of the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda among the members of the NARS.

Ministries play a significant role in the sustainable development planning process, as the 2030 Agenda encompasses numerous topics within their areas of responsibility. However, it is noticeable that there is no information on the ministries' websites about their responsibilities and how they are addressing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Moreover, there is no information about the ministry responsible for managing and coordinating activities related to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, there is no consolidated information about all the institutions and working bodies that have authority in implementing the

2030 Agenda and the SDGs. No clearly defined responsibilities of the ministries regarding the 2030 Agenda cannot be found in the Law on Ministries from 2023 either.

On the other hand, the obligation to achieve the sustainable development goals has been well accepted at local level. The Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM), CSOs working at the local level, including members of the SDGs for All Platform, have implemented numerous projects to assist local self-governments in integrating the SDGs into local planning documents. In addition, the PPS has developed guidelines for the preparation of local development plans in accordance with the sustainable development goals.

Establishing Mechanisms for Monitoring Progress and Reporting on the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals

The key elements for monitoring the implementation of SDGs are 231¹ globally defined indicators. They are used to monitor progress at global, national, regional and local level. States also have a significant responsibility to establish a system for monitoring progress, with the first step being the determination of responsibilities for this activity. Due to the complexity and comprehensiveness of the 2030 Agenda, it is essential to include representatives from ministries, other government bodies, and state institutions, as well as representatives from the civil and business sectors, in the process of progress monitoring and reporting.

When it comes to reporting, the most important role should be played by Inter-Ministerial Working Group for the implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. One of the tasks that was finished was the preparation of the first Voluntary National Review of the Republic of Serbia on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development which was presented at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2019, held at UN headquarters in New York. However, the Inter-Ministerial Group has not been appointed by GRS since 2020, so it is unknown who will lead the process of preparing of the new report.

1 Total number of indicators is 248, but some of them are used to track several SDGs. There is a total of 231 unique indicators.

SORS plays an important role in the monitoring mechanism. Within SORS operates the Group for Sustainable Development Goals and Socio-Economic Indicators tasked with "monitoring, preparing and implementing recommendations necessary for the development, data acquisition and publication of SDG indicators, as well as organizing, preparing and updating data for the DevInfo databases (SORS, 2023a, Art. 7). DevInfo data base and SDG Open Data Portal are regularly updated.²

SORS currently monitors 145³ out of 248 SDG indicators. However, it remains unclear which indicators are applicable to Serbia, as a good number of them pertain to underdeveloped countries. Additionally,

Serbia has not defined target values in the national context for many targets and indicators, which is necessary for the appropriate interpretation of data.

For successful reporting and contextualization of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and considering the significance of Serbia's EU accession process, it would be crucial for the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia to monitor the progress indicators for achieving the SDGs that are tracked by the EU. Specifically, the EU has carefully selected 102 indicators for monitoring the SDGs, which are relevant for implementing EU policies and meet high statistical quality standards.

Table 1 Availability of Sustainable Development Goals Indicators

Availability of SDG indicators			
SDG 1 10/13	SDG 5 12/14	SDG 9 8/12	SDG 13 3/8
SDG 2 6/14	SDG 6 8/11	SDG 10 9/14	SDG 14 1/10
SDG 3 15/28	SDG 7 4/6	SDG 11 10/15	SDG 15 8/14
SDG 4 7/12	SDG 8 9/16	SDG 12 5/13	SDG 16 12/24
SDG 17 10/24			

Source: Babović, 2024.

² See: <https://sdg.indikatori.rs/sr-Latn/>.

³ Available indicators have been obtained from the SDG portal. There have been changes in the number of indicators on the website following the publication of the 2023 Progress Report on the Implementaiton of Sustainable Development Goals in the Republic of Serbia by 2030, when additional indicators were published on the SDG portal.

The lack of data on SDGs implementation at local levels is one of the problems in tracking progress. As previously mentioned, the implementation of most SDGs requires activities at both regional and local levels, making it necessary to invest additional efforts and resources to monitor progress toward achieving these goals in local communities.

SROS published the Progress Report on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 in the Republic of Serbia (for the year 2023) in June 2024. The report was prepared according to Eurostat's methodology, while the measurement itself was not conducted against a quantified target, but rather by tracking data relative to the baseline year for which data is avail-

able. Baseline year is used to calculate a degree of change in positive or negative direction. Due to data availability, progress in this report is mostly monitored over the short term. This highlights the importance of setting nationally specific targets, which have not yet been established in Serbia. Assessing progress rather than the status can give a misleading impression, as a positive change may be rated favourably even when the indicator value suggests that the situation is concerning or quite poor. SORS continued with the best practice of preparing additional reports, which analyse the implementation of the Agenda in the Republic of Serbia from the perspective of specific social groups, in line with the principle "leave no one behind".

Recommendations

Recommendations for Positioning the 2030 Agenda as a Priority Process for Development Management and Implementation

- » It is necessary to clearly define the authority for managing, coordinating, and implementing the 2030 Agenda and achieving the SDGs in the Law on Ministries.
- » It is necessary for the processes significant for the management, coordination, and implementation of the 2030 Agenda, delegated to ministries and bodies of the GRS, to be included in the annual work plan of the GRS.

Recommendations for Aligning Planning Documents and the Legal Framework with the 2030 Agenda

- » It is necessary to prioritize the adoption of the Development Plan of the Republic of Serbia, the highest hierarchical document for development planning, in accordance with the Law on the Planning System, which includes priority development goals. The adoption of the Development Plan is a legal obligation, and the deadline for its adoption was 1 January 2020.

- » When adopting the Development Plan, a broad social dialogue should be conducted, which involves defining development priorities and adapting the SDGs to the context in Serbia based on an extensive consultative process.
- » It is necessary to adopt an Investment Plan and a Spatial Plan following the adoption of the Development Plan, in accordance with the established priority development goals (as prescribed by the Law on the Planning System). The process of adopting these documents should be transparent and conducted with the participation of stakeholders and the general public.

Recommendations for Establishing Institutional and Coordination Mechanisms for Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

- » It is necessary for GRS to promptly form new Inter-Ministerial Working Group for the Implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which would support intersectoral cooperation and coordination, essential due to the multisectoral nature of the 2030 Agenda.
- » It is necessary to develop a work plan for the Inter-Ministerial Working Group for the Implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including guidelines for achieving goals, for assignment of responsibilities and for collaboration with stakeholders, in order to ensure optimal horizontal (between different sectors) and vertical coordination (between national and local levels).
- » One of the tasks of the Inter-Ministerial Working Group for Implementation of UN 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development should be to establish collaboration with representatives of stakeholders in various activities, including the possibility of their participation in the Group's meetings, as well as consulting them in monitoring the achievement of SDGs and in the preparation of periodic reports.
- » Reestablish the Focus Group of the NARS for the Development of Control Mechanisms for the Implementation Process and Supervision of the Achievement of the SDGs and make its activities public to all stakeholders and citizens of Serbia.
- » Publish consolidated information on the official websites of the GRS and relevant institutions regarding all institutions, working groups, and other bodies that have responsibilities concerning the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.
- » Within each ministry, include in the internal organization and job classification documents a department, office, or employee who is officially responsible for the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the SDGs.

Recommendations for Establishing Progress Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on the Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

- » Progress Report on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 should be supplemented with an assessment of the gap to the targeted indicator values and effectiveness of the related public policy measures, in collaboration with the competent institutions, working groups and other bodies. The report should clearly indicate the indicators for which there are no available data and for which no conclusions can be drawn. The report should also include the indicators selected by the EU and monitored by Eurostat (currently 102 indicators) given the recognized importance of linking the implementation of the 2030 Agenda with Serbia's EU accession process. The SORS website displaying the SDG indicators should specifically mark the indicators that are assessed as not applicable to Serbia.
- » When organizing workshops and other activities related to discussing indicators, a public call for participation should be announced for representatives of stakeholders and actively promoted through traditional and new media. When preparing the next voluntary national report, broad public participation should be ensured. Stakeholders should have the opportunity to submit data and documents for the report, as well as to comment on the draft report and influence its content.
- » SORS should continue its best practice of publishing reports on progress in implementation of SDGs among members of certain vulnerable groups⁴ considering the importance of monitoring the situation concerning vulnerable groups and the principle of the 2030 Agenda - "leave no one behind".

Analysis of the Alignment of the Economic Reform Programme (ERP) 2024 - 2026 with the Sustainable Development Goals

ERP is the main strategic document of GRS in socio-economic dialogue with European Commission and the EU member states. The ERP contains an outlook on the medium-term macroeconomic and fiscal framework, guidelines for conducting monetary and fiscal policy, as well as a list of planned priority structural reforms. This document is updated yearly, covers the next three-year period and is published by the Ministry of Finance (hereinafter: MF).

Among other things, the ERP has long been the most important official, publicly available document for development planning in the Republic of Serbia.

In the ERP, structural reforms are divided into three thematic sections – "Competitiveness", "Sustainability and Resilience", and "Human Capital and Social Policy", which are further categorized into a total of 13 more narrowly defined reform areas.

4 See: <https://sdg.indikator.rs/sr-latn/dokumenti/>.

Within each thematic section, two new priority structural reforms are identified, totalling six priority structural reforms to be implemented over the next three years. The goals intended to be achieved through the planned reforms in the ERP are often complementary to the objectives of other strategies, which is why the ERP includes a table showing the alignment of the proposed goals for the six identified structural reforms with other relevant public policy documents, including the SDGs.

The aim of this analysis is to examine the connection between the new structural

reforms from the ERP and the SDGs from the environmental, social, and economic pillars of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Following the methodology from the previous Report on Serbia's Readiness to Implement the 2030 Agenda from 2023, the analysis was conducted by examining the activities and indicators that will be used to monitor implementation of the six identified structural reforms and includes an assessment regarding the extent to which these contribute to achieving the goals and targets of sustainable development within the three mentioned pillars.

1. Analysis of the Alignment of Structural Reforms in the ERP with the SDGs from the Environmental Pillar

Structural Reform 1: Improving the business conditions, business environment, and market for industrial and agricultural products in the Republic of Serbia

Structural reform 1 refers to the diversification and increase of the volume of Serbia's foreign trade, both regionally and globally, by enhancing the competitiveness of all actors in the domestic market, including state-owned enterprises, as well as improving the legal certainty for business entities. Structural reform 1 contains five separate measures with a total of 13 planned reform activities. In addition to having a direct impact on improving the international competitiveness of the Serbian economy, this structural reform is also expected to have a positive indirect effect on environmental protection and climate change, as its ultimate goal is the full integration of the Republic of Serbia into the EU single

market and alignment with the provisions of the European Green Deal. This requires improving technical regulations and fully implementing standards that include the applicable environmental protection standards.⁵ Furthermore, the structural reform plans for measures to enhance market surveillance to ensure more effective monitoring of compliance with established standards in the area of energy efficiency, environmental protection, and reduction of harmful impacts on climate change. Activities within this reform are quite broadly defined, so investments in wastewater treatment facilities and waste management are planned as part of improving rural infrastructure, which should directly

5 SRPS ISO 14001 – Environmental Management Systems; SRPS ISO 50001 – Energy Management Systems.

contribute to reducing pollution caused by agriculture sector.

The ERP states that the implementation of this structural reform will support the achievement of two SDGs within the environmental pillar: 7⁶ through target "7.3 By 2030, double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency"; and 12⁷ through targets "12.5 By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse" and "12.8 By 2030, ensure that the people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature".

The indicators that will be used to monitor implementation of Structural Reform 1 relate to: a) fulfilment of trade facilitation measures that the Republic of Serbia received according to the UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation; b) improvement in the value of the Global Quality Infrastructure Index (GQII index); c) share of agricultural and food products in the total export value; and d) the proportion of convictions in relation to the number of complaints filed to initiate misdemeanour proceedings by inspections in the area of the informal economy in one year.

Progress in integrating the Republic of Serbia into the EU common market, which entails aligning with the provisions of the European Green Deal and the Green Agen-

da for the Western Balkans could have a broad positive impact on achieving all three aforementioned sustainable development targets. However, based on the proposed outcome indicators, it is not possible to provide a reliable assessment of the extent to which their achievement will contribute to reaching specific SDGs within the environmental pillar during the period from 2024 to 2026. Firstly, most of the planned activities relate to the preparation and adoption of amendments to the regulatory framework, but the ERP does not provide more precise information on when their full implementation is expected.

Additionally, none of the proposed outcome indicators allows for direct monitoring of the degree of integration of the Republic of Serbia into the EU single market, which is recognized as the main channel for contributing to the achievement of the mentioned SDGs. For example, the ERP plans to increase the value of the GQII from 82 in 2021 to 84 in 2026. Given that the GQII is a comprehensive and composite index of quality infrastructure, this result is likely achievable through the implementation of activities that do not have a direct connection to specific SDGs within the environmental pillar. As for the remaining three performance indicators, it can be said that they have no connection to the specified environmental targets of sustainable development.

Structural Reform 3: Greening The Energy Sector by Increasing Energy Production from Renewable Sources and Improving Energy Efficiency

Structural reform 3 represents the continuation of reform activities in the energy

sector of the Republic of Serbia, which intensified particularly after the onset of the

6 SDG 7: Affordable and clean energy

7 SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production

energy crisis near the end of 2021. The aim of this structural reform is to contribute to the transformation of energy generation by shifting from fossil fuels to renewable sources and improving energy efficiency, which, as part of a broader package of energy reforms, should enable the green transition of Serbia's economy and society.

The first measure within this reform relates to increasing the share of electricity generated from renewable sources by providing incentives for the construction of new wind and solar power plants with a total capacity of 1.3 GW over the three-year implementation of the ERP. It is planned for producers generating electricity from renewable sources to be protected from market price fluctuations relative to the price the producer offers at auction, with any difference between these prices covered by applying a dual market premium. The second measure aims to improve efficiency through measurable energy savings on the end-use side. This is planned to be achieved by switching to consumption-based billing for energy in 20 LSGUs for buildings currently connected to the district heating system on a flat-rate basis. Improving energy efficiency in multi-family buildings connected to the district heating system with the highest energy consumption among the reported facilities will be financed through a public ESCO (Energy Service Company) concept. In this process, the ESCO partner will be the state, while the LSGUs will conduct public calls to select multi-family buildings for energy rehabilitation and, in the next phase, transition them to a consumption-based heating service billing system.

The ERP states that the implementation of this structural reform will be supported by SDG 7⁸ and all its associated targets: "7.1 By

2030, ensure universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services"; "7.2 By 2030, increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix"; "7.3 By 2030, double the global rate of improvement of energy efficiency"; "7.a By 2030, enhance international cooperation to facilitate access to clean energy research and technology, including renewable energy, energy efficiency and advance and cleaner fossil-fuel technology and promote investment in energy infrastructure and clean energy technology"; i "7.b By 2030, expand infrastructure and upgrade technology for supplying modern and sustainable energy services for all in developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and landlocked developing countries, in accordance with their respective programmes of support".

Two performance indicators have been defined to monitor the implementation of structural reform 3, which relate to: a) new capacities for generation of electricity from renewable energy sources (RES) through the allocation of incentives via auction processes for wind and solar power plants (in MW), and b) energy savings in rehabilitated multi-family buildings that consume the most energy compared to the state before rehabilitation (average expressed in percentages).

Based on the defined indicators, it is possible to establish a direct and/or indirect link between the implementation of this reform and all the mentioned targets, as they encompass both key dimensions of SDG 7: the installation of new renewable energy capacities and the improvement of energy efficiency. The first performance indicator clearly establishes the goal of constructing new wind power plants (1,000 MW) and

solar power plants (300 MW) by 2026, and achieving this result would enable a significant increase in the installed capacities of these types of renewable energy sources in Serbia.⁹ Thus, there is a clear and direct connection between the implementation of the structural reform and targets 7.1, 7.2, and 7.b, which fundamentally relate to increasing the availability of clean energy from renewable sources and the growth of its share in end consumption. Given that the second indicator measures the results of planned activities in improving energy efficiency in district heating systems for multi-family buildings, there is also a

clear connection between the implementation of structural reform 3 and target 7.3. Regarding target 7.a, the ERP does not include a performance indicator that would allow for the direct measurement of the contribution of structural reform 3 to its achievement. However, the document explicitly states that activities are being carried out to find strategic partners for the implementation of this structural reform, from which it can be indirectly concluded that structural reform 3 will likely have a positive impact on strengthening international cooperation in the development of cleaner forms of energy.

Structural Reform 4: Greening The Road and Rail Transport in The Republic of Serbia

Structural reform 4 pertains to the regulation of transport services and the reduction of harmful gas emissions from the transport sector. It involves reducing the need for individual transportation while simultaneously increasing the mobility of the population by enhancing the availability and attractiveness of both road and rail public passenger transport and freight transport services. The goal of this reform is to fully align the domestic transport sector with the regulations, practices, and standards of the EU.

The first measure relates to improving the intercity road passenger transport system in accordance with EU standards, which should ultimately enhance the quality of services provided, increase its efficiency

and competitiveness, improve the mobility of the population, and reduce the negative impact on the environment due to decreased use of passenger cars. The second measure generally has the same objectives and represents a continuation of reforms from the previous period aimed at improving the quality of railway infrastructure. As part of this measure, the continuation of the electrification of railway lines that have not yet been electrified is planned,¹⁰ along with the procurement of new electric traction units, which should further stimulate the mobility of the population between cities.

The ERP states that the implementation of this reform will support one of the sustainable development goals within the envi-

⁹ According to data for 2023, the installed capacity of wind power plants in Serbia was approximately 400 MW, while solar power plants had a capacity of around 60 MW. Thus, the implementation of SR3 would allow for an increase in installed capacities by 2.5 times in the case of wind energy and even 5 times in the case of solar power plants.

¹⁰ In addition to completing work on already initiated projects, the electrification of new railway routes is planned: Niš to Dimitrovgrad and Belgrade Center to Vršac.

ronmental pillar – SDG 13¹¹, specifically one of its targets: "13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning". The performance indicators that will be used to monitor implementation of Structural Reform 4 relate to: a) total number of passengers transported by road; b) share of population with access to public transportation by sex, age and disability; i c) total number of passengers in rail transport.

Although none of the mentioned performance indicators allow for establishing a direct link to target 13.2, the planned activities certainly indicate that Structural Reform 4 supports its achievement. The implementation of this reform contributes to the in-

tegration of the climate change dimension into the development strategy of the transport sector in the Republic of Serbia, as measures to improve intercity road and rail transport can potentially reduce dependence on the use of passenger cars and ultimately lead to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. The anticipated improvement of the road transport system would enable more energy-efficient transportation of a larger number of passengers, while greater reliance on rail for the transport of goods and passengers would further enhance the structure of the transport sector in the Republic of Serbia in terms of its contribution to addressing climate change.

2. Analysis of the Alignment of Structural Reforms in the ERP with the SDGs from the Social Pillar

Structural Reform 1: Improving the business conditions, business environment, and market for industrial and agricultural products in the Republic of Serbia

The essence of the reform relates to the diversification and further growth of Serbia's foreign trade at the regional and international levels, as well as the improvement of competitiveness and legal certainty for all economic entities within the territory of the Republic of Serbia, regardless of their origin and type of ownership. The reform is primarily focused on economic entities and the removal of obstacles to their operations.

This reform is related to two targets within SDG 2, which are:

- target "2.3 By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous people,

family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value additional and non-farm employment" and

- target "2.4 By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and the progressively improve land and soil quality".

11 SDG 13: Climate action

Under Measure 3 – Improvement of Agricultural Competitiveness, the following activities are planned: improvement of infrastructure in rural areas, further progress in land consolidation, regulation of market and quality control of agricultural products, legal regulation of organic production, as well as enhancement of the capacities of the relevant ministry through the digitalization and automation of the financial support system for farmers. The performance indicator related to this measure is "The share of the value of agricultural and food products in the total export value" and cannot be directly linked to the targets of SDG 2.

Considering that the last agricultural census was conducted in 2018 and that the legal framework in this area is limited during the reporting period, it cannot be concluded to what extent the planned activities may impact the economically most vulnerable rural households or what the effects of the new measures will be (target 2.3). The Law on Amendments to the Law on Incentives in Agriculture and Rural Development from October 2023 increases incentives for production on small agricultural plots, while also raising the size limit of the plot for which incentives can be obtained (from 20 to 100 hectares). This increases competition for obtaining incentives and may adversely affect the smallest agricultural holdings. Despite the increase in direct incentives, the 2024 Budget Law¹²

plans savings of approximately 7 billion dinars related to rural development measures, which further limits the support available for small agricultural producers. This should lead to positive effects in achieving target 2.3. The implementation of existing laws related to land consolidation and other areas of agricultural activity primarily aims to strengthen the competitiveness and productivity of production (target 2.4), as well as to consolidate agricultural land and manage parcels more efficiently.

In the context of the impact of this reform on social goals, no other aspects of SDG 2 can be identified in the analysed planning document, aside from targets 2.3 and 2.4 in the aforementioned sense. Currently, data on the movement of indicators relevant to achieving targets 2.3 and 2.4 cannot be obtained through the SORS website, which hinders monitoring the effects of reforms in specific cases. When considering SDG 2 as a whole, it can be concluded that there is currently no issue with food supply in the Serbian market, but the continuous rise in food prices is not in line with achieving this goal.

Structural reforms do not encompass areas of social and health care; rather, these are mentioned solely through the description of subareas of the ERP. Due to the aforementioned reasons, the targets related to SDG 1 and SDG 3 have been neglected in the current structural reforms.

Structural Reform 5: Education for Sustainable Development and Workforce Readiness

The reform according to the ERP aims to increase the relevance of the education system through a multidimensional focus on learning related to practical work, thereby ensuring a more efficient response

from the education system to the needs of the economy and employability.

The ERP states that the implementation of this structural reform will contribute to

12 "Official Gazette RS" no. 92/2023.

achieving Goals 4¹³ and 8¹⁴ through the following targets: "4.3. By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university"; "4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship" and "8.6 – By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training".

The structural reform should be implemented through two measures: "Qualifications oriented towards labour market needs" and "Improvement of conditions for knowledge and skills development in the education system". The first measure has been repeated since 2017 and is, as before, focused on dual education and the development of the National Qualifications Framework. The second measure should be implemented through the preparation of video materials containing instructions and demonstrations for all laboratory exercises in physics, chemistry, and biology for primary schools and high schools, as well as equipping the physics, chemistry, and biology labs in primary schools and high schools.

The indicators that will be used to monitor implementation of structural reform relate to: a) number of established regional training centres; b) number of qualifications visible on the European Qualifications Portal; c) percentage of students enrolled in the first year of the dual education system compared to the total number of students enrolled in the first year of secondary vocational education; d) extent of produced and published video lessons on video platforms, with instructions for conducting all labora-

tory exercises prescribed by regulations for teaching physics, chemistry, and biology in primary schools and high schools; e) level of equipment of high schools for conducting prescribed laboratory exercises in physics, biology, and chemistry; level of equipment of primary schools for conducting prescribed laboratory exercises in physics, biology, and chemistry.

The structural reform, in terms of its scope and planned activities, does not contribute to ensuring equal access to quality vocational and university education, nor does it significantly increase the number of young people and adults with relevant skills, as outlined in targets 4.3 and 4.4. None of the planned activities relate to improving the quality of the teaching and learning process, which would involve the application of student-centered teaching/learning methods, the provision of quality and free textbooks and instructional materials, and ensuring quality working and learning conditions, particularly for socioeconomically disadvantaged students, thereby ensuring equal access to quality education. There are several reasons that we mentioned in the previous report due to which the structural reform focused on dual education does not contribute to the quality and relevancy of education. First, there are no learning quality standards at employers, as the accreditation of employers does not assess whether the work tasks in the company have the potential for learning and whether they lead to achieving defined outcomes. Second, the dual education model does not guarantee that educational profiles are relevant to the labour market, as enrolment is carried out solely based on the interest of employers. Third, only 4.1% of high-school students are enrolled in dual education, so this subsystem

13 SDG 4: Quality education.

14 SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth.

of education, even if it were relevant and of high quality, has no impact on achieving the aforementioned targets.¹⁵ Equipping specialized classrooms and creating

video materials are not activities that will enhance knowledge and skills in the education system, as stated in the ERP, if there is a lack of competent teachers.¹⁶

3. Analysis of the Alignment of Structural Reforms in the ERP with the SDGs from the Economic Pillar

Structural Reform 1: Improving the business conditions, business environment, and market for industrial and agricultural products in the Republic of Serbia

The goal of the structural reform is the diversification and further growth of foreign trade at the regional and global levels, increasing the competitiveness of market participants in the Republic of Serbia, with a particular focus on companies owned by the Republic of Serbia, as well as enhancing the legal certainty of economic entities.

It is stated that this structural reform will contribute to goals 9, 11, and 16 through the following targets:

- "9.2 Promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and, by 2030, significantly raise industry's share of employment and gross domestic product, in line with national circumstances, and double its share in least developed countries";

- "11.3 By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries";
- "16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels".

This reform is partially aligned with the sustainable development target 9.2. Measures 1 and 2, which relate to "Improvement of conditions and removing barriers to trade" and "Enhancement of the strategic quality infrastructure framework", have the potential to contribute to achieving target 9.2, which involves strengthening industry and increasing the share of industry in the em-

15 According to the Ministry of Education, 9,092 students (7,366 boys and 1,726 girls) are enrolled in dual education in the 2023/2024 school year, which represents only 4.1% of the total number of students enrolled in secondary schools.

16 In its Platform of the University of Belgrade (UB) for Improving the Status of Teacher Education Programs at UB and Preserving the Education System in Serbia the Senate of the University of Belgrade has pointed out the issues of a dramatic decline in the quality of teaching staff in our country, the poor status of teachers in society, low salaries, the deteriorating quality of secondary education, and a drastic decrease in interest in enrolling in faculties that educate teachers Available at <https://www.fil.bg.ac.rs/sr/vesti/2024/02/platforma-univerziteta-u-beogradu-za-unapredjenje-statusa-nastavnickih-studijskih-programa-na-univerzitetu-u-beogradu-i-ocuvanje-obrazovnog-sistema-u-republici-srbiji>.

ployment rate and gross domestic product (GDP). In the context of the first measure, the potential is reflected in the growth of foreign trade due to the anticipated membership in the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). In the context of the second measure, it lies in increased competitiveness of products due to compliance with foreign markets. What is not evident in the ERP is the need to promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, which is an important aspect of SDG 9.

It is not clear how this reform contributes to target 11.3. Goal 11 and its associated target 11.3 relate primarily to the development and management of cities, as well as other communities where people live. The focus of Goal 11 is on urban planning and management, alleviating the strain on cities, minimizing their impact on nature, waste treatment, and the protection of cultural and natural assets, among other aspects. The third measure of this structural re-

form, namely "Improvement of agricultural competitiveness", can be partially linked to SDG 11, as it includes activities aimed at enhancing rural infrastructure, which has the potential to improve the quality of life for people in rural areas.

Structural Reform 1, or Measure 4, which aims to improve the management of enterprises owned by the Republic of Serbia, has the potential to contribute to progress in achieving target 16.7. The Law on the Management of Companies Owned by the Republic of Serbia regulates the implementation of state ownership policy, management in companies owned by the Republic of Serbia, and other issues related to the legal status of capital companies. The by-laws and the digitalization of the corporate governance system anticipated within this measure should contribute to responsible decision-making at the level of enterprises owned by the Republic of Serbia. However, there is a lack of an indicator to measure the progress of this measure.

Structural Reform 2: Improvement of the Regulatory Framework and Infrastructure for the Development of a Knowledge-Based Economy

The goal of the structural reform is to create an efficient knowledge-based economy capable of developing and marketing high-quality innovative products and services that are competitive in the global market.

It is stated that this structural reform will contribute to goals 8 and 9 through the following targets:

- "8.2 Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus

on high-value added and labour-intensive sectors";

- "8.3 Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services";
- "8.5 By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for

young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value”;

- "9.3 Increase the access of small-scale industrial and other enterprises, in particular in developing countries, to financial services, including affordable credit, and their integration into value chains and markets”;
- "9.5 Enhance scientific research, upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries, in particular developing countries, including, by 2030, encouraging innovation and substantially increasing the number of research and development workers per 1 million people and public and private research and development spending”;
- "9.b Support domestic technology development, research and innovation in developing countries, including by ensuring a conducive policy environment for, inter alia, industrial diversification and value addition to commodities”.

This structural reform is largely aligned with target 8.2. First and foremost, the measures planned by this reform, such as the construction of the BIO4 campus and the expansion and enhancement of the infrastructure of science and technology parks, as well as the establishment of an Innovation District, are focused on technological upgrading and innovation. What is not covered is the focus on labour-intensive sectors.

It is not clear how this reform contributes to target 8.3. First and foremost, development-oriented policies, decent jobs, formalization and growth of the SME sector, and access to financial services as the core of this target are not covered anywhere. Only entrepreneurship, creativity,

and innovation are partially covered by the aforementioned measures.

Target 8.5 is not covered by this structural reform. None of the measures address achieving full and productive employment and do not target vulnerable categories in the labour market, such as women, youth, and persons with disabilities. It can be said that some of these measures may indirectly improve these indicators, but there is no direct link.

This reform is largely aligned with the sustainable development target 9. Two out of the four measures of this structural reform have the potential to contribute to progress in achieving targets 9.5 and 9.b. These measures involve the construction of the BIO4 Campus as a platform to encourage collaboration and connection with the research and business community, and the establishment of the multifunctional centre "Ložionica" as a creative hub designed to facilitate networking, education, idea testing, and more.

The measure that aims to develop the startup ecosystem through the GovTech programme could indirectly contribute to achieving target 9.3. This programme envisions a platform for collaboration between the public and private sectors and innovative entities, encouraging the use of new technologies. However, the focus of this programme is on innovative companies, rather than other small and industrial enterprises. A measure that would have real potential to contribute to the achievement of target 9.3 should expand the range of financial services for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Structural Reform 4: Greening The Road and Rail Transport in The Republic of Serbia

The aim of this structural reform is to regulate the transport services market and reduce harmful gas emissions by decreasing individual transportation through increased mobility for the population, as well as the availability and attractiveness of public transport services for passengers and/or goods in road and rail traffic.

It is stated that this structural reform will contribute to goals 9 and 11 through the following targets:

- "9.1 Develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, including regional and transborder infrastructure, to support economic development and human well-being, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all";
- "11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons".

This reform is largely aligned with the sustainable development goal 9. In the context of improving railway infrastructure, an increase in the kilometres of electrified tracks is planned, as well as the purchase of new electric traction units, which should contribute to sustainable infrastructure and the achievement of target 9.1.

This reform is also largely aligned with the sustainable development goal 11. The measures should contribute to improving the quality of road and railway transport. The goal is to increase competitiveness and efficiency, enhance population mobility between regions, reduce negative environmental impacts, and provide effective solutions to address climate change, social exclusion, and congestion of the transport network. The ERP text does not clearly explain how the proposed activities, such as aligning national legislation with the EU or implementing a new methodology regarding digitalization, will contribute to achieving target 11.2. It is positive that one of the indicators within this reform is indicator 11.2.1, which measures "the proportion of the population with convenient access to public transport, disaggregated by sex, age, and disability". This is precisely where we see the "leave no one behind" principle, which is a guiding principle of the 2030 Agenda.

Although not mentioned in the ERP, this reform has the potential to contribute to the achievement of "Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities", specifically target 10.3, which aims to ensure equal opportunities, i.e., to eliminate discriminatory practices and laws. This potential is reflected in the proposed efficient solutions for social exclusion.

Structural Reform 5: Education for Sustainable Development and Workforce Readiness

This extremely important reform, which aims to increase the relevance of the education system through a focus on learning related to practical work, requires first improving the dialogue between the economy and the education system, and encouraging greater flexibility in the education system to recognize and respond to needs—only then can dual education be effectively implemented and achieve the desired effects.

It is stated that this structural reform will contribute to goal 8 through the following target:

- "8.6 By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training".

Measures aimed at achieving the goal of the reform include: "Qualifications oriented towards labour market needs" and "Im-

provement of conditions for knowledge and skills development in the education system".

This reform only partially contributes to the achievement of target 8.6. Primarily, the focus of this reform is certainly on dual education through the Youth for Youth programs and the improvement of the infrastructure of regional training centres. In general, it can be said that the focus is primarily on the educational aspect, and less on job placement, which is an important aspect of target 8.6. Additionally, there is a lack of dialogue between the economy and the education system, which would be crucial in ensuring a more effective response of the education system to the needs of the economy and employability, which is set as a goal of the structural reform.

Structural Reform 6: Improved Conditions for Greater Participation of Youth in the Labor Market

The goal of this structural reform is to improve the position of young people in the labour market by ensuring an easier transition from education to employment, as well as preventing young people from entering NEET status (not in employment, education, or training).

It is stated that this reform contributes to goal 8 through the following target:

- "8.5 By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for

young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value";

- "8.6 By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training".
- "8.b By 2020, develop and operationalize a global strategy for youth employment and implement the Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organization".

This reform partially covers target 8.5. Primarily, in the domain concerning young people, there are measures that introduce the Youth Guarantee programme as well as integrated services for youth at the local level. However, issues related to women, people with disabilities, and reducing income disparities, as important aspects of target 8.5, are not addressed at all by this reform.

The reform largely addresses target 8.6, as the first measure plans to pilot the Youth Guarantee, which is a crucial step in reducing the NEET rate. At this stage, the measure provides for establishing a framework for implementing the Youth Guarantee through the introduction of online (pre) registration for accessing Youth Guarantee services, strengthening the capacity of the National Employment Service to profile unemployed individuals, reaching out to and activating NEET youth who are outside the system, as well as developing additional employment services within the NES. The main indicator mentioned in the ERP is the NEET rate of 15-29, while the adopted Youth Guarantee implementation Plan 2023 - 2026 also includes labour market indicators and education indicators, which will enable more precise monitoring of the implementation and effectiveness of the programme.

This reform does not mention the global strategy for youth employment or the ILO's Global Jobs Pact nor are they referenced in other parts of the ERP. However, the goals of the global strategy for youth employment and the Global Jobs Pact—which aim to address the challenges young people face in seeking decent work opportunities and creating jobs—are aligned with the objectives of the Youth Guarantee programme.

ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS IN ACHIEVING DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

The next section presents an overview of the progress made in eight priority development areas proposed by CSOs gathered around the SDGs for All Platform. The priority development areas contain targets taken from the 2030 Agenda, adapted to the development context of Serbia. The targets include indicators for monitoring progress, as well as indicators with expected target values.

The priorities are grouped into eight areas:

1. Healthy life and health care for all,
2. Dignity for all Serbian citizens,
3. Reaching European level of democracy, rule of law and quality of institutions,
4. Competitive economy and productive jobs,
5. Skills for sustainable and smart development and the future of labour,
6. Responsible and efficient use of natural resources,
7. Clean and resilient communities,
8. Preservation of natural and cultural heritage.

Each chapter for the priority areas includes an introduction, an assessment of progress against the established indicators (for the period from January 2023 to February 2024) and recommendations for the upcoming period.

Priority area 1: Healthy life and healthcare for all

Ensuring good health and promoting well-being throughout the life cycle is essential for sustainable development. The world has faced a global health crisis from 2020 to the present, threatening the lives of many people, leading to high mortality rates, and destabilizing global and national economies. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in maternal mortality, perinatal and neonatal mortality, and infant mortality (targets 3.1 and 3.2) in the Republic of Serbia, returning mortality rates to levels seen in 2018 due to the disrupted functioning of the healthcare system and the mobilization of all healthcare service capacities in the fight against this infectious disease. It has also jeopardized access to healthcare for individuals suffering from chronic non-communicable diseases (with cardiovascular and malignant diseases being predominant in national pathology) and reduced premature mortality, along with an increase in specific mortality rates due to the limited availability of necessary diagnostic and therapeutic services for the population. It has also elevated the preservation and improvement of the population's mental health to a high priority, with the consequences of neglect being evident in the rise of domestic violence, partner violence, and, more recently, violence in schools and local communities (target 3.4).

Although two out of three target values for the indicators of target 3.8 indicate a positive trend toward achieving this target, additional efforts are still needed to improve the overall capacity of the healthcare system. It is crucial that, in the upcoming period, public policy documents (the Health Care System Development Plan and the Human Resources Development Plan, as the foundational documents) and regulations are adopted to achieve universal health coverage and ensure access to quality health services, as well as safe, effective, quality, and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all, in accordance with target 3.8.

Sustainable Development Goal 3:

GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

No significant progress has been recorded in the area of the legal and strategic framework in this field, and none of the recommendations from the previous report have been adopted (see Bradaš et al., 2022).

In the area of the legal framework, the Law on Health Documentation and Records in Healthcare has been adopted, which further regulates the eKarton service. This is a step forward towards the consolidation of digital records of patients' health status, which should be accessible to both public and private healthcare institutions (NARS, 2023a). As analysed in the previous report, digitalization aims to expedite diagnostics and improve the quality of healthcare services (target 3.8). However, at this moment, there is no evidence that this process will achieve the set goals without investment in human resources development. Digitalization of health care records does not

have the direct goal of improving access to health services and medications for all segments of the population (target 3.8).

The Law on Occupational Safety and Health regulates the improvement and implementation of safety and health measures for individuals participating in work processes, as well as for individuals present in the work environment (NARS, 2023b). Regulating the safety and health of employees can positively impact the achievement of the target "3.9 By 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination", which primarily pertains to a clearly defined segment of the population.

The ERP does not include the reform related to healthcare. None of the SDG 3 targets are covered by the structural reforms

of the current ERP. This topic is covered in a section of the given planning document, with a description of the current situation but without defined measures, activities, and indicators of progress. The description of the area mentions a trend of stagnation in the volume of healthcare services provided in the public sector and an increase in the use of services in healthcare institutions that are privately owned. The number of insured individuals on waiting lists is increasing (over 77,000 in October 2023), which is explained by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (GRS, 2023a). Inequalities in access to healthcare for vulnerable population groups are emphasized, particularly concerning persons with disabilities and patients of Roma ethnicity.

Improvements to the institutional framework were very limited compared to the previous period. The quality and scope of intersectoral cooperation remain un-

changed and are at a low level. The issue of pollution remains a politically unresolved matter that negatively impacts public health and contributes to the stagnation of intersectoral cooperation in this area.

Through the SORS portal, it is currently possible to track 10 out of 13 targets (compared to 9 out of 13 targets in the previous period) and 15 out of 28 sustainable development indicators related to SDG 3 (compared to 13 out of 28 recorded in the previous year). It is concluded that monitoring the achievement of this sustainable development goal has improved (Babović, 2023).

According to data from the European Sustainable Development Network, the achievement of SDG 3 in Serbia is stagnating, while significant challenges in the field of healthcare that society faces remain unresolved (Lafortune et al, 2024).

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Target 3.8

Within SDG 3, the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report defines two priority targets that need to be achieved by 2030 (Belgrade Open School et al, 2020):

Priority target	3.8 – Achieve universal healthcare coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all		
Indicator	Reduce percentage of the population assessing their health status as poor and very poor from 15.7% to 9%	Reduce percentage of the population that did not meet their healthcare needs because it was too expensive, too far away, or they were on a waiting list, or could not allocate enough time from 6.5% to 2.5%	Reduce out-of-pocket expenditures for health-care from 41% to 20%

An improvement has been achieved in the indicator titled "Percentage of the population in Serbia that rates their health as poor or very poor". In 2022 this percentage was 11.3 compared to 2021 when it was 11.8%. The indicator value in 2020 (13.2%) and in 2019 (15.7%) indicates a downward trend in the percentage of the population that rates their health as poor or very poor. Although the currently subjectively assessed health status of the population is below the EU average (8.7% in 2022), it can be concluded that the indicator value is moving towards the target value of 9%.

In recent years the percentage of the population that did not meet their healthcare needs because it was too expensive, too far away, or because they were on a waiting list, or could not allocate enough time has varied. According to Eurostat data, the percentage of the population in the Republic of Serbia that did not meet their healthcare needs for these reasons was 3.1% in 2022, compared to 5.3% in 2021 and 3.8% in 2020. In 2019, the recorded value

of the indicator was 4.8%. The value of the indicator is still above the target value of 2.5% (Belgrade Open School et al, 2020). The average value for the EU citizens in 2022 was 2.2%. The variation in the value of the indicator from year to year suggests that stable progress is not being achieved in this context.

The current data on private expenditures (out-of-pocket payments) for healthcare available on the Eurostat website refers only to the year 2021 and amounts to 35.76% (Eurostat, 2024a). Previous data can be found in the World Bank database. The value of the indicator shows a continuous decline. In 2020, it was 35.91%, representing a decrease compared to 2019 (37.04%), 2018 (38.1%), and the previous year (40.64%) in 2017 (World Bank, 2024a). Although the values of this indicator are decreasing, this type of expenditure in Serbia is still more than twice as high as in the EU27, which was 14.52% in 2021 (Eurostat, 2024b). The value of the indicator is significantly higher than the target value of 20%.

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendation from previous period	Status	Comment
<p>Adopt the Health Care System Development Plan of the Republic of Serbia. This is an obligation stipulated by the Law on Health Care, and the Plan should be adopted by the National Health Council.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The Health Care System Development Plan of the Republic of Serbia has not been adopted, even though this recommendation has appeared in all previous reports.</p> <p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.</p>
<p>Adopt a workforce development plan for the healthcare system due to acute issues with workforce exodus and shortages.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The recommended planning document has not been adopted.</p> <p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.</p>
<p>Revise the Public Health Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2018–2026 to ensure adequate coverage of the targets related to: reduction of mortality from non-communicable diseases, universal health coverage, reduction of deaths and diseases from hazardous chemicals and pollution, and contamination of air, water, and soil, as well as universal access to medicines and vaccines.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>Public Health Strategy of the Republic of Serbia has not been revised.</p> <p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.</p>
<p>Revise the Birth Promotion Strategy so one of the goals is universal access to services related to sexual and reproductive health.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The specific strategic document has not been supplemented with the recommended goal.</p> <p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.</p>
<p>Amend the Law on the Protection of the Population from Exposure to Tobacco Smoke to align with Directive No. 2014/40/EU of the European Parliament and Council of 3 April 2014, concerning the harmonization of laws and regulations of member states regarding the manufacturing, presentation, and sale of tobacco and related products, and repealing Directive No. 2001/37/EC, particularly in the area of labelling and packaging of tobacco products.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>There has been no change in the legal regulations regarding the protection of the population from exposure to tobacco smoke.</p> <p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.</p>

Recommendations

1. Adopt the Health Care System Development Plan of the Republic of Serbia. This is an obligation stipulated by the Law on Health Care, and the Plan should be adopted by the National Health Council.
2. Adopt a workforce development plan for the healthcare system due to acute issues with workforce exodus and shortage. The competent authority is the Ministry of Health (MH).
3. Revise the Public Health Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2018–2026 to ensure adequate coverage of the targets related to: reduction of mortality from non-communicable diseases, universal health coverage, reduction of deaths and diseases from hazardous chemicals and pollution, and contamination of air, water, and soil, as well as universal access to medicines and vaccines. Competent institution is the MH.
4. Revise the Birth Promotion Strategy so one of the goals is universal access to services related to sexual and reproductive health. The authority responsible for this recommendation is the Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography (MFWD).
5. Amend the Law on Protecting the Population from Exposure to Tobacco Smoke to align with Directive No. 2014/40/EU of the European Parliament and Council of 3 April 2014, concerning the harmonization of laws and regulations of member states regarding the manufacturing, presentation, and sale of tobacco and related products, and repealing Directive No. 2001/37/EC, particularly in the area of labelling and packaging of tobacco products. The competent authority is the MH.
6. Stop the decline in vaccination coverage for children (measles, DTP, and other diseases) by aligning the Law on Protection of Population Against Communicable Diseases with the Law on Patients' Rights. The competent authority is the MH.

Priority area 2: Dignity for all Serbian citizens

The "leave no one behind" promise is one of the central transformative promises of 2030 Agenda, which is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Therefore, it is extremely important to implement public policy measures that contribute to reducing the number of men, women, and children of all ages living in any form of poverty (target 1.2), apply appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including the most vulnerable (target 1.3), eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere and recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work (targets 5.1 and 5.4), and progressively achieve and sustain income growth for the poorest 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average (target 10.1).

Sustainable Development Goal 1:

NO POVERTY



End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Compared to the monitoring report from the previous period, very limited progress has been made in creating conditions for achieving SDG 1, and none of the recommendations related to this goal have been adopted (see Bradaš S. et al., 2023). There is no Poverty Reduction Strategy, nor are there other proposed strategic documents concerning the protection of the most vulnerable groups in the population (National Strategy for Protection and Rescue in Emergency Situations and Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management). The Draft Law on Amendments to the Law on Social Protection is still in parliamentary procedure (since February 2023). The proposed amendments relate exclusively to caregiver parent and therefore cannot be considered comprehensive. At this moment, there are no plans to adopt a new Employment and Social Reform Programme (ESRP). The process of drafting the Social

Protection Strategy is underway, with its adoption planned for the second quarter of 2024. Currently, a Draft Action Plan for the Strategy of Deinstitutionalization and Development of Community-Based Social Services is being developed, aimed at standardizing the provision of social protection services at the local level, primarily concerning services provided by residential institutions and service providers in local communities (GRS, 2023a).

ERP still has a limited redistributive character. The progressivity of income taxation and the growth of the non-taxable portion of salaries are not strong enough to have a substantial impact on reduction of poverty. One of the recommendations from EU's Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN Council) in May 2023 specifically addressed poverty reduction, which was formulated as "Reduce poverty by significantly increasing the adequacy of benefits

from the financial social assistance (FSA) scheme for individuals and families with children and by raising the non-taxable base of salaries that is close to or equal to the minimum worker salary". Decision-makers emphasize that by improving the implementation of the Law on Social Card and in line with budgetary constraints, the level of social assistance will be increased, without providing specific data. Budget allocations for social protection are continuing to decline, as planned by the budget allocation policy. In accordance with the recommendation from the ECOFIN Council, the section titled Social Protection and Inclusion is included in the structural reform 3 "Human Capital and Social Policy". Within this section, it is emphasized that the level of social benefits at 13.1% of GDP in 2022 was consistent with the policy of reducing expenditures for social protection. Pensions account for the largest share of social benefits, totalling 9% of GDP. It is noted in this area that the further implementation of the Law on Social Card will improve the targeting of socially vulnerable groups and the level of assistance available to them. This is not feasible in practice, as the law only targets existing beneficiaries or those who have applied, and only in the sense of reducing their rights (A11 Initiative). It should be noted that within the area of "Human Capital and Social Policy", no structural reform related to social protection has been defined, nor have measures, activities, and target values in the area relevant to SDG 1, except indirectly and in a segmented manner within the framework of structural reform 6, "Improved conditions for greater youth participation in the labour market".

The harmonization between the current Law on Social Protection and the Law on Social Card has also not been improved.

The level of transparency and personalization of the algorithm used to determine the level of social vulnerability still does not exist. This leaves room for errors of exclusion in the case of socially vulnerable populations that have not had access to social assistance so far. New users can be identified by such system only if they apply for some form of assistance and support, which in practice exclusively refers to information about the right to child benefits and free preschool for children (GRS, 2023a).

There have been no significant changes in the institutional, administrative, and organizational framework, considering that the new Law on Ministries has not yet been adopted. The area of poverty and social policy remains under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs (MLEVSA), while poverty reduction doesn't fall within scope of responsibility of the Ministry of Demography and Family Welfare (MFWD) (GRS, 2022). The same can be concluded for the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue (MHMRSD). Intersectoral coordination, or collaboration among relevant institutions, is inadequate and is not currently directed toward the issue of poverty reduction or support for the population at risk of poverty.

According to the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24, it is assessed that the Republic of Serbia is implementing reforms in the right direction regarding the achievement of SDG 1, but that society still faces significant challenges in the area of poverty, particularly concerning the share of the population living in absolute poverty (Lafortune et al, 2024).

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Targets 1.2 and 1.3

In publication Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report prepared as a part of SDGs for All Platform, two priority targets within SDG 1 to be achieved by 2030 were identified (Belgrade Open School et al, 2020):

Priority target	1.2 – By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions (according to national definitions)		1.3: Implement appropriate national social protection systems and measures for all, including the most vulnerable, and achieve substantial coverage of the poor and vulnerable by 2030	
Indicator	Reduce the number of persons at risk of poverty by minimum 50% compared to 2020	Increase the share of financial social assistance beneficiaries at risk of poverty to 100%	Increase the share of the population covered by the social protection system by 100%	Reduce the share of informal unemployment in total employment to 10%

According to SORS data, the at-risk-of-poverty rate in 2022 was 20%, representing a decrease compared to 2020 (21.7%) and progress toward the 2030 target value. Analysing the age structure of individuals at risk of poverty reveals that those over 65 are particularly vulnerable (22.6%), which is slightly lower than in 2021 (22.7%). The indicator value decreased for all age groups in 2022 compared to 2021. In all age groups, women are at a higher risk of poverty. The persistent poverty risk rate in 2022 was 12.9%, a decrease from 2021 (16.5%) and 2020 (14.5%). The values of this indicator fluctuate, and no lasting trend of reducing the level of persistent poverty risk in Serbia can be observed.

The number of social welfare beneficiaries decreased by over 21,000 in 2022 (182,773), representing a 10.5% reduction compared to 2021. Between 2022 and 2023, the num-

ber of beneficiaries decreased by 44,106, which is over a 20% reduction (A11 Initiative). In this regard, there is no visible progress toward approaching the target value of this indicator within priority target 1.2. This can also be concluded based on the announced trend of further decline in budget expenditures for social protection (GRS, 2023a). Although the amount of financial social assistance slightly increased in 2023, solely due to adjustments for the inflation rate, it remains below the absolute poverty line (Prodanović et al., 2022).

The informal employment rate in 2022 was 13%, remaining at the same level as in 2021. During the same period, the informal employment rate for women increased (13.6% in 2022 compared to 13.3% in 2021), while it decreased for men (12.5% compared to 12.8% in the previous year). It should be noted that the data are not comparable to

the baseline value from 2020 (16.4%) because the methodology for calculating the informal employment rate was changed in 2021 (SORS, 2024a). The target value for

this indicator is set at 10%, which has not yet been achieved.

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendation from previous period	Status	Comment
Adopt a poverty reduction strategy that encompasses all relevant aspects of SDG 1.	Not adopted	There is no national strategy adopted during the reporting period related to poverty reduction. The recommendation has not been fulfilled since 2020.
Adopt a new ESRP that will include a target value for the indicator related to reducing the number of individuals at risk of poverty.	Not adopted	The new ESRP has not been adopted, nor is it in the process of being developed. The recommendation has been relevant since the expiration of the last ESRP. The recommendation has not been fulfilled since 2020.
Adopt a new national strategy for protection and rescue in emergency situations/disaster risk reduction and emergency management, which would reduce the pronounced exposure and vulnerability of the poor in the context of extreme climatic events and other economic, social, and/or environmental disasters.	Not adopted	A new national strategy in the relevant area has not been adopted, nor is there any official information indicating that the strategic document is in the process of being developed. The recommendation has not been fulfilled since 2020.
Establish a coordinating body of GRS for poverty reduction, to be chaired by the president of GRS.	Not adopted	The coordinating body was not established. The recommendation has not been fulfilled since 2020.
Reinitiate the work of the Platform for Monitoring the Implementation of the ERP (and ESRP) in collaboration with the National Convention on European Union.	Not adopted	The Platform for Monitoring the Implementation of the ERP (and ESRP) has not resumed its work. The recommendation has not been fulfilled since 2020.

Recommendations

1. Adopt a Social Protection Strategy that encompasses all relevant aspects of SDG 1. The competent authority is the MLEVSA.
2. Adopt a new ESRP that will include a target value for the indicator related to reducing the number of individuals at risk of poverty. The competent authority is the MLEVSA.
3. Adopt a new national strategy for protection and rescue in emergency situations/ disaster risk reduction and emergency management, which would reduce the pronounced exposure and vulnerability of the poor in the context of extreme climatic events and other economic, social, and/or environmental disasters. The competent authority is the Sector for Emergencies within the Ministry of the Interior.
4. Establish a coordinating body of GRS for poverty reduction, to be chaired by the president of GRS. The competent body is the cabinet of the prime minister of the Republic of Serbia.
5. Reinitiate the work of the Platform for Monitoring the Implementation of the ERP (and ESRP) in collaboration with the National Convention on European Union. The competent authority is the Ministry of European Integration (MEI), in collaboration with other ministries responsible for adoption of documents (MEI and MLEVSA).

Sustainable Development Goal 2:

ZERO HUNGER



End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

The average price increase places significant pressure on households with the lowest income levels and further threatens their livelihoods. In the broader category of food and non-alcoholic beverages, a price increase of 17.9% was recorded, while prices of vegetables, milk, cheese, and eggs rose by over 25% (Babović, 2023). The recorded inflation increase in 2023 was 12.1%, largely driven by food product prices. At the legal-strategic and institutional level in the Republic of Serbia, progress in this area has been limited. In April, and then in October 2023, the Law on Amendments to the Law on Incentives in Agriculture and Rural Development was adopted. The core of the initial amendments is to improve electronic records of agricultural holdings through the introduction of the national software solution, eAgrar. This law further regulat-

ed the conditions for applying for agricultural incentives. The second amendment increased the incentives for small farmers and limited the parcel size eligible for incentives to 100 hectares.

The topic of hunger is not explicitly mentioned in the ERP, while targets 2.3 and 2.4 are considered relevant to Structural Reform 1 ("Improvement of business conditions, business environment, and market for industrial and agricultural products of the Republic of Serbia"). The given targets are linked to achieving productive and sustainable agricultural and food production, as well as improving the situation of vulnerable categories of agricultural producers. The inability to monitor the values of these indicators makes it challenging to determine the impact of the planned measures and activities of the structural reform on

achieving the stated targets. The previous ERP listed a series of regulations that need to be adopted in the agriculture and food sector. In the new planning document, activities related to targets 2.3 and 2.4 are viewed through Measure 3 of the first structural reform, "Improvement of infrastructure in rural areas, further land consolidation, regulation of markets and quality control of agricultural products, legal regulation of organic production, as well as strengthening the capacity of the relevant ministry through digitalization and automation of the financial support system for farmers". The focus has been placed on increasing agricultural production and its competitiveness, which has not led to a reduction in the prices of food products. Therefore, this reform does not contribute to progress in the area of eradicating hunger among the economically and socially most vulnerable segments of the population.

During the reporting period, the Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2014–2024 was not revised, which had been a recommendation in the previous two reports (see Bradaš et al., 2022; 2023). The proposed goals of the revised Strategy would be: Doubling agricultural activity and income for small food producers, especially women; developing sustainable and climate-resilient food production systems; and linking the Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development with the eradication of hunger in the Republic of Serbia (Bradaš et al., 2022). A new national action plan for children has not been adopted, and the law on children's rights and the children's ombudsman is in the draft phase.

In 2023, the Law on Amendments to the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children was adopted. This amendment was adopted following the decision of the Constitutional Court, made upon the pro-

posal of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, initiated by members of parliament and the association "*Mame su zakon*". The improvements to the law focus on enhancing the status of mothers who are owners of agricultural holdings and entrepreneurs, who are now equal in their labour rights with other employed women. At the initiative of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, it has also been stipulated that fathers who are employed and whose wives are entrepreneurs can use the right to take leave for childcare, or for special childcare, along with wage compensation. Additionally, the calculation method applied to calculate remuneration during the maternity leave and childcare leave has been changed, with the inclusion of the maternity sick leave period in the calculation period. The right to compensation during maternity leave and child care leave no longer excludes the right to take leave for child care or special child care leave, as well as wage compensation or salary compensation for the father of the child, if the child's mother is self-employed or, as the head of a family agricultural holding, has the status of a self-employed person. The specific amendments improve the accessibility of financial assistance for families with children who are in vulnerable situations. This contributes to the prevention of malnutrition and hunger among children and families with children.

There has been no progress in the institutional, administrative, or organizational sense regarding the creation of conditions to achieve SDG 2. Institutional mechanisms have not changed, and no new bodies have been established to eradicate hunger and improve food accessibility. MFWD, as well as other relatively related ministries, do not have the resolution of malnutrition and the eradication of hunger in the Republic of Serbia within their remit (GRS, 2022).

Through the SORS portal, it is currently possible to monitor 6 out of 8 targets, or 8 out of 14 sustainable development indicators related to SDG 2, which represents progress compared to the previous period when it was possible to monitor 4 out of 8 targets, or 6 out of 14 sustainable development indicators (SORS, 2024). The diversity

of data sources and the different periods for which data is collected still complicate progress tracking in this area. According to the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24, information on progress towards achieving SDG 2 for the Republic of Serbia is unavailable, the same as in the previous period (Lafortune et al., 2024).

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendations from previous report	Status	Comment
Revise the Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2014–2024, with the main objectives being the doubling of agricultural activity and income of small food producers, especially women, the development of sustainable and climate-resilient food production systems, and linking the Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development with the eradication of hunger in the Republic of Serbia.	Not adopted	The strategy was not revised according to recommendations from the previous reporting period. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.
Adopt new improvements to the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children to further enhance inclusiveness and the amount of financial assistance to the relevant target group.	Adopted	Proposed amendments to the law have been changed during 2030.
Adopt a poverty reduction strategy within which one of the goals will focus on eradicating hunger in the Republic of Serbia.	Not adopted	There is no Poverty Reduction Strategy in the Republic of Serbia. The recommendation has been repeated in multiple reporting periods.
Adopt a new national action plan for children and expand the scope of the strategic framework that will establish measures to end all forms of malnutrition in children under five years of age.	Not adopted	The national action plan for children has still not been adopted. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.
Adopt the Law on the Rights of the Child and the Ombudsman for Children's Rights.	Not adopted	The law is still in the draft phase. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.

Recommendations

1. Revise the Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2014–2024, with the main objectives being the doubling of agricultural activity and income of small food producers, especially women, the development of sustainable and climate-resilient food production systems, and linking the Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development with the eradication of hunger in Serbia. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management (MAFWM) is responsible for adopting the recommendation.
2. Adopt a poverty reduction strategy, within which one of the goals will focus on eradicating hunger in the Republic of Serbia. MLEVSA is responsible for adoption of this recommendation.
3. Adopt the National Social Protection Strategy, based on the initiative and recommendations of the Platform for Sustainable Development for All. MLEVSA is responsible for adoption of this recommendation.
4. Adopt a new national action plan for children and expand the scope of the strategic framework that will establish measures to end all forms of malnutrition in children under five years of age.
5. Adopt the Law on the Rights of the Child and the Ombudsman for Children's Rights.

Sustainable Development Goal 5:

GENDER EQUALITY



Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

The first Action Plan for the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy expired in 2023, and the next action plan has not yet been adopted, although the Gender Equality Strategy for the period 2021–2030 emphasizes that work on preparing each subsequent action plan should begin in a timely manner, no later than six months before the expiration of the current action plan. The public discussion on the Draft Action Plan for 2024 and 2025 for the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy for the period 2021–2030 is planned to take place from 1 to 22 March 2024.

The Medium-Term Plan of the SORS for the period 2024–2026 does not include plans for collecting and publishing data on unpaid work, nor for publishing annual statistical data on the state of gender equality in accordance with Article 12, paragraph 2, and

Article 66, paragraph 10 of the Law on Gender Equality.

The reporting obligation on the achievement of gender equality pursuant to Article 66 of the Law on Gender Equality has been met by only one in a hundred entities. MHMRSD provided data from 5870 obligated entities, including public authorities and employers, gender equality bodies at various levels of government, political parties, trade unions and associations (MHMRSD, 2023).

A few months before the provisions of the Law on Gender Equality related to the use of gender-sensitive language come into force, a campaign against the use of gender-sensitive language is intensifying. In February, the Ombudsman joined the campaign against the use of gender-sensitive language, which is led by the Serbian Orthodox Church, Matica Srpska, and the Committee for the

Standardization of the Serbian Language¹⁷ (Radio-Television of Serbia, 2024). On February 21, the Ombudsman announced, without further clarification, that they would initiate a constitutional review of these legal provisions (Danas, 2024). This announcement was met with a response from the MHMRSD, CSOs and numerous individuals. In its comment, the MHMRSD pointed out that during the process of drafting and adopting the Law on Gender Equality, the Ombudsman did not submit any objections to the provisions concerning the use of gender-sensitive language.¹⁸ In their response, CSOs, individuals, and activists expressed concern and disagreement with the announcement to initiate a constitutional review of the provisions of the Law on Gender Equality related to the use of gender-sensitive language. They highlighted that Ombudsman's legal responsibilities, include the protection and promotion of human and minority rights, and emphasized the harmful impact of this initiative on women and its negative consequences (Femplat, 2024).

There were no significant changes in the institutional, administrative, and organizational framework. At its session held on 19 April 2023, the GRS adopted the Decision on the Establishment of the Council for Gender Equality with the key task of monitoring the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality. It is indicative that this decision was not written in gender-sensitive language. Information on whether the Council has ever convened, as well as whether it has fulfilled its obligation to

submit reports to the relevant parliamentary committee and the GRS, is not available on the websites of the competent institutions. The exact number of mechanisms for gender equality is not known, and the assessment of their activities and impact is limited to the national and provincial levels, as there is the least data available for mechanisms at the local level (Beker et al, 2024). During the reporting period, nothing was done to strengthen the administrative capacities of the Group for Improving Gender Equality. On the contrary, the number of employees in the Group for Improving Gender Equality in the MHMRSD was reduced from four positions at executive roles, as provided by the Rulebook on Internal Organisation and Job Classification in MHMRSD to just one employee (MHMRSD, 2023).

According to the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24 target values for gender pay gap and inactivity due to caring responsibilities have been achieved. For two indicators ("Seats held by women in national parliament" and "Proportion of ICT specialists that are women"), it is assessed that the Republic of Serbia is on track to achieve the target values by 2030. A decline was observed regarding the indicator "Positions held by women in senior management positions", with the assessment that there are significant challenges in achieving the target value.

17 Available at: <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/5353905/spc-i-matica-srpska-rodno-osetljiv-jezik-u-suprotnosti-sa-standardnim-jezikom-i-neustavan.html>.

18 For the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue's comment on the Ombudsman's announcement regarding the initiation of a constitutional review of the provisions of the Law on Gender Equality, see: <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/drustvo/115243/ministarstvo-za-ljudska-i-manjinska-prava-zastitnik-imao-2-predstavnika-u-radnoj-grupi-za-zakon-o-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti/vest>.

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Targets 5.1 and 5.4

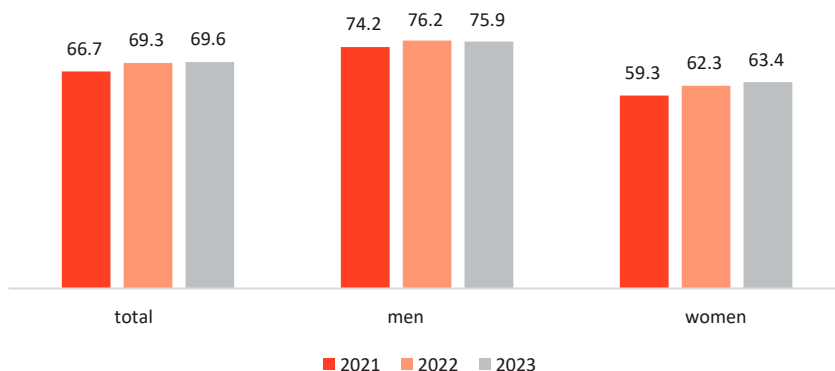
End all forms of discrimination (target 5.1) and value unpaid care and domestic work (target 5.4) were set as priority in the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report (Belgrade Open School et al, 2020). Performance indicators for targets 5.1 and 5.4 in 2030 are shown below.

Priority target	5.1. End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere	5.4. Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate	
Indicator	Complete elimination of the gender employment gap – from 13.9 percentage points to 0	Complete elimination of gender pay gap – from 9,6% to 0%	Reduce the rate of inactivity due to caring responsibilities to 6%

Priority target 5.1:

In 2023, compared to 2022, the gender employment gap decreased by 1.4 percentage points (from 13.9 to 12.5 percentage points). However, the decrease in the gender employment gap is not the result of an increase in women's employment, but rather due to a greater decline in men's employment. The number of employed men and women in 2023 decreased compared to the previous year, and the reduction in the gender employment gap occurred due to a smaller decline in women's employment (by 0.6%) and a greater decline in men's employment (by 3.3%).

Compared to EU countries, Serbia's relative position improved in 2023 compared to 2022, as in 2022, the gender employment gap was larger in four EU member states (Czech Republic, Romania, Italy, and Greece), while in 2023, five EU countries had a larger gender employment gap than Serbia (Czech Republic, Malta, Romania, Italy, and Greece). Compared to the Republic of Serbia, the lower employment rate for men in 2023 was observed in Croatia, while lower employment rates for women were seen in Romania, Greece, and Italy.

Chart 1 Employment rates for men and women (in %) aged 20–64, 2021–2023

Source: Eurostat Labour Force Survey database

Progress in reducing the gender pay gap cannot be assessed, as the latest available data for the Republic of Serbia is from 2018.¹⁹ SORS does not publish data on monthly and quarterly wages disaggregated by gender, despite the explicit obligation under the Law on Gender Equality. SORS publishes data on average annual salaries by gender and age in the Statistical Calendar of the Republic of Serbia, based on data from the tax return form for withholding tax. Women's salaries compared to men's salaries (Table 2) have been low-

er during the observed period, with the gap widening year by year. In 2020, women's salaries were 10.5% lower than men's salaries, and in 2023, the gap increased to 14.4%. In 2023, compared to age groups, the average salary difference between men and women exceeding 14.4% was observed in the age range between 30 and 49 years, with the largest gap occurring in the 35–39 age group, where women's average net salaries were 21% lower than men's average net salaries.

Table 2 Average net annual salaries (in dinars) by gender, 2020–2023

	Average net salaries				Gap between women's and men's salaries (in %)			
	2020	2021	2022	2023	2020	2021	2022	2023
Men	57717	69510	80186	92275	-10.5	-11.5	-14.1	-14.4
Women	51652	61536	68889	78991				

Source: SORS, Statistical Calendar

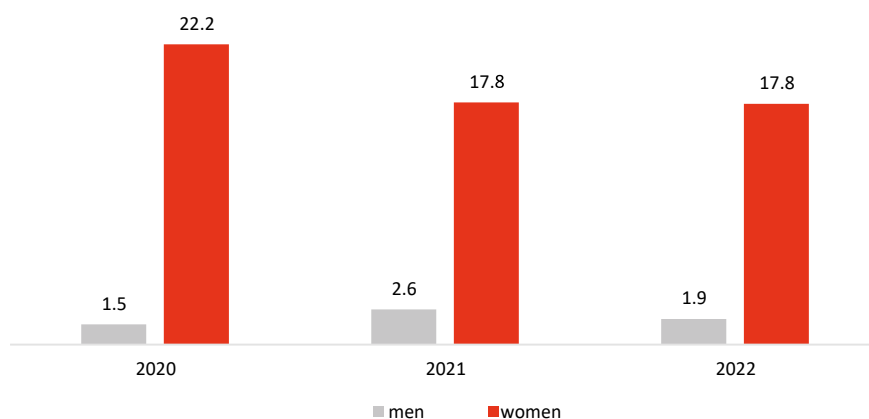
19 The gender pay gap represents the percentage difference between the average hourly salary of employed men and women, relative to the average hourly salary of men.

Priority target 5.4:

There were no significant changes in the reasons for absence from the labour market due to caring responsibilities in 2022 compared to the previous year (Chart 2). The share of women who are outside the labour force due to caring responsibilities but wish to work remains the same as the

previous year (17.8%), while the share of men who care for others decreased from 2.6% to 1.9%. The share of women among those who remain outside the workforce due to caring responsibilities in 2022 increased compared to the previous year (from 90.3% to 93.7%).

Chart 2 Rates of inactivity due to caring responsibilities (for persons with disabilities and children) among the population aged 20-64 years (as a percentage of the population outside the labour force who wants to work), by gender, 2020-2022



Source: Eurostat Labour Force Survey database

There has been no progress regarding the availability of childcare services in the Republic of Serbia. Data on the availability of preschool education (PSE) in 2022 show that the coverage of children up to three years old was 37%, with significant regional differences (Belgrade region 52.3%, Vojvodina region 36%, Šumadija and Western Serbia region 29.8%, Southern and Eastern Serbia region 26.4%). The coverage of children aged three years to the start of the preparatory preschool programme in 2022 was 68% in the Republic of Serbia, 81.4% in the Belgrade region, 75.1% in the Vojvodina region, 57.7% in the Šumadija and Western Serbia region, and 53.9% in the Southern and East-

ern Serbia region. The Republic of Serbia has the lowest coverage of preschool age children up to three years to start of primary school compared to EU countries. In 2021, the coverage of this group of children in Serbia was 67.5%, while the average for the EU27 was 92.5% (coverage in the EU ranges from 75.6% in Romania to 100% in France).

Women more often encounter difficulties in balancing work and family life. Indicator of flexible work hours from the European Working Conditions Survey show that in 2021 59% of women and 66% of men were able to take one or two hours off during working hours to care for a family member.

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

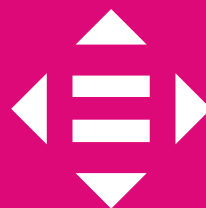
Recommendation from previous report	Status	Comment
Ensure the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality and accompanying bylaws by strengthening the capacities of the organisational unit of the Ministry responsible for the field of gender equality.	Not adopted	The Rulebook on Internal Organisation and Job Classification of MHMRSD was amended in 2023, but the number of job positions in the Group for Improving Gender Equality was not increased.
When developing the new Action Plan for the implementation of the Gender Equity Strategy set target values that are aligned with the values set in the 2030 Agenda for gender equality.	Not adopted	New action plan for implementation of the Gender Equity Strategy has not been adopted. In the draft action plan target values have not been aligned with the values set in the 2030 Agenda for gender equality.
Amend regulations in the field of official statistics to introduce the obligation to classify data by gender and to include a gender perspective in the section that regulates the production and dissemination of statistical data.	Not adopted	The medium-term plan of the SORS for the period from 2023 to 2025 foresees the adoption of a new Law on Official Statistics in the second quarter of 2023. The new law has not been adopted by the time of writing this Report.

Recommendations

1. MHMRSD should ensure implementation of the Law on Gender Equality and accompanying bylaws by strengthening the capacities of ministry's organisational unit that is responsible for the gender equality by amending the Rulebook on the Internal Organisation and Job Classification by the end of 2024.
2. MHMRSD should initiate the process of revising the Gender Equality Strategy so that the target values are aligned with the values set in the 2030 Agenda for gender equality by the end of 2025 and submit the revised Strategy to the Government of the Republic of Serbia for adoption.
3. SORS in cooperation with GRS should align the planning documents and regulations in the field of official statistics with the obligations set out in the Law on Gender Equality by the end of 2024.

Sustainable Development Goal 10:

REDUCED INEQUALITIES



Reduce inequality within and among countries

When it comes to public policies, the previous Report stated that the ESRP, as the overarching strategic document in this area, has long expired, and that a new one has not yet been adopted, nor are there any indications that this will happen soon. The same applies to the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, which has been adopted by all EU member states, as well as to the strategic documents concerning the reintegration of returnees and the improvement of the position of persons with disabilities. The Action Plan for the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy 2021–2030 has been criticized in terms of logic and clarity, while the Strategy for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination for the period 2022–2030 and the related Action Plan were evaluated as lacking ambition. Finally, the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2022–2030 and the related Action Plan have

been criticized for insufficient inclusivity in the public consultation process. Regarding the legal framework, the adoption of the Law on Social Entrepreneurship was welcomed, but criticism was directed at the fact that the implementation programme for the law had not yet been adopted, even though almost a year had passed. Finally, in the institutional domain, the Council for Gender Equality was established as an advisory body of the GRS, and a decision was made to establish the Council for Social Entrepreneurship, which performs key tasks in this area.

Analysing changes in public policies compared to the previous reporting period, it must be noted that the new ESRP has not yet been adopted, nor is it known when this will happen. The same applies to the Strategy of Returnees Reintegration Based on the Readmission Agreement. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan was adopted in all EU countries in the context of the

COVID-19 crisis that erupted four years ago, while the Republic of Serbia never adopted it (and it no longer serves a purpose), instead addressing this crisis on an ad hoc basis, not basing it on strategic documents. An Action Plan for the period 2023–2026 has been adopted for the implementation of the Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing in the Republic of Serbia until 2030. However, the plan does not include any measures that would contribute to reducing inequalities in student achievements or in access to education for individuals from poor families. In addition, the Strategy for Active and Healthy Aging in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2024–2030 and the associated Action Plan for the period 2024–2026 have been adopted, with the aim of improving the quality of life for older citizens. An Action Plan for the period 2023–2024 has been adopted for the implementation of the Strategy for Improvement of Position of Persons with Disabilities in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2020–2024 with the general goal of equalizing opportunities for persons with disabilities in enjoying all rights. The Government of the Republic of Serbia has also adopted the Youth Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the period from

2023 to 2030 and the related Action Plan for the period 2023–2025. However, the strategy and plan fail to address measures for improving labour legislation for young people, as well as to propose concrete actions for enhancing housing independence. The Action Plan for the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy expired in 2023 and a new one has not yet been adopted.

As for the legal framework, there were no changes related to SDG 10. There were no changes in the institutional framework – no new institutions were established, nor was the capacity of existing ones strengthened.

The Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24 assessed that the Republic of Serbia is "on track or maintaining progress" in achieving SDG 10. Progress has been recorded in the Gini coefficient and the Palma ratio, which compares the income or wealth share of the top 10% richest with the bottom 40% poorest. However, when we look at the latest data from Eurostat for 2022, the Gini coefficient in Serbia, although reduced by 1.3 percentage points compared to the previous year, is still among the highest in Europe (Eurostat, 2024b).

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Target 10.1

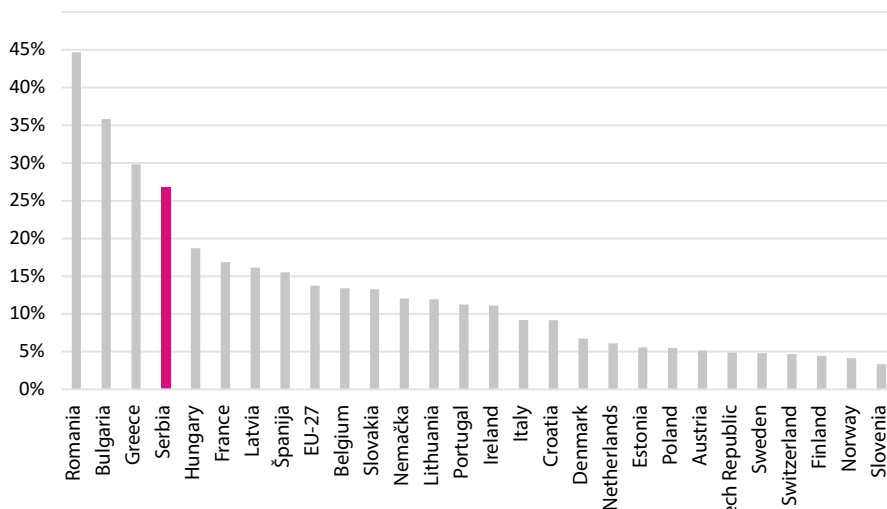
Within SDG 10, the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report defines one priority target to be achieved by 2030:

Priority target	10.1 By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average	
Indicator	The rate of severe material deprivation among the poorest 40% of citizens decreased from 28% to 10%, in line with the European average	The percentage of the poorest 40% of citizens who rate their health as poor or very poor decreased from 17.7% to 10%, in line with the European average

Since Eurostat has not yet updated the data on the material deprivation rate for 2020, we will use the data on the material and social deprivation rate, which is available for comparison for 2022. Regarding the Republic of Serbia, this rate for the 40%

poorest citizens (I and II quintiles) is 26.8%, placing it among the four worst-ranked European countries, while the EU average is 13.8%. Compared to 2021, it has decreased by 0.6 percentage points.

Chart 3 Rate of severe material and social deprivation – the poorest 40% of the population – 2022

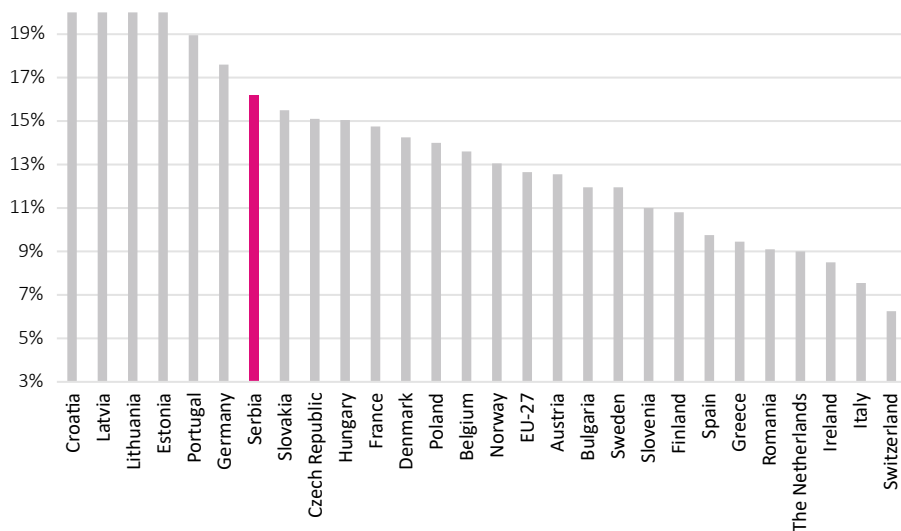


Source: Calculated by authors based on Eurostat data

In addition, as seen in Chart 3, the Republic of Serbia has made some progress regarding the percentage of the poorest 40% of the population who rate their health as

poor or very poor, which, compared to the previous year, decreased in 2022 from 17.3% to 16.2%, although the target of 10% has still not been reached.

Chart 4 Percentage of the population that rates their health as poor or very poor – the poorest 40% of the population – 2022



Source: Calculated by authors based on Eurostat data

None of the nine recommendations from the previous report have been fulfilled. The most concerning fact is that the Republic of Serbia has still not adopted the key over-

arching strategic document in this area – the ESRP. Most of these recommendations have been repeated for many years.

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendations from previous report	Status	Comment
Adopt the National Economic Recovery Plan, in line with current European policies as well as all relevant targets under SDG 10.	Not adopted	The recommendation has been repeated since 2020 but is no longer relevant and will be excluded from future reports.
Adopt a new ESRP that addresses all relevant aspects of reducing inequality, including wealth, income, consumption, and access to basic services (healthcare, education, culture, etc.).	Not adopted	The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.

<p>Adopt an amendment to the Individual Income Tax Law in line with the recommendations of the Fiscal Council, increasing the nominal tax rate from 10% to 20%, while raising the non-taxable threshold to 40,000 dinars, which would reduce the fiscal burden on the lowest wages and, consequently, reduce inequality.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.</p>
<p>Amend the Law on Social Protection to reduce the number of individuals living below the nationally defined absolute poverty line, by increasing benefits for households without income and providing assistance to households with earnings (at least up to the level of the nationally defined absolute poverty line).</p>		<p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.</p>
<p>Amend the Law on Ministries to clearly define the institution responsible for inequality issues and explicitly state the distributive and redistributive policies as the responsibility of the Ministry of Finance (MF).</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.</p>
<p>Initiate a consultation process regarding the proposal for a new taxation system made by authors Arandarenko, Krstić, and Žarković-Rakić, which would abandon the current system that separately tracks income from labour and capital, in favour of a tax that would combine income from labour and capital and tax them at a progressive tax rate to be agreed upon through a broader social dialogue process.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.</p>
<p>Introduce an inheritance tax modelled on developed European countries, with a tax-free allowance up to a certain amount (e.g., half a million euros) and progressive rates that would go up to 50%.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.</p>
<p>Increase the coverage of preschool education, particularly in rural areas, in order to reduce long-term educational inequality.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.</p>

Make child benefits universal, following the example of Croatia and Slovenia.	Not adopted	The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.
Introduce social pensions for elderly citizens who are not recipients of regular old-age pensions.	Not adopted	The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.
Introduce additional amendments to the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children to stipulate a minimum allowance for the child care period, as well as a parental allowance for the fifth (and each subsequent) child.	Not adopted	The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.
Amend the Law on Social Protection to reconsider and potentially reduce the number of conditions (primarily asset-based) for receiving social assistance, in order to improve coverage for socially vulnerable citizens who do not meet all the requirements.	Not adopted	The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.
Align the amount of social assistance with Article 13 of the European Social Charter, ensuring that the assistance exceeds the poverty threshold and enables the coverage of basic costs, such as rent for social housing and utility bills.	Not adopted	The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.
Adopt an Action Plan for the implementation of the Public Health Strategy, which should outline the necessary steps to achieve the goals of the Strategy, primarily focusing on improving the health of vulnerable groups.	Adopted	The Action Plan was adopted along with the strategy and represents its integral part.
Adopt the programme for implementing the Law on Social Entrepreneurship.	Not adopted	The draft programme has been prepared and submitted to the relevant ministry, and the development is still ongoing. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.

Recommendations

1. GRS should adopt a new ESRP that addresses all relevant aspects of reducing inequalities, including inequalities in wealth, income, consumption, and access to basic services (healthcare, education, culture, etc.).
2. NARS should amend the Law on Social Protection to reduce the number of individuals living below the nationally defined absolute poverty line, by increasing benefits for households without income and providing assistance to households with earnings (at least up to the level of the nationally defined absolute poverty line).
3. NARS should amend the Law on Ministries to clearly define the institution responsible for inequality issues and explicitly state the distributive and redistributive policies as the responsibility of the Ministry of Finance (MF).
4. MLEVSA should initiate a consultation process regarding the proposal for a new taxation system, which would abandon the current system that separately tracks income from labour and capital, in favour of a tax that would combine income from labour and capital and tax them at a progressive tax rate to be agreed upon through a broader social dialogue process.
5. NARS should adopt amendments to the Law on Property Tax, introducing an inheritance tax modelled on developed European countries, with a tax-free allowance up to a certain amount (e.g., half a million euros) and progressive rates that would go up to 50%.
6. The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development (MESTD) should initiate efforts to increase the coverage of preschool education, especially in rural areas, to reduce educational inequality in the long term.
7. The NARS should adopt amendments to the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children to make the child benefits universal, following the model of Croatia and Slovenia.
8. The NARS should adopt amendments to the Law on Social Protection and introduce social pensions for older citizens who are not recipients of regular old-age pensions.
9. NARS should introduce additional amendments to the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children to stipulate a minimum allowance for the childcare period, as well as a parental allowance for the fifth (and each subsequent) child.
10. NARS should adopt amendment to the Law on Social Protection to reconsider and potentially reduce the number of conditions (primarily asset-based) for receiving

social assistance, in order to improve coverage for socially vulnerable citizens who do not meet all the requirements.

11. NARS should adopt amendments to the Law on Social Protection, aligning the amount of social assistance with Article 13 of the European Social Charter, ensuring that the assistance exceeds the poverty threshold and enables the coverage of basic costs, such as rent for social housing and utility bills.
12. MH should adopt an Action Plan for the implementation of the Public Health Strategy, which should outline the necessary steps to achieve the goals of the Strategy, primarily focusing on improving the health of vulnerable groups.
13. GRS should, based on the proposal of MLEVSA, adopt a Programme for Implementation of the Law on Social Entrepreneurship.

Priority area 3: Reaching European levels of democracy, rule of law and institutional quality

Functional institutions based on the principles of "good governance" and respect for the rule of law are essential conditions for the realization and preservation of human rights. In this regard, achieving SDG 16 is of particular importance, as it entails building functional and accountable institutions at all levels, ensuring access to justice for all, and promoting a peaceful and inclusive society for sustainable development. This goal is compatible with the political and institutional priorities in the negotiation process between the Republic of Serbia and the EU.

Sustainable Development Goal 16:

PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

The judicial reform outlined in the Action Plan for Chapter 23 was completed in February 2023. On the proposal of the GRS, and with a positive assessment from the European Commission for Democracy through Law of the Council of Europe – the Venice Commission, the NARS adopted a set of judicial laws, including: the Law on Judges, the Law on the Organisation of Courts, the Law on the High Judicial Council, the Law on the High Prosecutorial Council and the Law on Public Prosecutor's Office. The adoption of

these laws has provided a legal basis for implementing previously adopted constitutional amendments, whose main goal was to reduce political influence on the judiciary by changing the selection process for judges and prosecutors so that they are no longer appointed by NARS, but by the High Judicial Council and the High Prosecutorial Council, respectively. Accordingly, the entire process of constitutional changes, including the adoption of judicial laws, has been positively assessed by officials of the Council of Europe and the European

Commission as a progress in Serbia's EU accession process. However, the adoption of the laws is recognized as the first step toward achieving an efficient and independent judiciary, while their effective implementation in practice is crucial. On the other hand, part of the domestic experts from the field has frequently pointed out a number of shortcomings during this process, ranging from the lack of substantial transparency and inclusivity in the entire process of preparing and adopting regulations, to insufficiently clear provisions in the documents themselves, and a missed opportunity for a complete depoliticization of the judiciary (Majić, 2023).

In addition to the aforementioned laws, the Action Plan for Chapter 23 also envisages the adoption of the Law on the Seats and Territorial Jurisdictions of Courts and Public Prosecutor's Offices and the Law on the Judicial Academy, which were not adopted during this reporting period. The entire judicial reform has largely been completed through the adoption and harmonisation of a series of secondary legislative acts, while the adoption of two secondary acts, which fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, is still awaited. Finally, during this reporting period, legislative activities based on the recommendations from the previous report, which envisaged the adoption of the Law on Amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code, Amendments to the Criminal Code, the Family Law, the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, and secondary legislation in the areas of combating organized crime, terrorism, and corruption, as well as the management of vital records, were absent. Regarding the work on amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code and the Criminal Code, special working groups were formed as early as 2021. However, the community of experts has not been informed about the results of their work, except for the informa-

tion that these legislative activities are also foreseen in the Reform Agenda that Serbia is preparing as part of its European integration process. Also, despite certain initiatives, the relevant ministries have not taken steps to improve the legal framework in the area of domestic violence prevention, despite the negative trends in this field. Finally, although free legal aid was legally regulated as early as in 2018 to enable effective and equal access to justice for all individuals, after several years of implementation, full harmonisation with procedural laws has not been achieved.

On the other hand, in order to align with the adopted set of judicial laws, amendments and supplements to a number of laws have also been adopted. Among them is the Law on the Organization and Jurisdiction of Government Authorities in the Suppression of Organized Crime, Terrorism, and Corruption. Furthermore, amendments have been adopted to the Law on the Organization and Competence of Government Authorities in War Crimes Proceedings, the Law on the Organization and Competences of Government Authorities Combating Cyber Crime, and the Law on the Protection of the Right to a Trial Within a Reasonable Time, which are also significant for ensuring access to justice. Additionally, the Law on Constitutional Court was amended twice during 2023. In February, amendments were adopted to align with judicial laws regulating the position of holders of judicial and public prosecutor functions, while the amendments in October changed the conditions for the retirement of Constitutional Court judges. These amendments allow Constitutional Court judges to continue performing their duties after reaching the age of 65, until the second condition is met — reaching 45 years of service. Finally, in 2023, a new Law on Electronic Media was adopted, and an important innovation in this area, which is directly related to a large number of the targets of SDG 16, is

the adoption of the Regulation on the urgent public notification of the disappearance of a minor in September 2023. Following this, the "Pronadi me" system (*eng. "Find Me"*) for urgent notification of public about the disappearance of a child (the so-called *Amber Alert*) began functioning in the Republic of Serbia.

The most significant change in the legal framework regarding the organization of public administration in this reporting period concerns the amendments to the Law on Employees in Autonomous Provinces and Local Self-Government Units, which introduced a competency framework into the human resources management system and the civil service system at the local government level. Also, in 2023, amendments to the Law on Public Procurement were adopted, which became effective from 1 January 2024. Among other things, these amendments introduced the principle of environmental protection in public procurement procedures and the introduction of quality criteria for certain services. Therefore, these amendments, which align with the best EU practices, contribute to both the achievement of SDG 16 and SDG 13.

Although the framework of public policies in the area of SDG 16 had largely been completed, a number of public policy documents were adopted during this reporting period. In August 2023, the GRS adopted the Personal Data Protection Strategy for 2023 - 2030, which meant that new strategic document was adopted 13 years after the first strategy in this area and five years after the adoption of the new Law on Personal Data Protection. The main goal defined in this strategic document is the protection of the right to personal data privacy in all areas of life. Also, in the area of improving services to citizens and the economy, the GRS adopted two significant strategic docu-

ments during 2023: The Programme for the Simplification of Administrative Procedures and Regulations – e-PAPER for 2023–2025, aimed at creating preconditions for quality and user-oriented services for citizens and the economy, and reducing administrative costs for businesses; and the eUprava (*eng. eGovernment*) Development Programme with the accompanying Action Plan for the period 2023–2025, which general goal is the development of an efficient and user-oriented administration in a digital environment. Furthermore, in 2023, a new two-year Action Plan (2023–2024) for the implementation of the Strategy for Improvement of Position of Persons with Disabilities in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2020–2024, was also adopted. Finally, regarding the Strategy for Public Administration Reform in the Republic of Serbia adopted in 2021, significant results were achieved during this reporting period, particularly in the areas of service delivery and digitalization, which are moving towards a "paperless administration", contributing not only to SDG 16 but also to SDG 13.

However, during this reporting period, no strategic document addressing violence and inappropriate behaviour at sporting events was adopted, despite the fact that the previous National Strategy expired in 2018. Additionally, Serbia has lacked an Action Plan for the implementation of the Community Policing Strategy, which was adopted in 2013, since 2016. Furthermore, although a draft of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy was prepared and a public debate was held, the new strategic document has not yet been adopted. Additionally, in accordance with the commitments arising from Serbia's participation in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) initiative, the Government, after conducting a public consultation, adopted the Action Plan for the Implementation of

the OGP Initiative in the Republic of Serbia for 2023–2027.

When it comes to the implementation of policy documents, there is generally no established practice of regular monitoring and evaluation, with the exception of certain documents such as the Public Administration Reform Strategy and the National Strategy for War Crimes Prosecution. In addition to the regular annual reports on the implementation of the strategic framework in the field of public administration reform, in 2023, a Mid-term Review and Evaluation of the Impact of the Action Plan (2021-2025) for the Implementation of the Public Administration Reform Strategy in the Republic of Serbia was conducted.

Additionally, one of the positive examples is the practice of the MHMRSD, which regularly publishes reports on the implementation of action plans for strategies within its competence in areas such as anti-discrimination, gender equality, civil society development, etc. However, these documents are generally limited to an overview of the implementation of activities, while a comprehensive qualitative analysis is lacking.

Finally, there were no significant changes during 2023 regarding the institutional framework, considering that the amendments to the Law on Ministries only related to the status and responsibilities of the Office for Information Technologies and eGovernment.

Assessment of sustainable development priority 3 (SDG 16)

According to the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24, the performance rating for achieving SDG 16 remains unchanged, meaning that the Republic of Serbia still faces significant challenges and continues to stagnate in this regard (Lafortune et al, 2024). According to this report, the performance of the group of EU candidate countries included in this study (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Turkey) is rated in the same way. More specifically, when it comes to the Republic of Serbia, the report suggests that three indicators have been met so far and are progressing in a positive direction. These indicators are: "percentage of population reporting crime, death rate due to homicide and gap in population reporting crime in the area, by income". The remaining indicators for this SDG point to significant or critical chal-

lenges, with values that are either stagnating or declining.

According to the European Commission's assessments, despite certain improvements, significant progress cannot yet be noted regarding political criteria, specifically those aspects of these criteria that are crucial for achieving SDG 16 (European Commission, 2023). Regarding Chapter 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, the European Commission notes a certain level of readiness in the Republic of Serbia, as well as limited progress in the implementation of EU legal acquis and European standards, particularly concerning the implementation of judicial reforms. It also highlights the necessity of adopting an anti-corruption strategy in line with EU recommendations, while the previously mentioned recommendations on media freedom and freedom of

expression are still valid, as they have been implemented to a limited extent. Among other things, the European Commission highlights the adoption of legislation for implementing constitutional changes in the area of judicial reform, from February 2023, as an important step, while it is expected that the remaining laws will also be adopted. While awaiting the adoption of the anti-corruption strategy and its action plan, the Commission notes that the Republic of Serbia has taken steps to implement the remaining five recommendations from the Fourth Evaluation Round Report of the GRECO on the corruption prevention in respect of members of parliament, judges

and prosecutors. Regarding fundamental rights, although the constitutional and legislative framework is largely defined, the European Commission emphasized the need for consistent and effective implementation. On other relevant issues from the group of political criteria for this SDG, the European Commission still states that the Republic of Serbia is moderately prepared for membership in the field of public administration reform, with limited progress, while in the fight against organized crime, a certain level of readiness is noted, along with also limited progress, particularly regarding the detection and prevention of illegal migration and human trafficking.

Table 3 Comparison of assessed progress from the last two reports of the European Commission on the Republic of Serbia, by key aspects of political criteria for SDG 16

	2022	2023
Functioning of the judiciary	Some progress	
Fight against corruption	Limited progress	
Freedom of expression	No progress	Limited progress
Fight against organised crime	Limited progress	
Public administration reform	Limited progress	

Source: European Commission (https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports_en)

The most recent report from Freedom House, *Freedom in the World*, supports the assessment that freedoms in the Republic of Serbia are limited. The Republic of Serbia has maintained its status as a partially free country, with a global score of 57/100 (political rights 18/40, civil liberties 39/60). It is important to note that, regarding the overall score of the Republic of Serbia, a continuous decline is visible compared to previous reporting periods. Freedom House last characterized the Republic of Serbia as a free democracy in its 2018 report (Table 4). Key events in 2023

include mass anti-government protests that followed the mass shootings in May of the same year, as well as the December parliamentary and local snap elections, which were accompanied by credible reports of irregularities, along with protests in Belgrade as a result of questioning the final outcomes of the electoral process. At the time of writing this section, the latest available Freedom House report - *Nations in Transit* - is from 2023, in which Serbia was assigned the status of a transitional or hybrid regime (Freedom House, 2024).

Table 4 Results for the Republic of Serbia according to the Freedom in the World reports by Freedom House (2018–2024)

Year in which report was published	Status	Global freedom score
2024	Partially free	57/100
2023	Partially free	60/100
2022	Partially free	62/100
2021	Partially free	64/100
2020	Partially free	66/100
2019	Partially free	67/100
2018	Free	73/100

Source: Freedom House (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia>)

Additionally, according to the Rule of Law Index by the World Justice Project, the overall score of the Republic of Serbia in 2023 is 0.48, representing a slight decline compared to 2022 and 2021 (0.49). Although the overall value of this index does not indicate significant positive or negative shifts, the Republic of Serbia is slightly below the global and regional averages

(0.55 and 0.50, respectively). If the time series from 2020 is considered, a slight regression is noticeable across almost all the factors that make up the index (Table 5). On the global ranking list, the Republic of Serbia is currently ranked 93rd out of 142 countries observed, compared to 83rd place in 2022, when 140 countries were ranked (World Justice Project, 2023).

Table 5 Rule of Law index for 2023, compared to the period 2020–2022

	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total score	0.50	0.49	0.49	0.48
1 Constraints on government powers	0.39	0.38	0.37	0.35
2 Absence of corruption	0.44	0.43	0.42	0.42
3 Open government	0.47	0.46	0.46	0.45
4 Fundamental rights	0.57	0.56	0.55	0.55
5 Red i bezbednost	0.77	0.77	0.77	0.76
6 Sprovođenje zakona	0.48	0.47	0.46	0.46
7 Pravda u civilnim stvarima	0.51	0.50	0.49	0.47
8 Pravda u krivičnim stvarima	0.40	0.39	0.39	0.39

Source: Rule of Law Index of the World Justice Project (<https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2023/Serbia/>); Note: 0 is the lowest rule of law, 1 the highest.

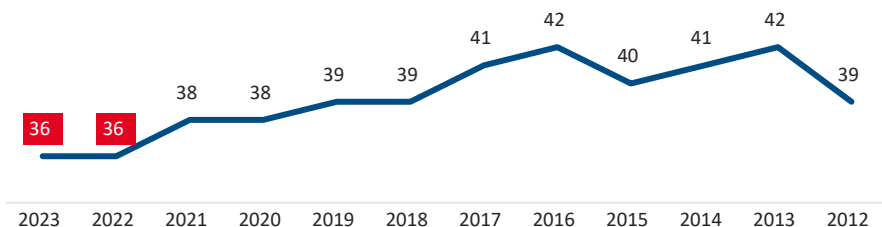
Finally, according to the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) for 2023, the Republic of Serbia remained at its lowest score since the inception of this index (36/100), which was recorded in the 2022 CPI edition. However,

despite the same result, the Republic of Serbia has once again fallen on the country ranking list by three places, now occupying 104th place out of a total of 180. The report highlights the susceptibility of the judiciary

to political pressures, and the associated inability to sanction public officials, as well as the "democratic backsliding" reflected in the

adoption of special laws aimed at limiting the transparency of major projects (Transparency International, 2024).

Chart 5 CPI, movement of results for the Republic of Serbia from 2012 to 2023



Source: Corruption Perception Index (CPI), organization Transparency International <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/index/srb>; Note: on a scale from 0 to 100 (0 being the lowest, 100 the highest score)

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendation from previous report	Status	Comment
The Ministry of the Interior (MoI) should initiate, and the Government of the Republic of Serbia (GRS) should adopt new planning documents that will define the strategic framework in the field of combating violence and inappropriate behaviour at sporting events.	Not adopted	Since 2018, when the validity period of the previous National Strategy for Combating Violence and Inappropriate Behaviour at Sports Events expired, Serbia has not had a strategic document specifically addressing this issue. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.
The MoI should initiate, and the GRS should adopt a completely new strategy or an Action Plan for the implementation of the Community Policing Strategy, as this strategy has no practical value since the expiration of the last action plan.	Not adopted	Since 2016, when the validity period of the previous Action Plan for implementation of the Community Policing Strategy expired, Serbia has not had a strategic document specifically addressing this issue. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.

Recommendation from previous report	Status	Comment
<p>The Ministry of Justice (MJ) should initiate and the GRS should adopt a new strategy aimed at combating corruption, as the current strategy expired in 2018.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>In accordance with the Action Plan for Chapter 23, it is envisaged that, until the adoption of the new National Anti-Corruption Strategy and the accompanying Action Plan, an Operational Plan for the Prevention of Corruption in Areas of Particular Risk will be adopted. Although this Operational Plan was adopted back in 2021, its validity has expired, and the National Strategy has still not been adopted. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.</p>
<p>MIA should adopt a new strategy for combating the organised crime.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The National Strategy for Fight Against Organized Crime was adopted in 2009, after which the GRS adopted public policy documents related to investigations of financial crime (2015–2016) and the fight against cybercrime (2019–2023). The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.</p>
<p>To improve the efficiency of court proceedings in accordance with EU standards and the practice of the European Court of Human Rights, and to strengthen the independence of judges and prosecutors, the MJ should initiate the process of aligning a set of judicial laws (laws on the organization of courts, judges, the public prosecutor's office, the High Judicial Council, the State Prosecutorial Council, the Judicial Academy, etc.) with the Constitution.</p>	<p>Partially adopted</p>	<p>NARS adopted the following: the Law on Judges, the Law on the Organisation of Courts, the Law on the High Judicial Council, the Law on the High Prosecutorial Council and the Law on the Public Prosecutor's Office. However, in addition to the aforementioned laws, the Action Plan for Chapter 23 also envisages the adoption of the Law on the Seats and Territorial Jurisdiction of Courts and Public Prosecutors Offices and the Law on the Judicial Academy, which were not adopted during this reporting period. The entire judicial reform was supposed to be completed by adopting and aligning a series of secondary legislation, which has only been partially implemented.</p>

Recommendation from previous report	Status	Comment
<p>In order to improve the rights of individuals in criminal proceedings, the MP should initiate the process of amending the Criminal Procedure Code with the aim of aligning it with many EU directives previously outlined in the document.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The Criminal Procedure Code has not been changed during 2023 or recent years. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.</p>
<p>MIA and MJ should adopt a secondary legislation based on the Law on Organisation and Jurisdiction of Government Authorities in Suppression of Organised Crime, Terrorism, and Corruption, in order to regulate the procedures for official communication between the police and the public prosecutor's office in cases of organized crime and corruption.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>Article 16 of the Law on Organisation and Jurisdiction of Government Authorities in Suppression of Organised Crime, Terrorism, and Corruption stipulates that the deadlines, procedures, and methods of official communication between the special departments of higher public prosecutor's offices and the organizational unit responsible for combating corruption shall be regulated by a document jointly adopted by the minister responsible for judicial affairs and the minister responsible for internal affairs. Although the deadline for submission of this secondary legislation expired in 2018, it has not yet been adopted. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.</p>
<p>MLEVSA and MHMRSD should initiate the process of amendment of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination in order to achieve full harmonisation with EU legal acquis, in particular regarding the scope of exceptions to the principle of equal treatment, the definition of indirect discrimination, and the obligation to ensure reasonable accommodation for employees with disabilities.</p>	<p>Partially adopted</p>	<p>In 2021, amendments and supplements to the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination were adopted, which, among other things, regulated the concept of indirect discrimination.</p>

Recommendation from previous report	Status	Comment
To strengthen systemic and institutional mechanisms for responding to all forms of violence against children, the MLEVSA should initiate amendments to the Family Law to include an explicit ban on corporal punishment.	Not adopted	The Family Law has not been changed during 2022 or recent years. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.
There is a need for additional measures, including the improvement of secondary legislation, to ensure that children whose parents do not possess personal documents are registered at birth in the civil records in accordance with Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and that children born stateless in the country have immediate access to citizenship. The authorities responsible for these measures are the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government (MPALSG) and MIA.	Not adopted	The Law on Civil Records and Instructions on Maintaining the Civil Records and Related Forms were not amended during 2023. While the Law on Civil Records has not been changed since 2018, the Instructions on Maintaining the Civil Records and Related Forms was amended in 2022, but the amendments did not include this recommendation.
The GRS should include the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, and the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection in the work of the Inter-Ministerial Working Group for the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.	Not adopted	The decision on establishment of the Inter-Ministerial Working Group for the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was not amended during 2023. The Decision was last amended in 2019. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.

Recommendation from previous report	Status	Comment
GRS should revise its framework for performance indicators related to SDG 16 by replacing the inadequate indicators or adding new ones to the existing framework, in accordance with the findings presented in this document.	Partially adopted	The mechanisms for tracking progress under Goal 16 have been slightly modified. SORS monitors and publishes 13 global indicators out of a total of 24, which is one indicator more than in 2023. During the last year the number of global indicators available on the portal was increased by one for SDG 16. In addition to the 12 indicators that were previously available, SORS now also includes: 16.8.1a (10.6.1a) - The share of members in international organizations.

Recommendations

1. MIA should initiate, and the GRS should adopt new planning documents that will define the strategic framework in the field of combating violence and inappropriate behaviour at sporting events.
2. The MIA should initiate, and the GRS should adopt a completely new strategy or an Action Plan for the implementation of the Community Policing Strategy, as this strategy has no practical value since the expiration of the last action plan.
3. The MJ should initiate and the GRS should adopt a new strategy aimed at combating corruption, as the current strategy expired in 2018.
4. MIA should adopt, and the GRS should adopt a new strategy for combating the organised crime.
5. To improve the efficiency of court proceedings in accordance with EU standards and the practice of the European Court of Human Rights, and to strengthen the independence of judges and prosecutors, the MJ should initiate the process of aligning a remaining set of judicial laws (laws on judicial academy and seats and jurisdictions of courts and public prosecutor's offices) with the Constitution, as well as adopt remaining secondary legislation related to the Ministry of Justice.
6. In order to improve the rights of parties in criminal proceedings, the MP should initiate the process of amending the Criminal Code and the Law on Criminal Procedure with the aim of aligning it with many EU directives previously outlined in the document.
7. In order to improve the system of free legal aid, it is necessary to harmonize procedural laws with the Law on Free Legal Aid and conduct a campaign to inform citizens about their rights.

8. MIA and MJ should adopt a secondary legislation based on the Law on Organization and Jurisdiction of Government Authorities in Suppression of Organised Crime, Terrorism and Corruption, in order to regulate the procedures for official communication between the police and the public prosecutor's office in cases of organized crime and corruption.
9. In order to improve the protection of citizens from discrimination, it is necessary to further strengthen the capacities of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, in line with the recommendations of the UN Human Rights Committee in the Concluding Observations regarding Serbia's Third Periodic Report on the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights for 2016-2017.
10. In accordance with the same UN recommendations, it is necessary to enable the collection of data on judicial practices in procedures for protection against discrimination. The competent ministry should adopt a subordinate act that prescribes the method of keeping records by courts on final judgments and decisions made in misdemeanour, criminal, and civil proceedings due to violations of provisions prohibiting discrimination, as well as the method of submitting them to the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality.
11. To strengthen systemic and institutional mechanisms for responding to all forms of violence against children, the MLEVSA should initiate amendments to the Family Law to include an explicit ban on corporal punishment.
12. There is a need for additional measures, including the improvement of secondary legislation, to ensure that children whose parents do not possess personal documents are registered at birth in the civil records in accordance with Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and that children born stateless in the country have immediate access to citizenship. MSALSG and MIA are responsible for these measures.
13. The GRS should include the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, and the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection in the work of the Inter-ministerial Working Group for the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
14. GRS should revise its framework for performance indicators related to SDG 16 by replacing the inadequate indicators or adding new ones to the existing framework, in accordance with the findings presented in this document.
15. Based on the initiative of MLEVSA, GRS should improve strategic and legal framework in the field of preventing domestic violence. The amendments to the normative framework should particularly stipulate that a child is considered a victim of violence if they witness domestic violence against a family member or a close person.

Priority area 4: Competitive economy and productive jobs

Republic of Serbia needs to shift its focus from competitiveness based on low labour and energy costs to competitiveness based on knowledge and productive jobs. In this regard, it is important to promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, the creation of decent jobs, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation (target 8.3), achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including young people and persons with disabilities, as well as equal pay for equal work (target 8.5), and increase investments in research and development, enhance technological capacities, and encourage innovation, particularly in the private sector (target 9.5).

Sustainable Development Goal 8:

DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

In terms of changes to the strategic framework, at the end of October 2023, Strategy for the Development of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises for the period 2023 – 2027 was adopted, along with the accompanying Action Plan for the period 2023–2024. However, the key criticism from the previous period, that it is a document lacking sufficient ambition and foreseeing relatively modest financial support for the micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) sector, still stands. In addition, the GRS adopted the Action Plan for 2024 for the implementation of Startup Ecosystem Development Strategy which outlines activities for further improvement of financing, business operations, and infrastructure used by startups. This plan sets an ambi-

tious goal to reach 300 registered startup companies by the end of the year (currently, 141 companies are registered in the Innovation System Register). However, the question arises as to how it is possible to double this number in just over six months with programs that foresee less than 10 million euros in non-repayable support.

In the domain of the legislative framework, the Law on Occupational Safety and Health was adopted at the end of April 2023, which, among other things, for the first time recognized the concept of remote work and telecommuting. In addition, the new law introduces mandatory safety training and the responsibility of employees for workplace injuries, who will

be subject to fines for non-compliance with safety regulations. However, when it comes to remote work and telecommuting, the law contains only three sentences that are so general that they leave employers with complete freedom to act as they did before the adoption of this law. Here is an example from paragraph VI, point 45: "The employer may issue an act on the risk assessment for remote work and telecommuting in writing, with the participation of the employee" (NARS, 2023b). At the end of July, amendments to the Law on Foreigners and the Law on Employment of Foreigners were adopted, significantly easing the process of employing foreign citizens in Serbia. Most of the amendment became effective in February 2024, shortening the entire procedure to a maximum of 15 days²⁰. The application is now submitted electronically to the Ministry of the Interior via the e-Government portal, eliminating the requirement for the employee's physical presence²¹. The process results in the issuance of Unified Work and Residence Permit valid for three years, after which one can apply for a permanent permit²² (NARS, 2023c; 2023d).

In September 2023, the Law on the Management of Companies Owned by the Republic of Serbia, regulating the implementation of state ownership policies and management in approximately 180 companies in which the state holds both majority and minority ownership (NARS, 2023e). The most significant changes concern centralized ownership management, which will be carried out by the Ministry of Economy, with exceptions in the energy sector. However, organizations like Transparency have criticized this law, pointing out significant corruption risks in the

rules for managing state-owned enterprises. For example, the Law on the Prevention of Corruption does not apply to state representatives in the shareholders' assembly, members of supervisory boards, directors and acting directors in state-owned enterprises and they are not obliged to submit property reports at the beginning and end of their mandates and comply with other rules provided by the law. Other weaknesses of the law include insufficiently clear regulations on the appointment of acting directors, inadequate rules to prevent abuses for political promotion or media influence peddling, and the absence of penalties for violations of certain provisions (Transparency, 2023). At the end of October 2023, the minimum salary was increased by 17.8% nominally and 9.6% in real terms for the period January–December 2024, which means it averages 47,154 dinars per month (GRS, 2023b).

As in the previous reporting period, there were no changes in the institutional framework during the reporting period. No new bodies were formed, nor were the capacities of the existing institutions significantly strengthened.

In the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24 it was assessed that the Republic of Serbia is on the "right track" and making progress on indicators, but that "major challenges" still remain. Progress was recorded in indicators related to the protection of fundamental workers' rights, the NEET rate, the unemployment rate, and the poverty rate among employed persons, while the work-related injury mortality rate has worsened, linked to imports (Lafortune et al., 2024).

20 The same procedure previously lasted two and a half months.

21 Previously, the employee had to be physically present in Serbia up to three times, and the documentation was submitted both to the MIA and the NES.

22 Previously, a work permit and a residence permit were issued separately for a period of one year, and it was possible to apply for a permanent residence permit after five years.

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Targets 8.3 and 8.5

Within SDG 8, the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report defines priority targets to be achieved by 2030:

Priority target	8.3 - Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services	8.5 - By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value	
Indicator	By 2022, the share of private investments in GDP reached at least 20%, while public investments accounted for at least 5% of GDP	The employment rate for the population in the age group 20–64 reached 75%, with a median salary that enables the purchase of the average consumer basket	An increase in overall labour productivity by 50% and an increase in labour productivity in the manufacturing industry by at least 50%

Priority target 8.3

As for the share of public investments in GDP, the Republic of Serbia "surpassed" the 5% mark a few years ago, and according to the most recent available data for 2022, it reached 6.5% of GDP, ranking first in Europe (Chart 6)²³. However, while the high level of public investments is generally a positive aspect, what is problematic is their structure, namely the selection and prioritization of projects. On the one

hand, if we analyse the Budget Revision for 2023, it is positive that over 50% of public investments are directed towards the construction of roads, railways, and healthcare infrastructure. Given that the Republic of Serbia has long lagged behind the average of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in this field, such high investments are critically needed and should be sustained over a longer period. On the other hand,

23 According to publicly available data from Eurostat.

the downside of these investments is the very low and insufficient amount allocated to environmental protection. According to the estimates of the Fiscal Council, annual investments in this area would need to be at least two to three times higher than they are currently in order to make up for the decades-long gap compared to the economies of Central and Eastern Europe (Fiscal Council, 2023). The fact that the same amount of money planned for all environmental protection projects (18 billion dinars or 86%) has been allocated for the national football stadium and local stadiums, whose profitability is at least questionable, shows that the issue is not a lack of funds. An additional problem is the delay in implementing a large number of projects, especially in key areas such as environmental protection, education, and healthcare. For example, the year-end financial statement for 2022 shows that only 38% of the planned budgetary funds were spent on the "Čista Srbija" programme (*eng. Clean Serbia*), a key project in municipal infrastructure (Fiscal Council, 2023). Finally, the number of projects implemented outside institutional frameworks and legally prescribed procedures is increasing, with a notable example being the International EXPO 2027, which is proceeding under a "lex specialis" created specifically for it.

Private investments remain well below the targeted 20% of GDP, currently at 14.9%. However, when foreign investments are broken down into domestic and foreign, there are two entirely different stories. For several consecutive years, the Republic of Serbia has been attracting record amounts of foreign direct investments, with their

share of GDP reaching 7.3% in 2022, according to the latest comparative data—one of the highest results in Europe (Eurostat, 2024b). A different issue altogether is the structure of these investments. The share of the manufacturing industry barely exceeds 30%, while construction, real estate, and extractive industries collectively account for slightly more and it is well known that their developmental contribution is relatively low. On the other hand, it should be noted that a substantial portion of these investments has been attracted through subsidies²⁴, which on average cost us significantly more compared to what they are bringing in return²⁵.

When analysing domestic private investments, the situation appears significantly different compared to public and foreign direct investments. First of all, there is no official state statistics tracking these investments, but we can make a rough estimate²⁶ that in 2022, they accounted for about 7.7% of GDP, which is lower than the EU average (12.8%) and even half the average of Central and Eastern European economies during their period of most intense growth. On the other hand, even these low domestic private investments are overestimated, as they include investments by state-owned companies that are not recorded as public enterprises because they are not directly financed from the budget, such as Telekom, Serbian Railways, as well as companies from the arms industry. Therefore, it is most likely a figure between 5.5% and 6.5% of GDP.

This poor result is the consequence of two factors: One factor is the long-known sto-

24 One-third of the total investments into the manufacturing industry since 2015 has been attracted through subsidies.

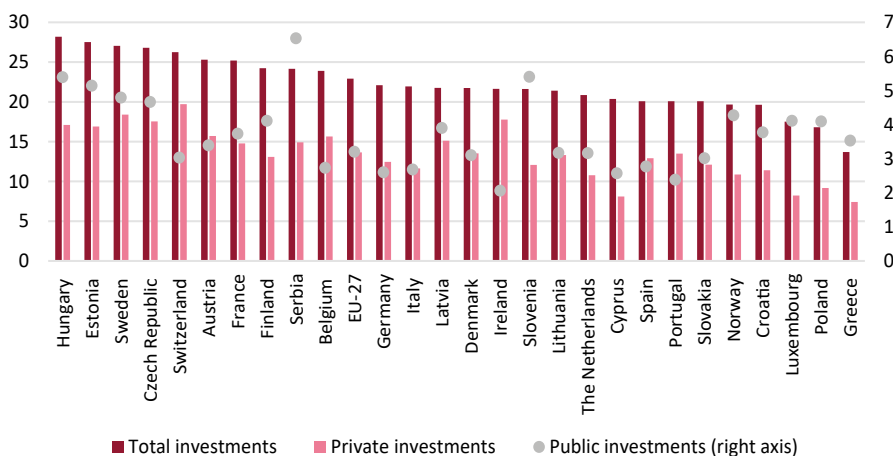
25 For example, the agreed share of subsidies in the total investments and gross earnings never fell below 12% in any year (2019, 2020), and reached as high as 21% (2016).

26 If we subtract foreign direct investments from the total investments of the private sector.

ry of an inadequate business environment – high corruption, insufficiently independent judiciary, inefficient administration, etc.; the second factor is the fact that the state directs all its efforts in encouraging investments towards large foreign companies while completely neglecting the domestic sector of small and medium-sized enterprises, which are the backbone of

development for any country. This is evident both in tax policy (the existence of tax credits for large companies, but not for SMEs), industrial policy (the lack of "tangible" support programs for the SME sector), and the general institutional environment in which "the rules of the game" do not apply equally to everyone.

Chart 6. Total private and public investments (right axis) as a percentage of GDP in Europe in 2022



Source: Calculated by authors based on Eurostat data

Priority target 8.5

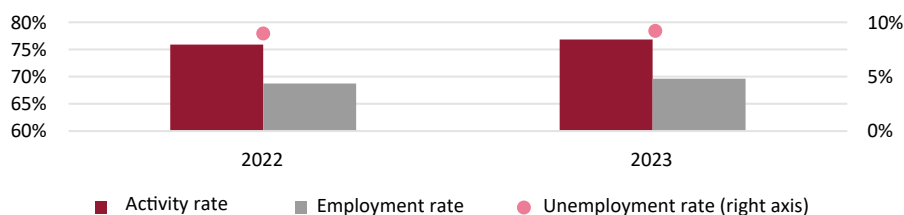
According to the latest publicly available data from the Labour Force Survey by the SORS, the Republic of Serbia increased its overall activity rate and employment rate by 1.0 and 0.9 percentage points, respectively, to 76.8% and 69.6%, while the unemployment rate remained the same at 9.4% (Chart 7). As we can see, the Republic of Serbia has not yet reached the employment rate of 75% (ages 20–64) set by this target and is making very slow progress. As for the median net salary, between January 2023 and January 2024, it increased nominally by 17.1% and by 10.0% in real

terms. This the result of several different short- and long-term (structural) factors. First of all, since January, a 10% salary increase in the public sector has come into effect, which represents the government's traditional recipe for buying "social peace". On the other hand, the faster salary growth in the private sector compared to the public sector suggests an increasing shortage of skilled labour, which puts additional pressure on wage growth. Finally, the easing of inflation, which stood at 6.4% on a year-on-year basis, prevented this high nominal growth from being significantly

eroded, as was the case the previous year. As a result, although it still hasn't reached the value of the average consumer basket,

the share of the median salary increased by as much as 6.2 percentage points during the observed period, reaching 72%.

Chart 7. Activity, employment and unemployment rates (right axis) in 2022 and 2023

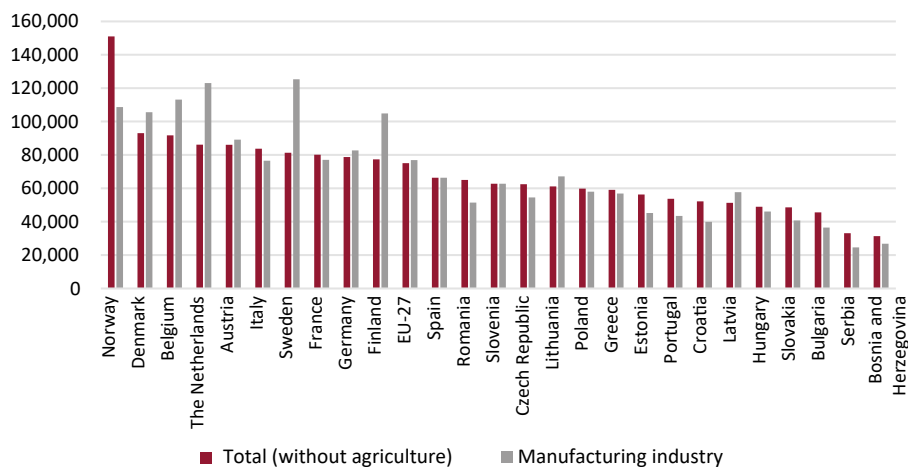


Source: Calculated by the authors based on data from Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Finally, when it comes to labour productivity, there was no significant progress in achieving target 8.5 between 2019 and 2022. Although overall labour productivity, expressed as gross value added per employee (excluding agriculture)²⁷ in constant 2015 prices in RSD, increased by 7.6%, it rose by only 0.2% in the manufacturing industry. Therefore, it

is not surprising that, in comparative terms, the Republic of Serbia was the second least productive country in Europe in 2022, and by far the least productive when it comes to the manufacturing industry²⁸. This points to structural issues in the Serbian economy and the lack of an adequate industrial policy that would stimulate its productivity.

Chart 8. Labour productivity in 2020 - GVA by employee (PPP EUR from 2020)



Source: Calculated by authors based on Eurostat data

27 The data for GVA and employment excluding agriculture are used because in 2021 there was a change in the methodology for the Labor Force Survey, with the most significant change being the exclusion of individuals producing agricultural goods and services for personal consumption, i.e., without placing products on the market, from the employment count.

28 European countries refer to those for which data are publicly available in the Eurostat database.

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendations from previous report	Status	Comment
Adopt the Development Plan as the highest hierarchical document for development planning and, based on it, the Investment Plan, as the second most important strategic document in the Republic of Serbia (in accordance with the LPS).	Not adopted	The recommendation has been repeated for many years. As for the Development Plan, in late June 2023, a Regulation was adopted outlining how the process of developing the Plan should proceed but work on its preparation has not yet begun. There is still no mention of the Investment Plan. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.
Revise all existing strategic documents in accordance with the Development Plan and Investment Plan.	Not adopted	The abovementioned documents have not been adopted. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.
Amend the Labor Law to allow cities in the Republic of Serbia to set their own minimum wage levels, in line with the standard of living, with the condition that the minimum wage at the city level cannot be lower than the national level.	Not adopted	The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.
Adopt an amendment to the Individual Income Tax Law in line with the recommendations of the Fiscal Council, increasing the nominal tax rate from 10% to 20%, while raising the non-taxable threshold from 18,300 to 40,000 dinars.	Not adopted	The nominal tax rate has not changed, and the tax-free allowance for 2024 is 25,000 dinars. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.
Amend the Labor Law to prohibit work on Sundays, except for the HORECA sector (hospitality and hotel industry), in line with the practices of developed European countries.	Not adopted	The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.

<p>Target 8.5, which refers to full and productive employment, decent work, and equal pay for equal work for all categories of the population, should serve as the starting point when formulating strategic documents in the field of economic development. First and foremost, it is necessary to develop specific indicators for monitoring this target, tailored to the context of the Serbian labour market.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.</p>
<p>Amend the Labor Law to better regulate remote work and provide greater protection for workers.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The Labour Law has not been adopted, but the Law on Occupational Safety and Health was adopted, which, among other things, for the first time recognized the concept of remote work and telecommuting. However, as mentioned in the text above, this area is still essentially not regulated.</p> <p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.</p>
<p>The Ministry of Economy should, in collaboration with academia, international organizations (e.g., World Bank, International Monetary Fund, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA]), and the civil sector, develop a study on the efficiency of public investments in Serbia over the past 10 years and use it as a starting point for strategic planning in this area.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.</p>
<p>Revise the current Employment Strategy 2021–2026 to increase budget allocations for active employment measures to 0.5% of GDP, and to define activities aimed at motivating inactive individuals and employing the long-term unemployed population.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.</p>

Recommendations

1. The GRS should, as soon as possible, propose, and the NARS should adopt, the Development Plan followed by the Investment Plan, as the second-highest strategic document in development planning in the Republic of Serbia.
2. GRS should also revise all existing strategic documents in accordance with the Development Plan and Investment Plan.
3. NARS should amend the Labor Law to allow cities in the Republic of Serbia to set their own minimum wage levels, in line with the standard of living, with the condition that the minimum wage at the city level cannot be lower than the national level.
4. MLEVSA should initiate a consultation process regarding the proposal for a new taxation system, which would abandon the current system that separately tracks income from labour and capital, in favour of a tax that would combine income from labour and capital and tax them at a progressive tax rate to be agreed upon through a broader social dialogue process.
5. NARS should amend the Labor Law to abolish work on Sundays, except for the HORECA sector (hospitality and hotel industry), in line with the practices of developed European countries. This reform would positively impact the enhancement of job dignity.
6. GRS should make target 8.5 the starting point for formulation of strategic document in the field of economic development. First and foremost, it is necessary to develop specific indicators for monitoring this target, tailored to the context of the Serbian labour market.
7. NARS should amend the Labor Law to better regulate remote work and provide greater protection for workers.
8. The Ministry of Economy should, in collaboration with academia, international organizations (e.g., World Bank, International Monetary Fund, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)), and the civil sector, develop a study on the efficiency of public investments in Serbia over the past 10 years and use it as a starting point for strategic planning in this area.
9. MLEVSA should initiate the process of amendment of the current Employment Strategy 2021–2026 to increase budget allocations for active employment measures to 0.5% of GDP, and to define activities aimed at motivating inactive individuals and employing the long-term unemployed population.

Sustainable Development Goal 9:

INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE²⁹



Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

The Republic of Serbia has not made significant progress in achieving SDG 9 during the previous reporting period. The current innovation policy is primarily focused on further strengthening the national innovation system through the implementation of measures such as: The establishment of new science and technology parks and regional startup centres, investment in research and innovation infrastructure, support for entrepreneurship, financing of innovative activities, and the creation of a favourable environment for the development of startup and innova-

tive entrepreneurship. The main focus is on economic growth, while the innovation policy that would address social challenges and sustainable development goals continues to be neglected, despite the existence of individual support programs, such as GovTech, which is implemented through the Innovation Fund.

Progress is noticeable in the creation of the strategic framework, reflected in the adoption of strategic documents. The Strategy for the Development of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises for the period 2023

²⁹ SDG 9 is included in two priority areas, which is why the changes in the strategic, legislative, and institutional framework for its implementation are addressed twice, in line with the theme of each priority area. This section addresses the part related to encouraging investment in research and development and promoting innovation.

– 2027 has been adopted, along with the accompanying Action Plan covering the period 2023–2024. The general goal of the Strategy is focused on further strengthening the small and medium-sized enterprises sector and entrepreneurship. At the end of December 2023, a new Action Plan for the implementation of the Smart Specialisation Strategy for the period 2023–2025 was adopted. The new Action Plan foresees significant investments in infrastructure: The construction of the BIO4 Campus research infrastructure with the aim of creating conditions for further development in the fields of biotechnology, bioinformatics, and biomedicine, as well as the development of an optical broadband network in rural areas of the Republic of Serbia by building missing access points in rural settlements and connecting public institutions (mainly primary schools) and households to the broadband network by 2025. In January 2024, a new Action Plan for the implementation of the Republic of Serbia’s Startup Ecosystem Development Strategy was adopted, covering the period from 2023 to the end of 2024 (GRS, 2024a). It should be noted that the new Action Plan was adopted with a one-year delay, as the previous action plan expired at the end of 2022. The general objective of the new Action Plan is to increase the number of registered startups by 300 in the period 2023–2024, which would significantly raise the current estimated number of 750 startups. Through five specific objectives, the plan aims to increase the startup entrepreneurial capacity through educational programs, improve infrastructure and programme support for startups, enhance startup financing mechanisms, improve business conditions for startups, improve

the tax framework, raise the competencies of public administration employees, facilitate access to information, and promote startup culture and global recognition of Serbia’s ecosystem. The Ministry of Economy has started the process of drafting the Action Plan for the implementation of the Industrial Policy Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2024 to 2025, as part of the strategy for 2021–2030. It is expected that this document will be adopted in the second quarter of 2024.

Support for the establishment of innovation infrastructure has continued with the implementation of the Support Programme for the Opening of Regional Innovation Startup Centres. By the end of 2023, a total of 23 regional innovation, startup, and smart city centres were opened, with their main role being to provide support for the development of startups in less developed regions. In mid-2023, an agreement was signed with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) for a loan of 80 million euros intended for the construction and development of science and technology parks in the Republic of Serbia. Around 70 million euros are allocated for the construction of a new science and technology park in Kruševac and the expansion of the existing capacities of science and technology parks in Niš and Čačak. The Registry of Entities in the National Innovation System³⁰ has started operating. It represents a central electronic database used for the registration of innovation entities and provides information on the state of the innovation system. The main goal of the registry is to support entities and provide the public and potential investors with insight into innovation activities.

30 See: <https://einovacije.rs/>.

There has been no progress in Interministerial cooperation in the implementation of policies in the field of innovation during the previous period. An Interministerial working body has not been formed to coordinate policies in the fields of science, technological development, and innovation. Although some progress has been made in the annual reporting on the results of action plan implementation, new strategic documents are mostly created without evaluating the previously expired documents. In addition, there is no practice of conducting strategic impact analysis of implemented policies.

The Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24 provides an assessment of Serbia's progress towards SDG 9, rating it as "moderately improving" (Lafortune et al., 2024). Compared to the set of indicators used, the greatest progress has been made in the share of households with access to broadband internet, the number of published articles per 1,000 population, and the average score of the top three universities. However, the report lacks indicators that would reflect the actual growth in labour productivity and exports of high-tech products, which are important indicators for assessing progress in this priority area.

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Target 9.5

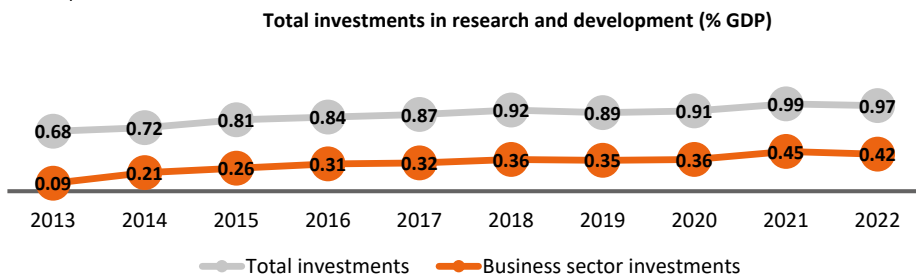
Within SDG 9, the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report defines one priority target to be achieved by 2030:

Priority target	9.5 – By 2030, increase investments in research and development, enhance technological capacities, and encourage innovation, particularly in the private sector		
Indicator	Double investments in research and development to reach 1.8% of GDP, with two-thirds related to the private sector	Achieve a real labour productivity growth of 50% and reach a productivity level of today's 22,500 current EUR per employee	Increase the share of high-tech product exports and knowledge-intensive services to 20% of total exports

In the previous period, there was a decline in total investment in research and development. According to the latest available data from the SORS, the share of total expenditure on research and development in GDP in 2022 was 0.97%, representing a decrease compared to 2021 (0.99%). In addition, the decrease in total expenditures on research and development is primarily due to the relative reduction in investments from the business sector, which

decreased from 0.45% to 0.42% of GDP (Chart 9). The Republic of Serbia still significantly lags the EU27 average, which total average expenditures on research and development amounted to 2.24% of GDP in 2022, with 2/3 of these expenditures coming from the business sector (1.48% of GDP) (Eurostat, 2024b).

Chart 9 Trend of investments in research and development in the last 10 years in the Republic of Serbia

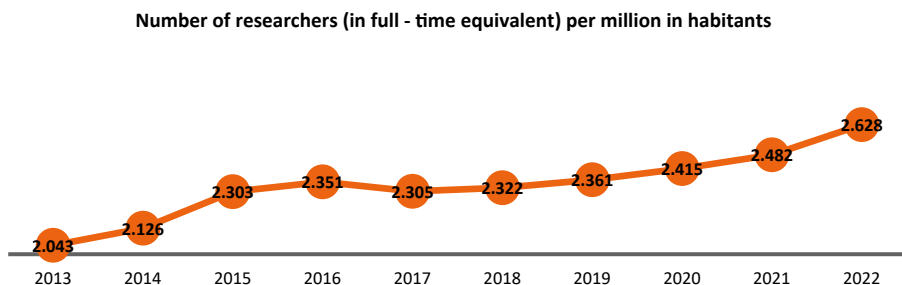


Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

In 2022, the trend of growth in the number of researchers continued, a trend that had been present in previous years. The number of researchers per million inhabitants, expressed as a full-time equivalent, increased from 2,482 in 2021 to 2,628 in 2022 (Chart 10). However, when we com-

pare these numbers with the data for EU data, it is evident that Serbia still has a significant lag. The share of researchers in total employment in the EU27 was 1.44% in 2022, while in the Republic of Serbia, this share was 0.57% in the same year (Eurostat, 2024a).

Chart 10 The trend in the number of researchers over the past 10 years in the Republic of Serbia



Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (<http://sdg.indikatori.rs/>)

The total labour productivity, measured as gross value added per employee (excluding agriculture) in constant 2015 prices, increased by 0.89% in 2022 compared to 2021 and by 7.6% compared to 2019. It should be noted that this growth is not a result of increased productivity in the manufacturing industry, which grew by only 0.23% from 2019 to 2022 (SORS, 2024).

The share of high-tech product exports in total exports in 2022 was 3.02%, representing a slight increase compared to the previous year, 2021 (2.8%). However, the Republic of Serbia still significantly lags the EU27 average in this parameter, which in 2022 was 17.32% (Eurostat, 2024b). There are several factors that influence this indicator, some of which are related to: the structure of the industry and industrial her-

itage, low levels of investment in research and development, underdeveloped business infrastructure, and an insufficiently attractive domestic market. For Serbia to increase its high-tech exports, revitalization of the domestic industry is necessary through capital investments, investments in research and development, as well as

the implementation of policies to encourage technological innovations. In addition, it is of fundamental importance to direct foreign direct investment policies towards attracting foreign companies in high-tech sectors, which would ensure not only capital but also new technologies, knowledge, and access to global markets.

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendations from previous report	Status	Comment
Improve communication and coordination between ministries responsible for industry and innovations by establishing Inter-ministerial working body (working groups) responsible for horizontal coordination and innovations policy management. The important role of this body should be directed towards establishing a framework that will result in a greater contribution of science, technology, and innovation to the sustainable development goals.	Not adopted	Interministerial working body for coordination of innovations policies has not been established. There is no clear communication between ministries regarding the contribution science, technology and innovations have to sustainable development goals. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.
The GRS should intensify policies that facilitate easier access to financing, support business development, and promote the adoption of new technologies by small and medium-sized enterprises to increase the productivity of the manufacturing industry. Although some of the mentioned measures exist, it is evident that their implementation does not contribute to increasing productivity. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate the existing measures and propose new ones, along with increasing the budgetary allocations for this purpose.	Partially adopted	The evaluation of existing measures aimed at improving the framework for increasing the productivity of the manufacturing industry has not been conducted. However, in the previous period, efforts were made to increase access to financing and the adoption of new technologies through the establishment of venture capital funds within programs of the Innovations Fund.

<p>Considering the evident delay, it is necessary to complete and adopt the following strategic documents in the first half of 2023: the Strategy for the Development of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises for the period 2023 – 2027, the Action Plan for the Smart Specialization Strategy for the period 2023–2025, and the Action Plan for the Development of the Startup Ecosystem of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2023–2025 need to be completed and adopted in the first half of 2023.</p>	<p>Adopted</p>	<p>The mentioned strategic documents have been adopted. The Action Plan for the Startup Ecosystem Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia has been adopted for a period of one year, i.e., until the end of 2024.</p>
<p>It is necessary to increase the number of educational events about the measures launched in 2019: "R&D deductions" and "IP Box", which aim to encourage investment by the business sector in research and development (R&D). A significant number of small and medium-sized enterprises are not sufficiently informed with the aforementioned measures or the conditions for their use.</p>	<p>Adopted</p>	<p>As part of the campaign "Srbija, zemlja nauke, zemlja inovacija" (eng. Serbia, a Land of Science and Innovation) the number of educational events has significantly increased with the goal of raising awareness and expanding the number of users benefiting from tax incentives for R&D.</p>
<p>In order to increase the effectiveness of industrial policy implementation, it is necessary to identify industrial sectors in which the Republic of Serbia holds the greatest competitive advantages, has significant market potential, and sustainability. Based on these findings, policy instruments and incentives should be created to stimulate their accelerated growth and enhance competitiveness.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The recommendation has not been adopted. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.</p>

Recommendations

1. Considering that the existing national innovation system has reached a stage of maturity, it is necessary to shift towards a transformational innovation policy. This policy should focus on the development of innovations that can contribute to the transformation of society and the resolution of identified societal challenges. This implies a gradual shift in the paradigm of innovation policy. The first steps that need to be taken include forming an interdisciplinary working group that would de-

sign and implement a pilot programme for the development of innovations aimed at solving societal challenges. After evaluating the implemented pilot programme, the next step involves creating a strategy and action plan with clear goals and deadlines, securing adequate financing, implementing it, and establishing a system for monitoring and evaluating progress. The pilot phase should last 1-2 years, with the implementation of main activities taking 3-5 years.

2. Improve communication and coordination between ministries responsible for industry and innovations by establishing Interministerial working body (working groups) responsible for horizontal coordination and innovations policy management. The role of this body, which should be established by the GRS, should be focused on implementing innovation policy that leverages existing science, technology, and innovation potentials in the context of achieving sustainable development goals.
3. It is necessary that the GRS adopts the following strategic documents in the first half of 2024: New Strategy for the Development of Artificial Intelligence and the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Industrial Policy Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2024–2025.
4. The GRS should conduct an analysis of the effects of the policies aimed at encouraging investment in research and development, specifically the "R&D deductions" and "IP Box" introduced in 2019. This analysis will help identify weaknesses in the current measures and allow for the creation of more effective policies that will encourage greater investment from the business sector in research and development, contributing to the overall innovation capacity of the country.
5. In order to increase the effectiveness of industrial policy implementation, it is necessary to identify industrial sectors in which the Republic of Serbia holds the greatest competitive advantages, has significant market potential, and sustainability. Based on these findings, policy instruments and incentives should be created to stimulate their accelerated growth and enhance competitiveness.

Priority area 5: Skills for sustainable and smart development and the future of labour

In the 21st century education is crucial for achieving all other SDGs. Therefore, it is necessary to implement measures to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes (target 4.1) and to increase the number of youth and adults with relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for decent jobs and entrepreneurial ventures (target 4.4).

Sustainable Development Goal 4:

QUALITY EDUCATION



Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Between November 2021 and March 2023, amendments to several laws and nearly 100 by-laws were adopted in the field of pre-university education. During the same period, significant changes occurred in the institutional framework. Changes in the institutional framework. The Law on Amendments to the Law on Ministries divided the former Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development into two ministries: Ministry of Education and Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovations. Only a month after the adoption of the Law on Amendments to the Law on Ministries, the GRS adopted the Regulation on the Establishment of the Office for Dual Education and the National Framework of Qualifications transferring the responsibilities related to dual education and the National Qualifications Framework to the Ministry of Education.

Several laws in the field of education were amended during 2023: the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System, the Law on Primary Education, the Law on Secondary Education, the Law on Dual Education, the Law on Higher Education, the Law on the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Serbia, and the Law on Textbooks.

In October 2023, GRS adopted the Action Plan for the period 2023–2026 has been adopted for the implementation of the Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing in the Republic of Serbia until 2030. It is unclear why 2023 is the starting year in the Action Plan for the period from 2023 to 2026 for implementing the Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing in the Republic of Serbia until 2030, given that it is the final year of the previous Action Plan. Target

values for the indicators of education availability (student enrolment) have been set for most indicators at the same or lower level than the values for 2023 in the previous action plan. For example, the target value set for 2023 for the indicator "enrolment of children in preschool education and care aged 3 to 5,5 years" was 68%, while the target value for 2026 is 67%. The planned enrolment of children aged 6 months to 3 years in 2026 is only 35%, the same as was planned for 2023. Three indicators related to children from Roma settlements (primary school completion rate, effective rate of transition to secondary school, and the secondary school completion rate) have target values for 2026 that are the same as those for 2023 (66%, 57%, and 63%, respectively). In the new Action Plan for the period from 2023 to 2026 for the implementation of the Strategy for the Development of Education by 2030, as in the previous one, there are no indicators or target values for the enrolment of vulnerable groups at all levels of education, nor are there activities aimed at improving the accessibility and quality of education for these children. No changes are planned in the regulations regarding school and university students' standards that would enable subsidizing education costs for children and youth from socially disadvantaged groups (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2024).

The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality has recommended that the Government of the Republic of Serbia should take all necessary measures to ensure the distribution of textbooks in all local self-government units from the budget funds in the upcoming school year, rather than just in select areas as was the case in the previous school year. The Commissioner pointed out that the distribution of textbooks and textbook sets for primary and secondary school students should not be a privilege for children in one city, but that this right should be granted to all

children in Serbia. Due to the importance of inclusive education and investment in early childhood development, in 2023, a number of recommendations were sent to all preschool institutions. These recommendations suggested that they amend the enrolment forms so that parents can indicate, at the time of enrolment, if the child has a rare, neurochemical, or chronic non-communicable disease. Additionally, they were advised to improve and adjust internal rules to ensure that all children participate in the institution's activities while receiving necessary therapy during their stay, helping them protect and improve their health without discrimination. In addition, preschool institutions were recommended to not require re-enrolment every school year for children who have already been enrolled and continue their stay at the institution, through their general internal regulations or amendments to existing internal regulations (Commissioner for Gender Equality, 021-01-683/2023-02).

From the perspective of the institutional framework, there were no significant changes during the reporting period.

The Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24 provides an assessment for the Republic of Serbia of moderate progress, insufficient for achieving SDG 4, with a note that there are significant challenges to achieving this SDG. The performance of the Republic of Serbia is the weakest in the indicators of education quality (underachievers in mathematics) and in participation in early childhood education. In addition, significant efforts are needed to increase the participation of adults in education. The target value for the indicator of early school leaving has been achieved. For the indicator of the participation of highly educated individuals, it is assessed that Serbia is on track to achieve the target values by 2030 (Lafortune et al., 2024).

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Targets 4.1 and 4.4

Ensuring that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes (target 4.1) and increasing the number of youth and adults with relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for decent jobs and entrepreneurial ventures (target 4.4) were set as priorities in the report *Serbia 2030: Development Priorities – the Non-State Sector Report* (Belgrade Open School et al, 2020). Performance indicators for targets 4.1 and 4.4 in 2030 are shown below.

- "Reducing the share of students who do not achieve basic literacy to 8% in reading, mathematics, and science (initial values: 37.7% for reading and science, and 39.7% for mathematics);"
- "Increasing the parity index for vulnerable students to a value between 0.9 and 1 (initial values: 0.62 for reading and 0.60 for mathematics);"
- "Reducing the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rate for youth aged 15–29 to 8% (initial value 19%)."

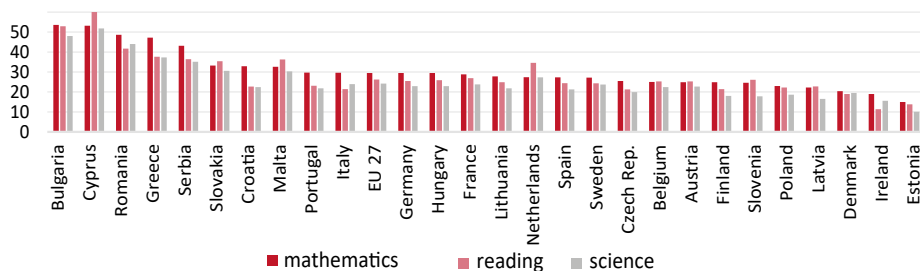
Priority target 4.1

Data on the participation of students who do not achieve the basic level of literacy in reading, mathematics, and science in the PISA³¹ study (Chart 11) show that in Serbia, more than a third of students do not reach the basic level of functional science and reading literacy (35.1% in science and 36.4% in reading), and more than two-fifths of students (43.1%) do not achieve the basic level of mathematics literacy. Compared to the previous cycle of the PISA study, there

has been a decrease in the share of students who do not achieve the basic level of reading and science literacy (by 1.3 and 2.6 percentage points, respectively), and an increase in the share of students who do not achieve the basic level of functional mathematics literacy (by 3.4 percentage points). Compared to EU countries, only students from Bulgaria, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece have lower achievements than students from the Republic of Serbia.

31 PISA – abbreviation of Programme for International Student Assessment. The study launched in 2000 by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) provides internationally comparable data on student performance. PISA studies are conducted in three-year cycles with the aim of examining the extent to which 15-year-old students, who are nearing the end of compulsory education in most participating countries, have acquired the key knowledge and skills necessary for full participation in the social and economic aspects of life.

Chart 11 The share of students who do not achieve the basic level of functional literacy (in %) in 2022

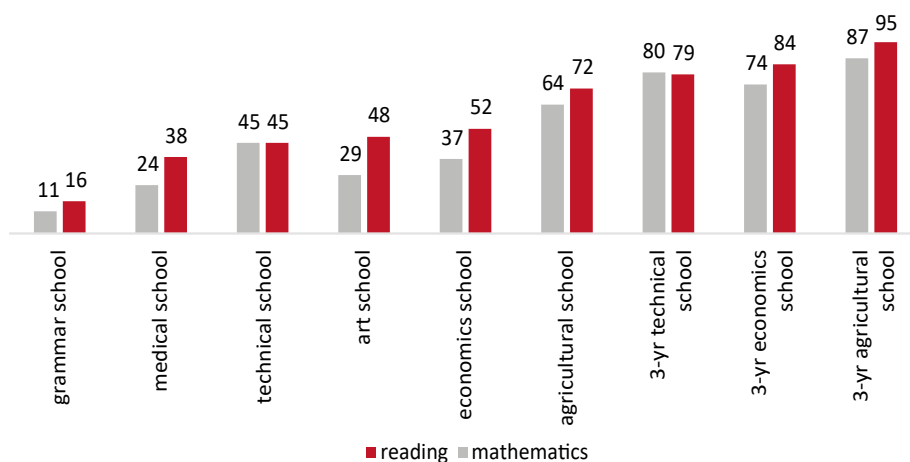


Source: Eurostat SDG indicators database

As in the previous cycle of the PISA study, there are significant differences in the performance of students attending different types of schools. In grammar schools, there are the fewest students who do not achieve the level of functional literacy (11% in reading and 16% in mathematics), followed by four-year vocational schools (38–72% in mathematics and 24–64% in reading), and three-year vocational schools, where on average, between 79% and as much as 95% of students are functionally

illiterate in both of the mentioned domains (Chart 12). Secondary vocational schools enrol the highest number of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, so the differences in achievement can partly be explained by the varying socioeconomic status of the students. However, when the socioeconomic status of students is taken into account, the gap between grammar schools and vocational schools decreases, but it remains statistically significant.

Chart 12 The share of students who do not achieve functional level of mathematics literacy by school type (in %)

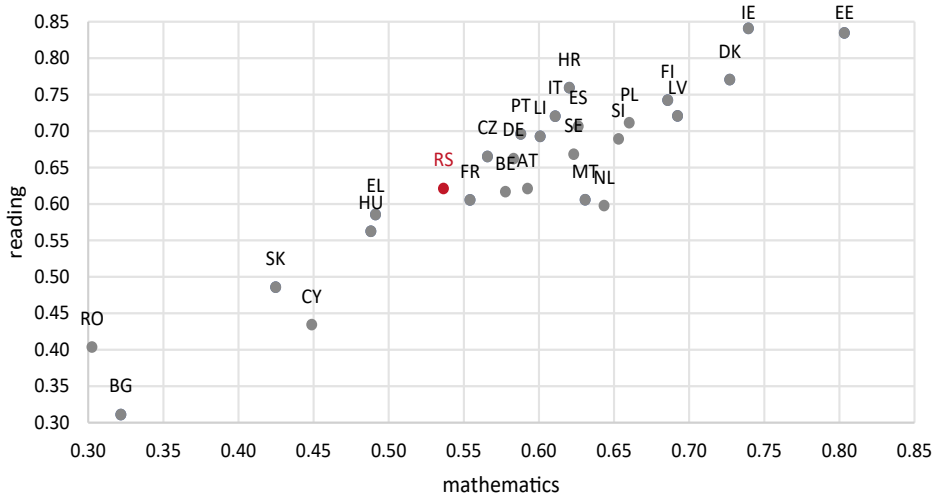


Source: Čaprić, G. and Videnović, M., 2024.

The opportunities offered to students of different socioeconomic statuses are not equal. The equality of education systems in terms of the opportunities provided to students from different socioeconomic backgrounds in the PISA study is measured by the relationship between student performance and their socioeconomic status, expressed by the index of economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS)³². Chart 13 shows data on the parity index for socioeconomically disadvantaged students compared to privileged students. The parity index compares students who have achieved at least the second level in mathematics and reading. The parity index value for Serbia is 0.62 in reading and 0.54 in mathematics, meaning that for every

62 socioeconomically disadvantaged students who achieve at least the basic level in reading, and 54 in mathematics, there are 100 students from the highest socio-economic status who achieve the same level. In most EU countries, the parity index is higher than in Serbia, with Estonia being the country that provides the greatest educational opportunities for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Compared to the previous PISA study from 2018, the parity index in reading has remained unchanged, while in mathematics it has decreased (0.60 in 2018), meaning that educational opportunities for socioeconomically disadvantaged students have decreased in this area.

Chart 13 Parity index for socioeconomically disadvantaged students compared to privileged students in 2022



Source: (OECD, PISA Database, 2022) Notes: Abbreviations: BE – Belgium, BG – Bulgaria, CZ – Czech Republic, DK – Denmark, DE – Germany, EE – Estonia, IE – Ireland, EL – Greece, ES – Spain, FR – France, HR – Croatia, IT – Italy, CY – Cyprus, LV – Latvia, HU – Hungary, MT – Malta, NL – Netherlands, AT – Austria, PL – Poland, PT – Portugal, RO – Romania, SI – Slovenia, SK – Slovakia, FI – Finland, SE – Sweden, RS – Serbia

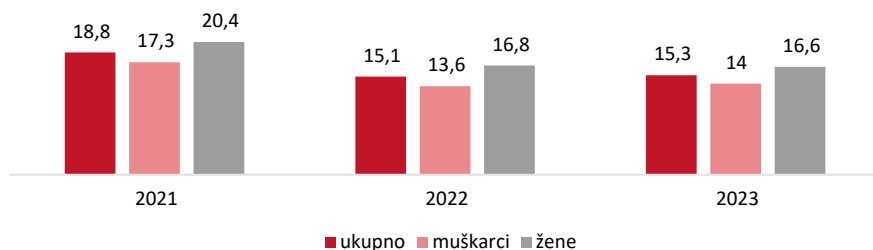
32 The Economic, Social, and Cultural Status (ESCS) index is a composite index derived from the following variables: parental education, parental occupation, the presence of certain types of movable assets in the household indicating material wealth, and the number of books and other educational resources available in the home. ESCS enables the identification of privileged and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, as well as schools. Students are considered socioeconomically privileged if they fall within the top 25% of students with the highest values on the ESCS index, while they are classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged if their values on the ESCS index fall within the lowest 25%.

Priority target 4.4

The indicator of transition from education to the labour market, expressed through the participation of not employed, in education or training youth (NEET) relative to the youth population, shows that there has been no change in the position of young people in the labour market (Chart 14). In the age group 15–29 years, the NEET rate increased by 0.2 percentage points in 2023

compared to the previous year (from 15.1% to 15.3%). As in previous years, gender differences are present: The NEET rate is higher among women than among men, with the gender gap slightly narrowed in 2023 due to an increase in the NEET rate among men (from 13.6% to 14%) and a decrease in the NEET rate among women (from 16.8% to 16.6%).

Chart 14 Young people aged 15–29 not in education, employment or training (NEET) by age (in %), 2021–2023.

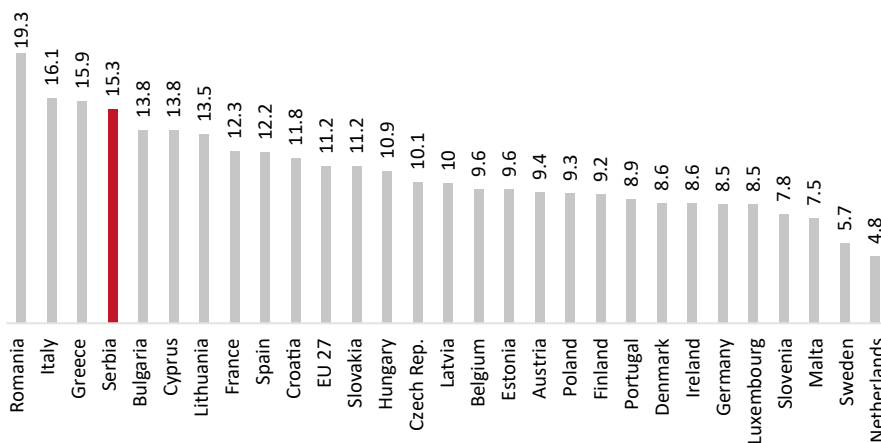


Source: Eurostat SDG indicators database

In comparison with EU countries, as in previous years, Serbia is among the countries with the highest NEET rate (Chart 15). Low-

er NEET rates are found in 24 EU member states, while higher rates are recorded in Greece, Italy, and Romania.

Chart 15 Young people aged 15–29 not in education, employment or training (NEET), 2023 (In %)



Source: Eurostat SDG indicators database

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendation from previous report	Status	Comment
Redesign the Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing in the Republic of Serbia until 2030 Strategy for the Development of Education so that concrete measures are formulated to improve the quality and relevance of education.	Not adopted	<p>Despite the fact that the indicators of quality and relevance of education point to shortcomings in the education system, no revision of the strategic document has been carried out to introduce measures to ensure quality conditions for teaching and learning, measures to improve the quality of curricula and programs, and measures to enhance the teaching and learning processes.</p> <p>The recommendation has not been fulfilled since 2021.</p>
Increase allocations for education to at least 6% of GDP.	Not adopted	<p>Year by year, the allocations for education as a percentage of GDP are decreasing. In 2009, 4.5% of GDP was allocated for education, while in 2023, it was 3.1% of GDP. Compared to EU countries, Serbia allocates the least amount of funds for education as a percentage of GDP. In 2021, public spending on education in the EU amounted to 5% of GDP, with half of the EU member states allocating more than 5% of GDP for education.</p> <p>The recommendation has not been fulfilled since 2020.</p>

Recommendations

1. The Ministry of Education should redesign the Strategy for the Development of Education and Upbringing in the Republic of Serbia until 2030 to include specific measures that will lead to an increase in the quality and relevance of education and submit it to the Government of the Republic of Serbia for adoption by the end of 2024.
2. The GRS should include in the Draft Budget Law a gradual increase in funding for education, so that by 2030 the allocation reaches at least 6% of GDP.
3. The Ministry of Education should propose amendments to the relevant laws (the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System, the Law on Preschool Education, and the Law on Secondary Education) to: ensure free preschool education and care and introduce compulsory secondary education by the end of 2025.

Priority area 6: Responsible and efficient use of natural resources

In the area of responsible management of natural resources, the Republic of Serbia has been facing numerous challenges for years, which are typically associated with other areas of environmental protection. It is crucial to improve infrastructure and make industries sustainable, with greater efficiency in resource use and the adoption of clean and environmentally sound technologies and industrial processes (target 9.4), significantly increase the share of renewable energy in the energy mix (target 7.2), and improve energy efficiency (target 7.3), as well as achieve sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources (target 12.2).

Sustainable Development Goal 7:

AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY



Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

During 2023 the Ministry of Mining and Energy (MME) continued working on Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan until 2030 with projections until 2050 (INECP). After a several months of inactivity, the document was presented to the working group in June 2023, just one day before it was made available for public consultations and debate. It contained many amendments that have not been seen in previous phases, which violated the principle of participation of interested communities in the process. The goals set in the document are not in compliance with international obligations assumed

by the Republic of Serbia. The decision of Energy Community Ministerial Council no. 2022/02/MC-EnC from December 2022 set the target values for reduction of greenhouse gas emission, share of renewable energy sources (RES) in final energy consumption and energy efficiency. In the last version of INECP available³³ (MME, 2023) the Energy Community Secretariat provided its comments, which were specifically focused on reduced ambitions of Serbia in the area of RES and energy efficiency. The reduced ambitions for the installation of renewable energy capacity, as well as the planned measures for the

33 This is explained by referencing Article 6 of the aforementioned decision of the Energy Community Ministerial Council and Article 31 of the Regulation on the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action 2018/1999. There are arguments provided that such a share represents an unrealistic growth in the installation and use of heat pumps, a risk of significantly increasing electricity imports, and assumes unrealistic balancing reserve capacities in 2030 for the integration of renewable energy sources. In line with this and the latest analyses conducted in the country, an alternative target for the share of renewable energy sources in final energy consumption has been proposed.

modernization of the coal mining industry and the significant funds allocated for this purpose, cast doubt on the coal phase-out by 2050 in Serbia, clearly highlighting the contradiction between the proclaimed goals. The insufficiently ambitious target for RES by 2030 indicates that the burden of decarbonization will fall on the period between 2030 and 2050, which, coupled with investments in coal modernization, threatens to undermine the cost-effectiveness and fairness of the energy transition, a topic that has been given very little attention in the INECP. It is recommended that the concept of a just transition be further developed and taken into account when planning energy and climate policy. In addition, it was noted that the document should include a vision for carbon neutrality by 2050, instead of the most ambitious scenario, which predicts a 75% reduction in GHG emissions compared to 1990 (Energy Community, 2023). After reviewing the comments, the final draft of the INECP was prepared in December 2023, and its adoption is expected. Since this is a key document in the field of energy and climate policy, it should be adopted as soon as possible. This recommendation has been included in reports for many years. As for the Energy Development Strategy until 2040 with projections for 2050, there have been no significant changes, and the drafting process is at a standstill, with no additional information on its continuation.

During the reporting period, the Law on Amendments to the Energy Law was adopted. This legislation establishes the Republic Commission for Energy Networks, an independent body of the Republic of Serbia, responsible for overseeing the electricity transmission system operator and the natural gas transportation system operator. Its responsibilities include proposing the Strategy for the Development and Management of Operators to the NARS with an Action Plan for its implementation, determining the

general annual goals of operators, as well as the measures and deadlines for their implementation, and determining the content and deadlines for the development of medium-term plans for operators (NARS, 2023). Apart from the introduction of the Commission into the legislative framework, there were no other significant institutional changes during the reporting period.

During the reporting period, the Law on Amendments to the Law on the Use of Renewable Energy Sources was adopted. It further elaborates the rights and obligations of the guaranteed supplier and privileged producers in the market premium system, defines the right of the GRS to determine the maximum price offered for 1 MWh of electricity generated in auctions, and prescribes additional obligations for the transmission (Elektromreža Srbije – EMS) and distribution system operators (Elektro distribucija Srbije – EDS) when planning the integration of new renewable energy capacities into the grid (NARS, 2023b). Finally, limits have been set for the connection of individual households and industry to the electricity grid. In addition, a series of regulations have been adopted that further define the auction process for market premiums and feed-in tariffs, making the auction system operational.

In the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24 the situation within SDG 7 in the Republic of Serbia was rated as "moderately improving". Progress has been made regarding the share of the population relying on clean fuels and cooking technologies, with the report stating that the Republic of Serbia is "on track to meet this indicator". A rise in CO₂ emissions from fuel combustion in electricity generation has been observed again, which remains at a high level, indicating that Serbia is stagnating in this regard (Lafortune et al., 2024).

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Targets 7.2 and 7.3

Within SDG 7, the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report defines two priority targets to be achieved by 2030: Since there have been changes in internationally committed obligations, as well as in national strategic and planning documents, it is necessary to revise the defined target values of indicators.

Priority target	7.2 – By 2030, increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix	7.3 – Double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency	
Indicator	Share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption at republic level with targeted value of 40.7% for 2030	Significantly reduce level of final energy consumption at national level. Maximum primary energy consumption in 2030 should be 14.68 Mtoe. Final maximum primary energy consumption in 2030 should be 9.54 Mtoe.	Achieve an energy intensity level of 5 MJ/USD.

Priority target 7.2

Data regarding target 7.2 has not been updated for 2022 on the SORS website, so an adequate progress assessment cannot be provided. The share of RES in gross final consumption was 25.58% in 2021 (SORS, 2024a). Law on Amendments to the Law on the Use of Renewable Energy Sources was adopted in April 2023. It sets a limitation on the connection of new capacities of customers-producers of electricity. For households, it is set at 10.8 kW (originally 6.9 kW), while for companies, a limit of 5 MW has been introduced until 1 July 2024, when a limit of 150 kW will take effect (NARS, 2023f). In Serbia, there are currently around 2,900 prosumers registered in the EDS prosumer registry, with a total capacity of approximately 48 MW. It

should be emphasized that the majority of prosumers are individual households with installed solar panels, totalling 2,128 (an increase of about 1,200 households since April 2023), with a total capacity of 17.3 MW (Peljto, 2024). However, the limit remains low, often justified by the argument that the system cannot integrate more capacity due to potential grid instability, especially considering that the target value in the INECP is 20,000 prosumers (MME, 2023). However, the current trend of household connections, with just over 1,000 per year, indicates that the limit is quite low and that there is room for its increase, especially considering the total generation capacity of Elektroprivreda Srbije, which is 7,855 MW (Elektroprivreda Srbije, 2024). It is un-

likely that further increasing the capacity for connections would pose a significant risk to the country's power system, and such a measure would provide a substantial incentive for households to invest in renewable energy sources.

In 2023, the Plan for the incentive system for the use of renewable energy sources for the period 2023-2025 was adopted, which further defines the timeline for bidding rights for incentive measures, specifically auctions for the construction of new renewable energy capacity. According to the document, a total of 1000 MW of wind energy and 300 MW of solar energy will be eligible for incentives by 2025 (MME, 2023). The first auctions were planned and held in 2023, where the 400 MW quota for wind energy was fulfilled. However, this was not the case for solar energy, where incentive funds were allocated for only 26.2 MW out of the projected 50 MW (Balkan Green Energy News, 2023). The continuation of auc-

tions signals the ongoing trend of phasing out outdated feed-in tariffs, which are now available only for plants with capacities smaller than 500 kW. It is essential to continue this practice in order for Serbia to achieve the target of 3 GW of energy from renewable sources by 2030. However, it will not be sufficient to meet the target value that Serbia has committed to according to the Energy Community, so it is necessary to plan resources and auctions for additional renewable energy capacities.

Additionally, further measures and investments are needed to increase the share of renewable energy in the heating and cooling sector, which currently stands at 35.47% (SORS, 2024a). To fulfil the obligations arising from the EU Renewable Energy Directive, it is proposed to set a target for increasing the share of renewable energy in this sector by 1% annually (Energy Community, 2023).

Priority target 7.3

There has been no significant progress regarding the value for this target during the reporting period. The target value for final energy consumption in the draft INECP is 9.7 Mtoe, which does not align with the agreed value from the Energy Community Ministerial Council decision. The document explains that the difference is not significant, as it falls within the scope of statistical error (MRE, 2023). In addition, the draft INECP defines target values for final energy consumption for each year up to 2030.

Table 6 Energy efficiency targets from INECP by year

(Mtoe)	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Final energy consumption	9.3	9.3	9.4	9.5	9.6	9.7
Primary energy consumption	15.15	15.09	15.11	15.06	14.83	14.68

Source: Ministry of Mining and Energy, INECP, 2023.

In 2022, primary energy consumption increased to 16.42 Mtoe, while final energy consumption increased by 9.26 Mtoe (GRS,

2023). In addition, the energy balance includes estimates for 2023 and plans for 2024.

Table 7 Energy consumption values from the energy balance of the Republic of Serbia

(Mtoe)	2022.	Projection for 2023	Plan for 2024
Final energy consumption	16.42	16.42	17.06
Potrošnja primarne energije	9.48	9,6	9,7

Source: GRS, Energy balances for 2024, 2023

According to the energy balance of the Republic of Serbia, the largest increase in energy consumption will occur in the transport sector, followed by an increase in energy consumption in industry and households (GRS, 2023l). The projections and plans for 2023 and 2024 are problematic, as it is unclear how they align with projections and target values for 2025, especially considering that the target value of 9.7 Mtoe from the draft INECP is planned to be reached (and exceeded). Additionally, the draft INECP anticipates an increase in final energy consumption in the years thereafter, while the total planned cumulative energy savings for the period from 2023 to 2030 amount to 506 ktoe (MRE, 2023). Based on all the data presented in the 2024 energy balance, it is difficult to see how the Republic of Serbia will achieve the target for 2030.

Energy intensity values in the Republic of Serbia worsened, as it increased from 5.04 in 2019 to 5.26 MJ/\$ (SORS, 2024a). That is still 1.4 times higher than the European average (World Bank, 2024a). One of the key factors behind Serbia's poor energy performance remains the residential sector, where households account for about 36% of total final energy consumption, nearly 10% higher than the EU average (Eurostat, 2024a). For this reason, key activities for improving energy efficiency lie in measures for the energy renovation of residential buildings. For this purpose, in 2022 and

2023, the Ministry of Mining and Energy allocated 34 million euros for the renovation of residential buildings. An additional 176 million euros are planned for these activities by the end of 2027, through the project "Čista energija i energetska efikasnost za građane u Srbiji" (eng. *Clean Energy and Energy Efficiency for Citizens in Serbia*) of which around 45 million will be financed through a World Bank loan, while the rest will be covered by public authorities and citizens (MME, 2023). Although improvements in these public calls are visible, as citizens can now apply for packages that include more measures and thus receive a higher share of subsidies (up to 65%), these measures often remain inaccessible to citizens with lower financial status. For this reason, it is necessary to further adjust public calls for this category of the population and provide them with a higher share of subsidies in order to successfully implement the energy renovation of residential buildings. In addition, it is necessary to allocate much larger funds for these programs, as the draft INECP states that an investment of 1.7 billion euros is needed for the renovation of residential buildings (MME, 2023), while the planned funds that the MRE intends to allocate for this purpose by 2027 amount to only 283 million euros (MME, 2023). This recommendation has been repeated for many years, indicating the necessity of allocating additional funds for these measures.

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendation from previous period	Status	Comment
By the end of 2030, MME should adopt the Energy Development Strategy and Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan setting clear, measurable and time-bound goals for decarbonization and (just) energy transition of the country to RES, as well as for improving the energy efficiency.	Not adopted	Although the draft INECP has been developed, it has not yet been adopted. It does not foresee carbon neutrality for Serbia and places the majority of the decarbonization burden between 2030 and 2050, which could jeopardize a just transition. Additionally, the target values for RES and energy efficiency are not aligned with the international commitments arising from the Decision of the Ministerial Council of the Energy Community No. 2022/02/MC-EnC. As for the Energy Development Strategy, there has been no significant progress in its development during the reporting period. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.
As soon as possible, the MME should adopt a three-year incentive plan for the use of RES that will ensure the monitoring of progress toward achieving the 2030 targets in the field of RES.	Adopted	In 2023, Plan for the incentive system for the use of renewable energy sources for the period 2023-2025 was adopted, which further defines the timeline for bidding rights for incentive measures, specifically auctions for the construction of new renewable energy capacity. According to the document, a total of 1000 MW of wind energy and 300 MW of solar energy will be eligible for incentives by 2025.
As soon as possible, the MME should increase subsidies for the energy renovation of residential buildings, family houses, and apartments, enabling the improvement of thermal insulation, upgrading or replacing heating systems, installing solar collectors, and installing solar panels and supporting installations for the production of electricity for self-consumption.	Partially adopted	The funds allocated for these programs were effectively doubled in 2023 with the new project. However, these funds are far from sufficient for the planned renovation that would enable significant energy savings, so it is necessary to substantially increase the allocated funds.

Recommendations

1. It is essential for the GRS to adopt the INECP as soon as possible.
2. It is necessary for the MME to initiate the process of developing the Energy Development Strategy until 2040, with projections until 2050, by the end of 2024. The document should be in line with the INECP and other strategic documents of the Republic of Serbia in this area.
3. During the expected revision of the INECP, it is necessary for the MME to define the goal of carbon neutrality by 2050. Additionally, it is necessary to set more ambitious targets for the share of RES in final energy consumption, as well as for final energy consumption by 2030, which will be in line with the international commitments undertaken by the Republic of Serbia. As part of the RES goal, it is necessary to include a target for increasing the share of RES in the heating sector by 1% annually, in line with the comments and recommendations of the Energy Community on the draft INECP. This recommendation should be implemented immediately after the start of the INECP revision process, and no later than by the end of 2025.
4. When drafting the budget for 2025, it is necessary for the GRS to allocate higher funds for the energy renovation of residential buildings, family houses, and apartments, which will enable the improvement of thermal envelopes, the upgrading or replacement of heating systems, the installation of solar collectors, and the installation of solar panels and supporting infrastructure for the production of electricity for self-consumption. These funds should be allocated to the Administration for Financing and Promoting Energy Efficiency of the MME.
5. The MME should, by the end of 2024, adopt an Action Plan for Reducing Energy Poverty, which will redesign existing public calls for energy renovation measures and adapt them for citizens with lower financial status or design new programs targeted at this social category. In addition, these programs must ensure a higher share of subsidies for the mentioned target group.

Sustainable Development Goal 9:

INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE³⁴



Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

In response to the need for alignment with the obligations set out in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the recommendations defined in the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, Serbia began taking the first concrete steps to improve the climate change framework starting from 2021. The legal framework was defined in 2021 with the adoption of the Law on Climate Change, the Law on the Use of Renewable Energy Sources, and the Law on Energy Efficiency and Rational Use of Energy. Based on the Law on Climate Change, the foundation was laid for

formulating strategic documents that further specify concrete goals and measures for combating climate change.

In June 2023, the Low Carbon Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2023–2030 with projections up to 2050 was adopted. The strategy, which implementation is the responsibility of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, plays a key role in directing the efforts of the Republic of Serbia towards reducing GHG emissions. The main goal of the strategy is to reduce GHG emissions by 13% by 2030 and at least 55% by 2050 compared to the reference year of

34 SDG 9 is included in two priority areas, which is why the changes in the strategic, legislative, and institutional framework for its implementation are addressed twice, in line with the theme of each priority area. This section covers the part related to the efficient use of resources and the adoption of clean and environmentally sound technologies and industrial processes.

2010. The goal is to reduce emissions in the production of electricity and heat, increase energy efficiency, use renewable energy sources in industry, and implement measures in other sectors. The action plan for the implementation of the Strategy is currently under development. In December 2023, the Programme for Adaptation to Changed Climate Conditions for the period 2023 to 2030 was adopted. The overall objective of the Programme is to increase capacity for achieving greater resilience to climate change in order to improve the well-being of people, the economy, and the environment.

The Law on Amendments to the Law on the Use of Renewable Energy Sources was adopted on 28 April 2023, further improving the terminology by introducing the term "variable energy sources", which primarily refers to wind and solar energy.

There were no significant changes in the institutional and organisational framework. The National Council for Climate Change, established in 2021 under the Law on Climate Change, is the most significant political body for achieving societal and political consensus on climate change issues. However, although the Rules of Procedure specify that this body should meet at least once every six months, no meetings were held during 2023. It is evident that there is a lack of coordination between the relevant ministries in the process of implementing strategic documents in this area.

In the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24 Serbia's progress towards SDG 9 was assessed as "moderately improving" (Lafortune et al., 2024). However, none of the listed indicators are relevant to priority area 6, which concerns the responsible and efficient use of natural resources.

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Target 9.4

Within SDG 9, the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report defines one priority target to be achieved by 2030:

Priority target	9.4 – By 2030, upgrade infrastructure and retrofit industries to make them sustainable, with increased resource-use efficiency and greater adoption of clean and environmentally sound technologies and industrial processes	
Indicator	A 50% reduction in CO ₂ emissions per euro of GVA, i.e., achieving a level of around 0.6 kg of CO ₂ per unit of GVA, while simultaneously maintaining or increasing the share of the manufacturing industry in GVA	A 20% reduction in the share of electricity produced from solid fossil fuels, i.e., achieving a level of around 50%, which is approximately the current level in North Macedonia

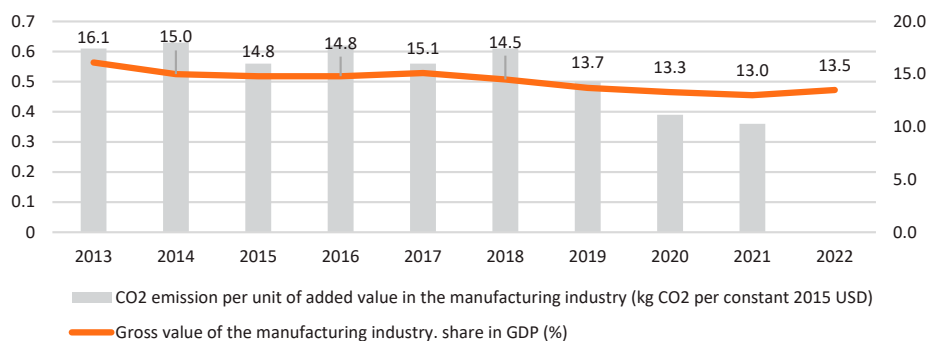
According to the latest available data, the Republic of Serbia recorded a slight increase in CO₂ emissions from fuel combustion processes across the entire industry in 2020, while in the manufacturing industry, the trend of CO₂ emissions reduction continued in 2021, decreasing

from 0.50 kg CO₂ (per constant 2015 USD) in 2019 to 0.36 kg CO₂ in 2021. After a six-year period from 2013 to 2018, during which CO₂ emissions fluctuated between 0.56 and 0.63, this represents a significant reduction in CO₂ emissions that has been ongoing since 2018 (Chart 16).

The share of gross value added by the manufacturing industry in GDP increased from 13.0% in 2021 to 13.5% in 2022 (Chart 16). Given that the data on CO₂ emissions for 2022 is missing, it is not possible to determine whether the increase in the share of the gross value added of the manufacturing industry in GDP corresponds to a

reduction in total CO₂ emissions from the manufacturing industry in 2022. Based on the data from the previous period of 2018–2021, it can be concluded that there is a trend of decreasing CO₂ emissions, but this has been accompanied by a decrease in the share of the gross value added of the manufacturing industry in GDP.

Chart 16 Comparative overview of CO₂ emissions and the share of the manufacturing industry in GDP in the Republic of Serbia.

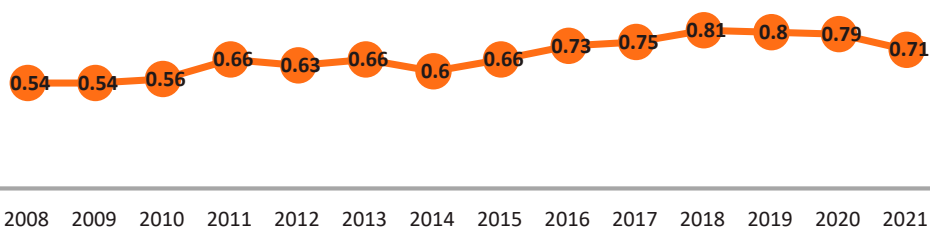


Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024 (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal/database>)

In 2021, the intensity of PM_{2.5} particle emissions from the manufacturing industry was recorded at 0.71 grams per euro, representing a decrease compared to 2020 (Chart 17). However, Serbia significantly lags behind the European Union average

according to this indicator. According to the latest data from Eurostat, the PM_{2.5} emission intensity in the EU27 was only 0.06 grams per euro, which is ten times lower compared to Serbia.

Chart 17 Trend of PM_{2.5} particle emission intensity from the manufacturing industry of the Republic of Serbia in the period 2008–2021 Units of measurement: (grams per euro, chain-linked volumes, 2010)



Source: Eurostat, 2024

After the decline in the share of solid fossil fuels in electricity generation in 2021, the Republic of Serbia recorded a new increase in the share of fossil fuels in 2022. According to the energy balances for 2022, a total of 66.06% of electricity was generated from solid fossil fuels. In absolute values, in 2022, electricity production from

hydroelectric power plants decreased by 22.6% compared to 2021, while on the other hand, electricity production from solar power plants increased by 17%. However, considering that the share of solar energy is extremely low, it should be noted that these are low values, and such deviations are to be expected (SORS, 2024a).

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendations from previous report	Status	Comment
In order to accelerate the reduction of CO ₂ emissions from fuel combustion processes in industry, it is necessary to introduce incentive measures for the use of clean technologies in the manufacturing industry and the use of renewable energy sources. Some of the specific measures that should be considered include: establishing a green investment fund, setting up loan guarantees for green investments, introducing tax incentives for environmental investments, and similar.	Not adopted	No new incentive measures for the use of clean technologies in the manufacturing industry have been adopted. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.
The GRS should consider allocating larger funds for financing projects in the field of green transformation. One way is to introduce additional support programs to the Innovation Fund through the existing Science Fund focusing specifically on green technologies and sustainable innovations.	Not adopted	No new support programs for green transformation and adoption of green technologies have been adopted in the previous period. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.
It is necessary to adopt a new National Plan for Use of Renewable Energy Sources of the Republic of Serbia (the previous one expired in 2020).	Partially adopted	The recommended planning document has not been adopted. However, the Low-Carbon Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2023 to 2030, with projections until 2050 has been adopted, which represents a key strategic document in this area.

<p>Considering that increasing the share of hydroelectricity may have negative ecological consequences, the criteria for incentive measures should include the introduction of environmentally sound technologies. Incentivising more efficient models for transitioning to renewable energy source would at the same time improve energy sector and preserve country's natural potential</p>	<p>Partially adopted</p>	<p>In the previous period, a 17% increase in electricity production from solar power plants was recorded. However, the total share of solar energy in overall production is still at a very low level.</p>
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Recommendations

1. The GRS should adopt the Action Plan for the implementation of the Republic of Serbia's Low Carbon Development Strategy by the end of 2024.
2. Considering that the National Council for Climate Change does not function according to the Rules of Procedure, the GRS should, by the end of 2024, examine the reasons for its non-functioning and propose the reorganization of this body in order to create a more efficient working system for the council.
3. To accelerate the reduction of CO₂ emissions from fuel combustion in industry, it is necessary to introduce incentive measures for the use of clean technologies and renewable energy sources in the manufacturing industry. The specific measures to be considered include establishing a green investment fund, setting up loan guarantees for green investments, introducing tax incentives for environmental investments, and similar. These measures should be a part of a new public policy to be initiated and led by the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP), in collaboration with the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Finance (MF). Adoption of this document and implementation of measures require coordination and support from the GRS.
4. The GRS should consider allocating larger funds for financing projects in the field of green transformation. One way is to introduce additional support programs to the Innovation Fund through the existing Science Fund focusing specifically on green technologies and sustainable innovations.

Sustainable Development Goal 12:

RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION³⁵



Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

The Environmental Protection Strategy is one of the most important documents for the sustainable development of the Republic of Serbia. By implementing the Strategy, the MEP will monitor the achievement of target 12.2, which envisions sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources. The strategy should define the directions for environmental development with the five pillars of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. The drafting and adoption of this strategy were planned for 2023, but this has not yet occurred.

The Circular Economy Development Programme in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2022 to 2024 includes an Action Plan outlining specific measures and activities to ensure the conditions

for achieving the programme's objectives within the specified period. One of the measures needed to achieve the goal "Support for local governments in creating a circular community" (which is directly related to target 12.2) is "Enhancing industrial symbiosis to optimize resource use and reduce waste". Implementing this measure leads to savings in natural resources, promotes the use of waste as a resource, and clearly directs local governments toward sustainable operations. There is no available data on the fulfilment of the measure for 2023 (GRS, 2022).

Environmental fees are one of the economic instruments for pollution control and natural resource management, aiming to influence the behaviour of economic

35 SDG 12 is included in two priority areas, which is why the changes in the strategic, legislative, and institutional framework for its implementation are addressed twice, in line with the theme of each priority area. This section includes a part addressing waste management.

entities, producers, and consumers. Fees for resource use relate to the extraction or utilization of natural resources, such as water, forests, wildlife, etc., as natural resources are consumed due to these activities. In 2022, revenue from environmental fees amounted to 241,633.3 million dinars, which is 1% less than the previous year. The largest share in the revenue structure came from energy fees at 87.2% and traffic-related fees at 7.2%, while pollution fees and resource usage fees accounted for 3.8% and 1.7%, respectively (SORS, 2024b).

In 2022, the share of revenue from environmental fees in the gross domestic product

was 3.4%, while its share in total tax and social contribution revenue was 8.5% (SORS, 2024c).

In the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24, the situation within SDG 12 in the Republic of Serbia was rated as "moderately improving". Here, we can see progress, as in the previous Europe Sustainable Development Report 2022, SDG 12 in the Republic of Serbia was rated as "stagnating". The progress in gross value added in the sector of environmental goods and services was rated as stagnant (Lafortune et al., 2024).

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Target 12.2

Within SDG 12, the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report defines two priority targets that need to be achieved by 2030, with a focus on target 12.2:

Priority target	By 2030, achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources
Indicator	Resource productivity with a target value of 0.7 EUR/kg by 2030

The key indicator for tracking progress in relation to target 12.2 is resource productivity. Resource productivity is a measure of the total amount of materials directly used by the economy (measured as domestic material consumption (DMC³⁶) relative to GDP).

According to the latest data published on the Eurostat website, the Republic of Serbia is among the last in terms of resource productivity, with only Turkey below it. Data for the resource productivity indica-

tor for 2022 for the Republic of Serbia have not been provided (Eurostat, 2024c).

Domestic material consumption from 2017 to 2021 shows a significant deviation from the target (CAGR 4.02%), while during the same period, resource productivity recorded moderate progress due to higher growth in gross domestic product compared to domestic material consumption (Babović, 2023).

36 The total amount of materials directly used in the economy is defined as the annual quantity of raw materials obtained from the domestic territory of the focused economy, plus physical imports, minus all physical exports.

Resource productivity for 2022 in the Republic of Serbia is 0,315 EUR/kg. In 2021, it amounted to 0,34 EUR/kg, which leads to the conclusion that productivity has slightly decreased (SORS, 2024a).

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendation from previous period	Status	Comment
The MEP, which is working on the development of the new National Strategy for the Sustainable Use of Natural Resources and Goods, should align it with the adopted Circular Economy Development Programme in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2022 to 2024.	Not adopted	The National Strategy for the Sustainable Use of Natural Resources and Goods has not yet been adopted. Draft National Strategy for the Sustainable Use of Natural Resources and Goods is not publicly available. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.
To increase resource productivity, it is necessary for the GRS to foster intersectoral cooperation between the MEP, industry, and energy in drafting and creating goals for strategic documents that cover the areas of sustainable use of natural resources.	Not adopted	During the reporting period, there was no intersectoral cooperation between the ministries. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.
It is necessary for the Government of the Republic of Serbia to gather all interested parties to provide recommendations and solutions for the sustainable and rational use of natural resources.	Not adopted	The Government of the Republic of Serbia did not make a call or gather interested parties during the reporting period. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.

<p>It is necessary for the relevant institutions dealing with environmental protection to recognize the importance of creating incentives for companies and social actors whose business policies are focused on renewable energy sources through changes in legislation, such as tax reductions, provision of subsidies, clearly defined regulations, and verification of standardization.</p>	<p><i>Partially adopted</i></p>	<p>The MEP and the United Nations Development Programme, with the support of the Global Environment Facility, awarded acknowledgments and monetary prizes at the end of 2022 to the creators of 21 of the best innovative ideas (12 of which involve collaboration between science and industry) for the further development of the circular economy in the Republic of Serbia.</p>
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Recommendations

1. The MEP, which is working on the development of the new National Strategy for the Sustainable Use of Natural Resources and Goods, should align it with the adopted Circular Economy Development Programme in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2022 to 2024.
2. To increase resource productivity, it is necessary for the GRS to foster intersectoral cooperation between the MEP, industry, and energy in drafting and creating goals for strategic documents that cover the areas of sustainable use of natural resources.
3. It is necessary for the Government of the Republic of Serbia to gather all interested parties to provide recommendations and solutions for the sustainable and rational use of natural resources.
4. It is necessary for the relevant institutions dealing with environmental protection to recognize the importance of creating incentives for companies and social actors whose business policies are focused on renewable energy sources through changes in legislation, such as tax reductions, provision of subsidies, clearly defined regulations, and verification of standardization.
5. The Ministry of Environmental Protection, through changes to the legal framework for the collection of environmental fees, should increase the fee for the use of non-renewable natural resources, referring to the first pillar of the Green Agenda, which covers the areas of climate, energy, and mobility, and prescribes activities and measures for greater use of renewable energy sources and reduction in the use of coal.

Priority area 7: Clean and resilient communities

Serbia is considered one of the countries with abundant water resources, while air pollution is becoming an increasing problem, and the amount of generated waste is growing year by year. It is necessary to implement measures to achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water (target 6.1), improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating waste, and minimizing the release of hazardous chemicals and materials (target 6.3), reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, with special attention to air quality and waste management (target 11.6), significantly reduce waste generation (target 12.5), and strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters (target 13.1).

Sustainable Development Goal 6:

CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION



Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

In April 2023, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the Water Management Plan for the territory of the Republic of Serbia until 2027. It is a key strategic instrument for integral water management and implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive. The plan, among other things, provides an overview of the characteristics of water bodies in Serbia, analyses pressures on water resources, establishes a monitoring framework, and outlines an action programme aimed at achieving good status for all water bodies, which is the primary objective of the Water Framework Directive. Among the key measures in the programme are those that have a direct impact on improving water quality:

- Construction or expansion of wastewater treatment plants,

- Reduction of nutrient pollution from agriculture,
- Reduction of pesticide pollution from agriculture,
- Remediation of contaminated sites.

In accordance with the methodology of the Water Framework Directive, the Plan identifies agglomerations (settlements) in Serbia that represent significant sources of water pollution. A total of 398 agglomerations have been identified, of which 345 have a population greater than 2,000, i.e., they are the primary sources of nutrient water pollution. The identification of agglomerations is intended to serve as a basis for better planning and prioritization of the construction of wastewater treatment plants for municipal wastewater.

During the reporting period, there were no significant changes in the legal framework for water management, nor were any anticipated in the Work Plan of the GRS for 2023 (GRS, 2023c). The National Programme for the Adoption of European Union Aquis was last revised in 2022, and the drafting of the new Water Law was planned for the fourth quarter of 2023. The same document also announced the Law on Drinking Water, but there is no available information on the progress of its drafting (GRS, 2023d).

The Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24 assessed that the Republic of Serbia is stagnating in terms of the overall SDG 6, and that the main challenges remain present. The percentage of the population connected to wastewater treatment systems, as well as the percentage of the population with access to well-managed water supply systems, are still stagnating (Lafortune et al., 2024).

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Targets 6.1 and 6.3

Within SDG 6, the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report defines two priority targets to be achieved by 2030:

Priority target	6.1 – By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all		6.3 – Improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, having the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally	
Indicator	The percentage of the population using drinking water from public systems is 100%	Adequate water supply, with a target value of 100%	The percentage of wastewater being treated	The percentage of water bodies with good quality status, with a target value of 100%.

Priority target 6.1

According to available data in the national SDG indicator database of the SORS, the percentage of the population supplied with water from public systems, i.e., public water supply, is 75%. This database also shows that this data has not changed since 2004 (SORS, 2024d).

Other available statistical data relevant to this target show that in 2022, the trend of increased water abstraction for drinking water supply and the expansion of the supply network continued. In 2022, 2.3% more water was abstracted for drinking water supply, and 0.3% more users were connected compared to 2021. The increase in the length of the water supply network

for the same period is 2.3% (SORS, 2024c). If we look at the data in the publication *Municipalities and Regions in the Republic of Serbia* regarding the number of households supplied with water from water supply systems, it can be calculated that the percentage of population connected to water supply systems is around 84% (SORS, 2024f). This shows that the data in the national SDG indicator database have not been updated for a long time. Data on the increase in the length the water supply network and the growing number of users also indicates the increase in population connected to the public water supply systems.

Data on the control of public water supply lines for 2023 was not available at the time of preparing this report. Reports for 2022 showed that out of 156 controlled water supply systems, 105 (67.3%) were compliant. Among the water supply systems with non-potable water, 17 (10.9%) had physical-chemical non-compliance, 14 (8.9%) had microbiological non-compliance, and 20 (12.8%) had combined non-compliance

(Knežević, 2023). These percentages have not significantly changed compared to the previous year (2021).

By comparing various statistical data on water supply in the Republic of Serbia, it can be concluded that the percentage of the population connected to public water supply systems is experiencing a slight but consistent increase. The percentage is still significantly below the target value of 100% connection by 2030. To achieve this goal by the planned year, it is necessary to continue with intensified investments in water supply infrastructure and improve cooperation between the relevant institutions, namely the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure (MCTI), the Ministry of MEP, the Water Management Directorate of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, and Local Self-Governments, in order to accelerate the preparation of documentation and the implementation of construction projects.

Priority target 6.3

The share of the population connected to urban wastewater treatment with at least secondary treatment was 15.2%³⁷ in 2022 (SORS, 2024g). This indicator still shows a slight positive trend (in 2021, it was 14.7%). However, the low level of municipal wastewater treatment, far below the average in EU countries, remains the biggest challenge in water protection. In the Republic of Serbia, 49 municipal wastewater treatment plants have been built so far, of which 32 are operational, but only a small number achieve the intended effect (GRS, 2023f).

This implies that the majority of urban areas in Serbia lack functional water treatment systems. The percentage of households connected to the sewage network also slightly increased by 0.4% compared to 2021. (SORS, 2024h). The data on the share of water bodies with good status has still not been updated in the national SDG indicator database. The latest available data is from 2020, when this share was 67.82% (SORS, 2024i).

37 Secondary wastewater treatment involves biological treatment, which reduces the concentration of biodegradable organic matter.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in investments in the construction of wastewater treatment systems in the Republic of Serbia. There are currently plans to build approximately 140 new treatment plants. According to the GRS Work Plan, the commissioning of 26 new treatment plants is planned by 2025 (GRS, 2023c).

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendation from previous report	Status	Comment
The new Water Law, fully aligned with EU legislation, should be prepared and adopted as soon as possible. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the Directorate of Water Management of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management.	Not adopted	During 2023, there were no activities regarding the development of the new Water Law. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.
The Plan for the Water Pollution Prevention should be adopted as soon as possible. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the Directorate of Water Management of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management.	Not adopted	No activities have been carried out in relation to development of the Plan for the Water Pollution Prevention. In 2023, the Water Management Plan for the Territory of the Republic of Serbia until 2027 was adopted, which includes important elements and measures related to the improvement of water quality. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.
Accelerate the preparation of project documentation for the construction of wastewater treatment plants in priority agglomerations in accordance with the Multi-Year Financial and Investment Plan until 2029. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the MEP and local self-governments.	Partially adopted	Investments in the construction of wastewater treatment plants have continued.

<p>Expand the monitoring network for the quality of surface and groundwater in accordance with the Monitoring Programme outlined in the Water Management Plan until 2025. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the MEP and Serbian Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA).</p>	<p>Partially adopted</p>	<p>The Water Management Plan for the Territory of the Republic of Serbia until 2027, adopted in 2023, includes a water monitoring programme.</p>
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Recommendations

1. The new Water Law, fully aligned with EU legislation, should be prepared and adopted as soon as possible. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the Directorate of Water Management of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management.
2. The Plan for the Water Pollution Prevention should be adopted as soon as possible. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the Directorate of Water Management of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management.
3. Accelerate the preparation of project documentation for the construction of wastewater treatment plants in priority agglomerations in accordance with the Multi-Year Financial and Investment Plan until 2029. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the MEP and local self-governments.
4. Expand the monitoring network for the quality of surface and groundwater in accordance with the Monitoring Programme outlined in the Water Management Plan until 2025. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the MEP and SEPA.
5. Regularly update data for SDG 6 in the national database of SDG indicators. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the SORS.

Sustainable Development Goal 11:

SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES³⁸



Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

As part of public policies, in relation to the previous reporting period when the Air Protection Programme, Waste Management Programme, and Circular Economy Development Programme were adopted and are still in effect, during the last reporting period, the Sludge Management Programme for the Republic of Serbia for the period 2023–2032 was adopted, along with the accompanying Action Plan for the period 2023–2027. The goal of this planning document, which is being adopted for the first time in the Republic of Serbia, is to establish a system for managing sludge from municipal wastewater treatment plants.

Regarding the legal framework, in May 2023, amendments to the Law on Waste Management came into force. The main changes pertain to permits for waste management, the management of construction waste, the management of wastewater treatment plant sludge, and the responsibilities for issuing permits, etc. (Antić et al., 2023). In 2023, the Law on the Use of Renewable Energy Sources was amended, enabling further development of the renewable energy sector and the implementation of auctions for new renewable energy capacity. In addition to these amendments, for Goal 11 in the context of Priority Area 7, the Law on Air Protection, the Law on Climate Change, the Law on Energy Efficiency and Rational Use of Ener-

38 SDG 11 is included in two priority areas, which is why the changes in the strategic, legislative, and institutional framework for its implementation are addressed twice, in line with the theme of each priority area. This section addresses the negative effects of cities, with a particular focus on air quality and waste management.

gy, and the Law on Protection from Environmental Noise remain relevant.

Regarding the institutional framework, there have been no changes compared to the previous report. The key institution for air and waste management remains the Ministry of Environmental Protection, and within it, the Serbian Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA), which is responsible for data management, report preparation, and similar tasks.

In the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24, the situation in the Republic of Serbia regarding Goal 11 is assessed as "on track or maintaining SDG achievement", with main challenges still being present. The same assessment was given for the indicator related to waste. The report states that the municipal waste recycling rate was 16.8% in 2021, marking progress compared to the previous year's figure of 15.4% for 2020. Information on air pollution exposure, specifically the levels of PM_{2.5} particles in urban areas, is not available, and there are no data on this indicator (Lafortune et al, 2024).

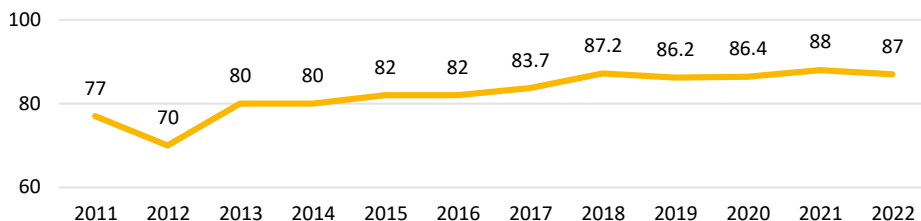
Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Target 11.6

Within SDG 11, the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report defines one priority target to be achieved with Priority Area 7: Clean and Resilient Communities by 2030:

Priority target:	11.6 – Reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management	
Indicator:	By 2031, achieve 100% coverage of the population of the Republic of Serbia with municipal waste collection services (in accordance with the Waste Management Programme 2022–2031)	Reduce PM _{2.5} emissions by 22% by 2030 (in accordance with Directive 2016/2284/EU [NEC Directive])

There was a slight decline in waste collection coverage – the average coverage in 2022 was 87%, which is a decrease of 1% compared to the previous year, 2021 (Chart 18). The reasons for this decrease are un-

known. On the other hand, a rise in the recycling rate of municipal waste was observed, from 16.8% in 2021 to 17.7% in 2022, with local self-governments contributing less than 3% (Đorđević et al, 2023).

Chart 18 *The average waste collection coverage (%) in the Republic of Serbia, 2011–2022.*

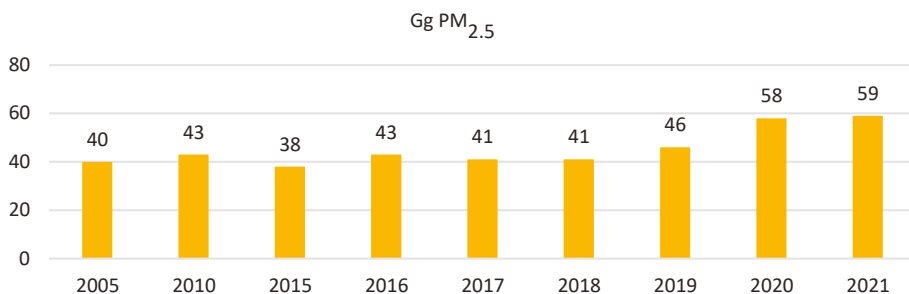
Source: Serbian Environmental Protection Agency (2020–2023), *State of Environment Report in the Republic of Serbia for 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022*

Although the percentage of the population covered by organized waste collection has increased in recent years, one of the key problems remains the lack of an established system for organized separate collection, sorting, and recycling of municipal waste (Srda, 2023). There have been no changes regarding the number of regional waste management centres (still 10 out of 26 planned by 2034).

On a positive note, in 2023, waste incineration for the generation of electricity and thermal energy began at the Solid Waste Management Centre in Vinča, with full operation expected in 2024. The Centre

receives recyclable waste, as well as hazardous household waste such as batteries, light bulbs, small household appliances, paints, chemicals, medications, etc.

The report from the SEPA shows that the levels of $PM_{2.5}$ particles have increased between 2005 (the year cited as the starting point for measurement according to the EU NEC Directive) and 2021 from 40Gg to 59 Gg (Chart 19). The largest source of emissions of these particles are heating plants with a capacity of less than 50 MW and individual heating systems (Knežević et al, 2023).

Chart 19 *Quantities of $PM_{2.5}$ particles in Serbia 2005–2021 in Gg*

Source: *Annual Report of the Republic of Serbia on Air Quality for the Year 2022, 2023*

Although the Law on Air Protection provides that the SEPA is obliged to publish the annual report by 28 February for the

previous year, the report for 2023 is not available at the time of writing this text (April 2024). The last report published in

2023 is for the year 2022, which states that in all eight agglomerations (Belgrade, Bor, Kosjerić, Novi Sad, Niš, Pančevo, Smederevo, and Užice), the air quality was classified as category III, meaning excessively polluted, as was the case in the previous annual report. When it comes to suspended particles $PM_{2.5}$, the exceeding of limit values was recorded in all agglomerations except in Bor and Novi Sad (Knežević et al, 2023).

A positive trend is that the number of measurement points from which data is collected and processed has been increasing year by year, with the number rising from 201 in 2021 to 220 measurement points in 2022. However, around 20% of the population in Serbia still lives in municipalities where there is no air quality monitoring (Paunović et al, 2023).

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendation from previous report	Status	Comment
Improve institutional and financial capacities for air pollution control at the national and local levels, with a focus on enhancing the capacities of the SEPA.	Not adopted	The recommendation has been repeated since 2020, and there is no information indicating that air pollution control capacities have been improved. The EU report for Serbia for 2023 repeats the recommendation on the need to ensure adequate staff within the SEPA (European Commission, 2023). The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.
Continue improving the network and the data obtained from it, with particular focus on setting up stations in areas where official measurements do not exist.	Partially adopted	The SEPA report shows an increase in data flow from local self-government units, as well as an increase in the number of measurement points from 201 in 2021 to 220 in 2022. However, around 20% of the population in Serbia still lives in municipalities where there is no air quality monitoring.
Increase the coverage of the population with municipal waste collection services.	Not adopted	Compared to the previous year, the data shows a 1% decrease in the population coverage for waste collection (SEPA, 2023). The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.
Build a network of regional waste treatment centres according to global standards.	Partially adopted	The construction of the network of regional waste treatment centres is ongoing.

Recommendations

1. SEPA should improve institutional and financial capacities for air pollution control at the national and local levels, with a focus on enhancing the capacities of the SEPA.
2. MEP and SEPA should continue improving the network and the data obtained from it, with particular focus on setting up stations in areas where official measurements do not exist.
3. LSGUs should increase the coverage of the population with municipal waste collection services.
4. LSGUs should continue building constructing a network of regional waste treatment centres according to global standards.

Sustainable Development Goal 12:

RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION³⁹



Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Waste Management Programme of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2022–2031 serves as the fundamental strategic document in this field, setting ambitious goals for each year. Its specific goal "Improving the municipal waste management system by increasing the recycling rate, reducing the disposal of biodegradable waste in landfills and reducing waste disposal in unsanitary landfills" is connected to SDG 12. The MEP will prepare a report on the results achieved in reaching the Programme's established goals (which implementation contributes to the achievement of target 12.5), based on an ex-post analysis of effects, after every three years of the Programme's implementation, within which it may also propose its potential revision.

The primary legal document for implementing target 12.5, which relates to reducing waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling, and reuse, is the Law on Waste Management along with its by-laws. The Law on Waste Management regulates: waste types and classification; waste management planning; waste management entities; responsibilities and obligations in waste management; organization of waste management; management of specific waste streams; conditions and procedures for issuing permits; transboundary movement of waste; waste reporting and database; funding of waste management; supervision, as well as other matters significant to waste management.

With the adoption of the Law on Amendments to the Law on Waste Management, which takes effect in May 2023, individu-

39 SDG 12 is included in two priority areas, which is why the changes in the strategic, legislative, and institutional framework for its implementation are addressed twice, in line with the theme of each priority area. This section includes a part addressing waste management.

als and legal entities are given a one-year period to align their operations with the adopted amendments. A six-month deadline has also been set for adopting the accompanying regulations stipulated by the amendments (Antić et al., 2023).

The long-awaited new amendments to the Law on Waste Management (implemented in May 2023) unfortunately did not resolve numerous issues but rather contributed to a worsening situation, particularly in the field of hazardous waste storage, as the storage period was extended from 12 to 36 months. Additionally, the amendments allowed for the use of mobile facilities for energy recovery from waste (Antić et al., 2023).

The Law on Waste Management also defines the principles of waste management. The principle of the waste management hierarchy defines the arrangement within the waste management system and sets the priority order in practice. The top priority is waste prevention and reduction, meaning the decrease in resource use. At the top of the waste management hierarchy is recycling,

or waste treatment for the recovery of raw materials. In the Republic of Serbia, the prevailing practice is to dispose of waste, mostly without prior treatment, at local unsanitary landfills, which largely do not meet even the minimum technical standards. Informal waste collectors, primarily of waste packaging, are not recognized as entities in the waste management system, which makes it impossible to determine the quantities of waste they deliver to operators.

During the reporting period, there were no significant changes in the institutional framework for the implementation of SDG 12.

In the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24, the situation regarding SDG 12 in the Republic of Serbia is rated as "moderately improving". Progress has been observed here, as in the previous Europe Sustainable Development Report 2022, SDG 12 in the Republic of Serbia was assessed as "stagnating". Serbia is on track to reach the target value for SDG 12, specifically in the export of plastic waste (Lafortune et al., 2024).

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Target 12.5

Within SDG 12, the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report defines two priority targets that need to be achieved by 2030, with a focus on target 12.5:

Priority target	By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse
Indicator	By 2029, achieve a recycling/reuse rate for packaging waste of 53%

The key indicator for monitoring progress toward target 12.5, "By 2029, achieve a recycling/reuse rate of 53% for packaging waste".

The target value to be achieved should align with the goals for waste reduction

and recycling in the Republic of Serbia, which are in accordance with the specific plans for implementing the Waste Framework Directive 2008/98/EC, the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive 94/62/EC, and the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive 2012/19/EU.

The indicator tracks the reduction in waste generation. Data is available for the period 2017–2021 and indicates a significant increase in the municipal waste recycling rate, from 14.1% to 16.8%, representing a change of 4.48% measured by the compound annual growth rate.

In 2022, as part of the ENVAP4 project, an "Analysis of the Status of Separate Waste Collection at the Local Self-Government Unit Level" was conducted. The goal of the analysis is to provide answers to questions regarding the main problems and challenges faced by LSGUs and public utility companies in implementing the waste selection and separate collection system, as well as in regular reporting to the SEPA on waste quantities and recycling rates.

In the Republic of Serbia, the majority of municipal waste is disposed of in landfills, which, according to the waste management hierarchy, should be the last resort, after waste prevention, reuse, recycling, and other forms of waste recovery. The latest estimate from the SEPA indicates that approximately 15% (17.7% in 2022) of the generated

municipal waste is recycled annually in the Republic of Serbia, with LSGUs contributing only up to 3%, while the remaining recycled quantities come from the informal sector. The recycling rate of municipal waste is directly related to the activities and organization of the waste management system regulated by LSGUs and implemented by public utility companies (Đorđević et al., 2023).

Based on data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia for 2022, the recycling rate of municipal waste is 17.7%.

According to data from the Statistical Office, in 2022, the economic sectors in the Republic of Serbia generated 174.7 million tons of waste. A total of 174.3 million tons of waste were treated, with 6.8% more waste being recycled compared to the previous year.

The bylaw adopted during the reporting period, relevant for the implementation of target 12.5, is the Regulation on the types of financial guarantees and equivalent insurance required to ensure the conduct of waste management activities (GRS, 2023g).

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendation from previous report	Status	Comment
It is necessary to implement the "polluter pays" principle, which is clearly defined in the Law on Waste Management. It must be monitored by the inspection authority responsible for waste management to ensure that polluters bear the full costs of the consequences of their activities.	Partially adopted	According to data from the 2023 Environmental Protection Inspection Report, environmental protection inspectors from the Department for Monitoring of Facility Operators, Transboundary Waste Movements, and Special Waste Streams reported: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 12 misdemeanours and - 1 commercial offences. In 2023, one court verdict was issued. Activities aimed at preventive action in the field of waste management were reflected in providing expert and practical advice and recommendations, including guidelines for conducting waste treatment, reuse, and disposal activities by facility operators, preparation and completion of waste documentation, as well as other issues related to waste management. One official advisory visit was conducted.
The MEP, which is responsible for waste management, should establish waste management regions formed through cooperation between LSGUs. After defining the regions, it is necessary to build regional infrastructures for municipal waste management.	Not adopted	According to the National Waste Management Strategy from 2003 and 2010, the closure and reclamation of existing dumpsites and the construction of 29 regional sanitary landfills, with centres for sorting of recyclable waste and transfer stations, are planned. So far, 12 sanitary landfills have been built. In 2023, no new region was defined. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.

<p>Through the legislation that defines the field of waste management, for which the MEP is responsible, it is necessary to introduce additional subsidies and support for businesses and individuals who engage in the separation of municipal waste, thereby increasing the recycling rate index.</p>	<p>Partially adopted</p>	<p>In April 2023 MEP a public competition for the first quarter. The subject of the competition included the allocation of incentive funds for the reuse and recovery of waste as secondary raw materials or for energy production, as well as for the production of reusable shopping bags.</p> <p>In 2023, subsidies were allocated to operators involved in the management and treatment of the following types of waste:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reuse, recycling, and recovery of waste electrical and electronic equipment - reuse, recycling, and recovery of waste portable batteries or starters - reuse and recovery of waste tires as secondary raw materials - treatment of waste tires for energy recovery - reuse, recycling, and recovery of waste oils as secondary raw materials.
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Recommendations

1. It is necessary to implement the "polluter pays" principle, which is clearly defined in the Law on Waste Management. It must be monitored by the inspection authority responsible for waste management to ensure that polluters bear the full costs of the consequences of their activities.
2. The MEP, which is responsible for waste management, should establish waste management regions formed through cooperation between LSGUs. After defining the regions, it is necessary to build regional infrastructures for municipal waste management.
3. Through the legislation that defines the field of waste management, for which the MEP is responsible, it is necessary to introduce additional subsidies and support for businesses and individuals who engage in the separation of municipal waste, thereby increasing the recycling rate index.
4. It is necessary for the MEP to continuously promote the waste management hierarchy principle at all levels through education and the introduction of additional financial support for businesses, operators, and utility companies with the highest recycling rates. This measure would increase the municipal waste recycling index.
5. It is necessary for the Department of Waste and Wastewater Management within MEP to initiate amendments to the Law on Waste Management in order to recognize and integrate informal waste collectors into the waste management system as soon as possible, thereby contributing to the achievement of the ambitious goals for packaging waste outlined in the Waste Management Programme of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2022–2031.

Sustainable Development Goal 13:

CLIMATE ACTION



Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

On 1 June 2023, the GRS adopted the Low-carbon Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2023–2030, with projections up to 2050 (GRS, 2023h). The Strategy was adopted three years after the public discussion, which was held in 2020, and five years after it was drafted. As stated in the MEP statement, the Strategy was adopted "in order to determine the strategic directions of action and public policy for reducing greenhouse gas emissions across the entire economy", as an obligation under the Law on Climate Change. The Strategy recommended a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 33.3% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels.

In addition, the Strategy presents measures, indicators, costs, and resources required to achieve this, as well as other presented scenarios. The greenhouse

gas emission reduction ambitions defined in this document are not in line with the commitments Serbia made at the Ministerial Council of the Energy Community held in December 2022. On this occasion, Serbia committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 40.3% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels (Ministerial Council of the Energy Community, 2022).

In addition to the Low-Carbon Development Strategy, several bylaws were adopted in 2023, aimed at enabling the implementation of the Law on Climate Change. This Law, which was adopted in 2021 (GRS, 2021a), regulates the system for limiting GHG emissions and for adaptation to changing climate conditions, monitoring and reporting on the Low-Carbon Development Strategy and its improvement. A system for monitoring, reporting, and verification of greenhouse gas emissions

has also been introduced, but for more effective implementation of the provisions within the law, the adoption of various secondary legislation is required. The Regulation on the Types of Data, Authorities and Organizations, and Other Individuals and Legal Entities That Provide Data for the Preparation of the National Inventory of Greenhouse Gas Emissions (VRS2023) has been adopted, with its adoption representing a continuation of aligning national regulations with EU legislation. At the end of 2023, the Programme for Adaptation to Climate Change for the period from 2023 to 2030 with the Action Plan was adopted (GRS, 2023i). The programme defines the activities that Serbia will undertake to adapt to the consequences of climate change, with specific measures to be implemented by 2026. The funds allocated for this first defined period amount to 865 million dinars in budgetary funds. In June 2023, the Rulebook on the Content of the National Inventory of Greenhouse Gas Emissions and the National Greenhouse Gas Inventory Report was adopted, where the inventory content was aligned with the decisions of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Paris Agreement, and the guidelines of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change (IPCC). Later that year, in December, the Rulebook on Monitoring and Reporting of Greenhouse Gas Emissions was adopted (GRS, 2023j). This rulebook specifies the reporting methods for greenhouse gas emissions, as well as the obligations of plant operators that emit these gases, regarding reporting deadlines and rules. Also, in June 2023, the Rulebook on the Content of the Greenhouse Gas Inventory and the Greenhouse Gas Inventory Report was adopted (GRS, 2023k).

In addition to the aforementioned documents, another important document for the climate policies of the Republic of Serbia, whose adoption has been delayed, is the INECP. This document is intended to define the specific steps that the Republic of Serbia will take in order to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. During the summer of 2023, the draft of this document was put up for public consultation, but it has not been adopted to this day.

The Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24 assesses that the Republic of Serbia has stagnated in implementing the goals for SDG 13 and that there are still significant challenges on the path to achieving this goal (Lafortune et al., 2024).

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Target 13.1

Within SDG 13, the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report defines one priority target to be achieved by 2030: Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries.

Priority target	13.1 – Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries	
Indicator	The share of local self-governments that adopt and implement disaster risk reduction strategies at the local level in accordance with National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction 2030	The goal is for all local self-governments to adopt and implement disaster risk mitigation strategies in line with the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction 2030

The main strategic document that would enable the implementation of target 13.1 in the Republic of Serbia, the Low-Carbon Development Strategy, was adopted in 2023. The Low-Carbon Development Strategy with the Action Plan should establish the development direction of the Republic of Serbia towards a low-carbon and resource-efficient economy. However, since the adoption of the action plan is still pending, the implementation of the plans and activities defined by the Strategy has not yet started.

According to the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management (GRS, 2018b), the GRS adopts the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management, while local governments adopt local plans and strategies based on the national strategy. It is still not possible to assess the progress in the number of local self-governments adopting and implementing strategies and plans for disaster risk reduction at the local level, as Serbia still does not have a National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management. Since the data on the SORS website has not been updated and only includes data from 2018, which shows that only 4.6% of local self-governments have adopted and are implementing local plans or strategies for

disaster risk reduction at the local level, or 8 out of 174 local self-governments (SORS, 2018).

Target 13.1 is directly related to several other Sustainable Development Goals, and feedback effects are expected in their achievement. These goals are SDG 6: Clean water and sanitation for all, SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy, SDG 11: Sustainable cities and SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production and SDG 15: Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and reverse land degradation. These targets would contribute to improving adaptability to climate change-related risks: access to drinking water (target 6.1), improving the water quality and reducing pollution (target 6.3), integrated water resource management (target 6.5), increase share of renewable energy in energy mix (target 7.2), develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient (target 9.1), upgrade infrastructure and retrofit industries to make them sustainable (target 9.4), reduce the adverse environmental impact of cities by paying special attention to air quality and waste management (target 11.6), ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services (target 15.1).

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendation from previous report	Status	Comment
Adopt the necessary subordinate legislation, which will contribute to better implementation of the Law on Climate Change.	Adopted	Several subordinate regulations were adopted in 2023. The following subordinate regulations were adopted: the Programme for Adaptation to Changing Climate Conditions for the period from 2023 to 2030 with an Action Plan, the Regulation on the Content of the National Inventory of Greenhouse Gases and the National Greenhouse Gas Inventory Report, the Regulation on Monitoring and Reporting of Greenhouse Gas Emissions, and the Regulation on the Types of Data, Authorities, Organizations, and Other Individuals and Legal Entities that Submit Data for the Preparation of the National Greenhouse Gas Inventory.
Adopt the Low-Carbon Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia with Action plan.	Partially adopted	On 1 June 2023, the GRS adopted the Low-Carbon Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2023–2030, with projections up to 2050. The Strategy was adopted three years after the public discussion, which was held in 2020, and five years after it was drafted. The action plan has not yet been adopted.
Adopt INECP.	Not adopted	In 2023 INECP was put out for public consultation and was expected to be adopted. However, it is yet to be adopted. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.
The SORS should monitor and regularly publish and update the indicators for SDG 13.	Not adopted	The last adopted data related to indicators of SDG 13 are from 2018. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.

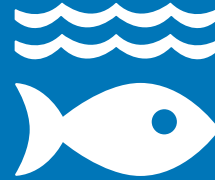
<p>Define and adjust the legal and institutional framework related to climate change adaptation and integrate it into other sectors, primarily water management, agriculture, urban planning, construction, infrastructure, forestry, nature protection, and energy.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>During the reporting period, there was no integration of the legal and institutional framework related to climate change adaptation into other sectors.</p> <p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2020.</p>
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Recommendations

1. MEP should continue working on by-laws that will contribute to better implementation of the Law on Climate Change and more efficient application of the adopted documents.
2. Define and adjust the legal and institutional framework related to climate change adaptation and integrate it into other sectors, primarily water management, agriculture, urban planning, construction, infrastructure, forestry, nature protection, and energy.
3. The GRS, at the proposal of the MME, should adopt the INECP as soon as possible, as significant delays have already occurred in adopting this document.
4. The adoption of the Action Plan for the implementation of the Low-Carbon Development Strategy should be expedited. The Strategy, which was adopted by the GRS in June 2023, foresees the adoption of the Action Plan for its implementation in the period 2024–2030 within one year.
5. The SORS should monitor, regularly publish, and update the indicators for SDG 13.

Sustainable Development Goal 14:

LIFE BELOW WATER



Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources is the primary objective of SDG 14. The specific aspects addressed by this goal are: reducing marine pollution, preventing ocean acidification, protecting marine and coastal ecosystems, regulating fishing practices, and improving the protection of ocean areas. Given the size of these ecosystems and their prevalence on the planet, they play a crucial role in global efforts to prevent and mitigate climate change. In this regard, all countries bear a certain level of responsibility for the preservation of these ecosystems, including landlocked countries like Serbia. River and marine ecosystems form an interconnected system, so pollution originating within the continent ultimately ends up in seas and

oceans. SDG 14 also focuses on the protection of migratory fish species, for which a specific target has been defined. Some fish species migrate within marine ecosystems, while others migrate between marine and freshwater ecosystems. This highlights yet another aspect of the responsibility that continental countries bear for protecting species migrating along rivers within their territories. Certain migratory fish species are present in Serbia, primarily from the globally endangered sturgeon group, which migrate between the Black Sea and the Danube.

The impact of pollution originating within the territory of the Republic of Serbia on marine ecosystems has never been specifically considered in national policies.

In landlocked countries, the implementation of SDG 14 is mostly carried out indirectly, through goals related to the conservation of freshwater resources (SDG 6). The most significant in this regard are the targets related to water pollution (6.3). Activities that contribute to reducing emissions into inland waters and improve the quality of inland waters also contribute to achieving Goal 14. Large quantities of nutrients, plastic, and other forms of pollution reach the seas through rivers, where they impact the natural balance of marine ecosystems in various ways. The accumulation of nutrients causes increased organic production in seas and oceans, leading to their gradual acidification. Plastic that accumulates and is transported in river ecosystems also ends up in marine ecosystems, where it accumulates in various marine organisms.

The still very low level of wastewater treatment in Serbia results in large amounts of nutrients ending up in rivers, which are then carried to the sea. Solid waste management is also underdeveloped, so significant amounts of this waste, including plastic, end up in rivers. The majority of Serbia belongs to the Black Sea basin (about 92%), so a significant portion of the pollution generated within the territory of the Republic of Serbia ultimately ends up in the Black Sea.

In addition to concentrated sources of pollution (municipal wastewater and industry), a significant source of pollution is diffuse pollution, which primarily comes from the agriculture sector. Large quantities of mineral fertilizers and pesticides used in this activity ultimately end up in inland waters and later in the seas. One of the mechanisms for reducing pollution from agricultural activities is the implementation of the EU Nitrates Directive. The implementation

of this Directive introduces mechanisms for better management of manure and synthetic nitrogen fertilizers to reduce their emissions into water. Among other things, the Nitrates Directive provides for the definition of areas that are sensitive to nutrients and areas that are nitrate vulnerable. Special measures need to be implemented in these areas to reduce the presence of nutrients and nitrates in watercourses. Serbia has not yet officially designated these areas, and only proposals for their designation have been developed.

Plastic and other solid waste largely end up in the watercourses of Serbia, as the management of this waste is still insufficiently regulated. According to data from SEPA (2023), in 2022, approximately 87% of the total generated waste was collected by municipal services in Serbia. This does not mean that all collected waste is disposed of properly, as a large number of unsanitary landfills are still in use, from which waste easily reaches watercourses. A large number of municipalities and cities still lack adequate waste disposal sites managed in accordance with the minimum environmental protection requirements.

The Republic of Serbia has a well-developed legal framework for the protection and sustainable use of the fish stock (NARS, 2014). The laws in this area, including the Law on Nature Protection and its bylaws, enable the control of fishing and the protection of endangered species and fish populations in the watercourses of the Republic of Serbia. The most endangered fish species, which are also migratory, are sturgeons (Acipenseridae). Sturgeon fishing is prohibited in the Republic of Serbia, and they are strictly protected (GRS, 2016). Control of fishing in the Republic of Ser-

bia faces numerous challenges, and many data suggest that the rate of illegal fishing, especially in larger fishing areas such as the Danube and Sava rivers, is high, posing a real threat to the long-term survival of certain fish species. The main drawback is the small number of inspectors and fish wardens, as well as their inadequate equipment. In addition, efficient control of fishing is further hindered by inadequate coordination between relevant institutions (inspections, police, judicial authorities), as well as the slow implementation of legal proceedings.

Although fishing is one of the most prominent threatening factors for these species, it should be noted that the damming of

watercourses and preventing their migration poses a significant danger to the survival of these species. The construction of the Đerdap hydroelectric power system had a highly pronounced negative impact on sturgeon species migrating along the Danube. Their migration has been almost entirely prevented, and they have been brought to the brink of extinction. Although the construction of fish passages on these hydroelectric facilities has been under discussion for many years, implementation is still not in sight.

The Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24 does not include data on the progress of the Republic of Serbia regarding SDG 14 (Lafortune et al., 2024).

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendation from previous report	Status	Comment
<p>Improve the strategic and legal framework in the field of water pollution prevention and waste management, and ensure its implementation, especially concerning water pollution by plastic waste, through amendments to the Water Law and the development of the Plan for the Water Pollution Prevention by the end of 2025. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the Directorate of Water Management of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management and MEP.</p>	<p>Partially adopted</p>	<p>In 2023, the Water Management Plan for the Territory of the Republic of Serbia until 2027 was adopted, which includes important elements and measures related to the improvement of water quality.</p>

<p>Establish monitoring of floating plastic waste and waste on riverbanks by 2025. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the MEP and SEPA.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The Waste Management Programme of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2022 to 2031 was adopted in 2022, but it does not include specific elements related to floating waste in rivers.</p> <p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.</p>
<p>Fully transpose the EU Nitrates Directive into national legislation and ensure its effective implementation by the end of 2024. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the MEP.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The Republic of Serbia has developed a specific plan for the implementation of the Nitrates Directive, but it has not yet been fully transposed into national legislation.</p> <p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.</p>
<p>Improve the implementation of the legal framework for the protection and use of fish stock to ensure effective protection of migratory fish species. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the MEP.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>Amendments to the Law on the Protection and Use of Fish Stock were initiated in 2022, but currently, there is no publicly available information about the status of this document.</p>
<p>The action plan for the protection of sturgeon species should be adopted by the end of 2023. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the MEP.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The Republic of Serbia has not yet adopted this document, although drafts were previously prepared.</p> <p>The recommendation has not been adopted since 2022.</p>

Recommendations

1. Improve the strategic and legal framework in the field of water pollution prevention and waste management, and ensure its implementation, especially concerning water pollution by plastic waste, through amendments to the Water Law and the development of the Plan for the Water Pollution Prevention by the end of 2025. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the Directorate of Water Management of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Water Management and MEP.
2. Establish monitoring of floating plastic waste and waste on riverbanks by 2025. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the MEP and SEPA.
3. Fully transpose the EU Nitrates Directive into national legislation and ensure its effective implementation by the end of 2024. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the MEP.
4. Improve the implementation of the legal framework for the protection and use of fish stock to ensure effective protection of migratory fish species. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the MEP.
5. The action plan for the protection of sturgeon species should be adopted by the end of 2023. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the MEP.
6. Accelerate the development of solutions for a fish passage on the Đerdap hydroelectric power system. The primary responsibility for implementing this recommendation lies with the MEP and MME.
7. Improve the capacities of inspection and fishery protection services to enhance fisheries control and improve coordination among relevant authorities (inspection, police, prosecution, courts) to ensure more efficient prosecution of illegal fishing activities.

Priority area 8: Preservation of natural and cultural heritage

Although reforestation has become highly relevant in Serbian public discourse, in practice, many forests are often targeted for conversion into construction land, while practices for preserving cultural and historical monuments remain inadequate. The key is to strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage (target 11.4) and take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species (target 15.5).

Sustainable Development Goal 11:

SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES⁴⁰



Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

During the reporting period, there were no significant changes in public policies or the institutional framework related to Sustainable Development Goal 11 in the context of "Priority Area 8: Preservation of Natural and Cultural Heritage". From a legislative standpoint, three laws in the field of culture have been adopted. Regarding the indicators of target 11.4, there has been an increase of 0.8% in the area under protection compared to the previous report, while there has been no change in the number of sites in the Republic of Serbia on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

Regarding the public policy framework, there were no changes during the reporting period. Several consultative meetings were held in 2023 regarding the preparation of the Environmental Protection Strategy, but the first draft has not yet been prepared. The Strategy for the Development of Culture of the Republic of Serbia has still not been adopted, although a draft for the period 2020–2029 was prepared a few years ago (MC, 2024).

Three laws in the field of culture have been adopted during 2023. The Law on Amendments to the Law on Culture has been adopted, which includes adding the Foundation of the Holy Monastery Hilan-

40 SDG 11 is included in two priority areas, which is why the changes in the strategic, legislative, and institutional framework for its implementation are addressed twice, in line with the theme of each priority area. This section includes a part addressing protection of world cultural and natural heritage.

dar to the list of entities that receive special state care in the field of culture and shortening the validity period of the Cultural Development Strategy from ten to five years. The second law is the Law on Film and Other Audiovisual Heritage, which for the first time in Serbia regulates the protection of film and other audiovisual materials. The Law on the Ratification of the Agreement on Cinematographic Co-production between the GRS and the Government of the Republic of Italy has also been adopted, enabling further enhancement of relations and cooperation in the field of film arts and audiovisual creation (MC, 2023a). In addition to these changes, the following laws remain relevant for this priority area: the Law on Nature Protection, the Law on Nat-

ional Parks, the Law on Environmental Protection, and the Law on Cultural Property.

MEP and MC still remain the competent ministries during 2023. In addition, the relevant institutions are the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia and the Republic Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments.

The Europe Sustainable Development Report for 2023/24 does not contain an indicator relevant to target 11.4, which focuses on strengthening efforts to protect and preserve world's cultural and natural heritage, and priority area 8, i.e., the preservation of natural and cultural heritage.

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Target 11.4

Within SDG 11, the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report defines one priority target to be achieved with "Priority Area 8: Preservation of Natural and Cultural Heritage" that should be fulfilled by 2030:

Priority target:	11.4 – Strengthen the efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage	
Indicator:	Increase the area under one of the types of protection regimes for natural areas to cover 20% of the territory of the Republic of Serbia	Provide conditions for adding at least one more site from the national tentative list to the UNESCO list

In the previous period, a slight increase in the size of the protected area was observed, from 691,443 ha (7.81% of Serbia's territory) to 765,537 ha (8.65%) (Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia, 2024). This is still significantly lower than the EU average (26%) and the global average (15.3%) according to the latest available data from 2021 (World Bank, 2024b).

In 2023, the following were added to the list of protected areas in the Republic of Serbia:

- Nature Park: Mrtvaja of Upper Potisje, Slatine in the Zlatica Valley
- Landscape of Outstanding Features: Varednik, Ada Ciganlija, Đetinja Gorge, Cer Mountain, Kanjiški Jarasi, and Potamišje

- Natural Monuments: Mrkonjski Vis, Vražji kamen – Prosečnik
- Natural Monuments of Botanical Character: Mulberry Tree near Šušljam, Zasavica Oak (INCS, 2024)

According to the European Commission's assessment, preparations for establishing the Natura 2000 network have advanced, thanks to an EU-funded project (European Commission, 2023). Except that, there are

no publicly available information on preparations of the Natura 2000 network.

In the meantime, no site from the national tentative list has been added to the UNESCO list. The UNESCO World Heritage List still includes 5 sites from the Republic of Serbia, and there are still 11 sites on the tentative list, meaning there has been no change compared to the previous reporting period (UNESCO, 2024).

Table 8 List of sites from Serbia on the UNESCO World Heritage List

Site	Added on the list
Gamzigrad-Romuliana, Palace of Galerius	2007
Medieval Monuments in Kosovo (Visoki Dečani, Pečka patrijaršija, Bogorodica Ljeviška and Gračanica ⁴¹)	2004
Stari Ras and Sopoćani	1979
Stećci -Medieval Tombstone Graveyards	2016
Studenica Monastery	1986

Source: UNESCO World Heritage Sites – Serbia, 2024

Serbia's tentative list includes: Đavolja varoš (Devil's Town) Natural Landmark, Tara National Park with the Drina River Canyon, Stara Planina National Park, Deliblato Sands, Đerdap National Park, Caričin grad – Iustiniana Prima, Smederevo Fortress, Negotinske pivnice, Manasija Monastery, Cultural Landscape of Bač and its surroundings, and Frontiers of the Roman Empire - The Danube Limes. According to the Ministry of Culture, Serbia is working on preparing the nomination dossier for several properties on the preliminary list, such as Smederevo Fortress, the Frontiers of Roman Empire – Danube Limes – Eastern Segment (a multinational nomination), and Caričin Grad (for which a capital project titled Research, Protection, and Presentation of the Caričin Grad Site has

been approved for the period 2023–2025, amounting to 366,586,000 RSD).

In addition to the sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List, there is also a list of intangible cultural heritage, which, in the case of Serbia, includes the preparation of plum spirit (*šljivovica*), Zlakusa pottery, singing to the accompaniment of the gusle, family saint patron's day (*slava*), and *kolo*, a traditional folk dance. In 2023, Serbia nominated the element called Kovačica Naive Painting, with a final decision expected in 2024 (Ministry of Culture, 2023b).

41 Also included on the List of World Heritage in Danger

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendation from previous report	Status	Comment
Adopt a cultural development strategy that would improve the potential for increased funding in this area and establish a system for monitoring the achievement of set goals.	Not adopted	According to the Annual Report for 2023, the Ministry of Culture is currently working on the preparation of the Cultural Development Strategy. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.
Continue work on the development of the ecological network in accordance with the EU Natura 2000 ecological network standards.	Adopted	The European Commission's report for Serbia states that preparations for establishing the Natura 2000 network have been improved thanks to an EU-funded project.
Improve activities aimed at adding sites from the national proposed list to the UNESCO list, as well as informing the public about this process.	Not adopted	The target value for 2023, according to the Annual Report on the Implementation of the Ministry of Culture's Mid-Term Plan 2023–2025, for the number of cultural assets inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List is the same as at the beginning of 2022, which is 5, so there are no indications that planned activities towards adding sites to the UNESCO list have been undertaken. According to the Ministry of Culture, Serbia is working on preparation of national dossier for several assets that are currently on tentative list (Smederevo fortress, Frontiers of Roman Empire - Danube River Limes - Eastern Segment and Caričin grad). The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.

Recommendations

1. GRS should adopt a cultural development strategy that would improve the potential for increased funding in this area and establish a system for monitoring the achievement of set goals.
2. MC should improve activities aimed at adding sites from the national proposed list to the UNESCO list, as well as informing the public about this process.

Sustainable Development Goal 15:

LIFE ON LAND



Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

During the reporting period, there was an increase in legislative activity in the field of nature protection and conservation of natural resources compared to 2022 (Bradaš et al., 2023). The Work Plan of the Government of the Republic of Serbia for 2023 envisaged the adoption of numerous regulatory and strategic documents in this area, which included, among other things, the submission of the Draft Law on Environmental Impact Assessment and the Draft Law on Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment in June 2023, as well as the Draft Law on Nature Protection and the Draft Amendments to the Law on Na-

tional Parks in December 2023 (GRS, 2023). The first two draft laws were submitted to the NARS in October 2023 and are still under parliamentary procedure. Although there are certain improvements in these documents, significant issues, which may lead to further harm to nature, can also be seen. For example, the Draft Law on Environmental Impact Assessment still allows the building permit to be issued before determining the environmental protection measures and requirements, which does not guarantee that these conditions and measures will be integrated into the project itself (Renewables and Environ-

mental Regulatory Institute (RERI, 2023). In addition, both draft laws broadly define the content of the studies that need to be prepared and practically do not require the existing state of nature at the site in question to be determined at the beginning of the procedure. This leaves room for authors of the study to use outdated and insufficiently accurate data, which fails to assess the actual state of biodiversity, potentially leading to its endangerment. As for the remaining two draft laws, the Draft Law on Nature Protection and the Draft Amendments to the Law on National Parks, there is no available information on whether the process of preparing these documents was initiated by the MEP during the reporting period.

The Work Plan of the GRS for 2023 (GRS, 2023c) also envisaged the adoption of the Regulation on the Ecological Network of the Republic of Serbia by the end of 2023, but there is no publicly available information on the progress of its development. According to the Institute for Nature Protection of Serbia (2024a), both nature protection institutes, in cooperation with the Faculty of Biology and the Institute for Multidisciplinary Research of the University of Belgrade, submitted to the competent Ministry Annex 2 – the reference list of habitat types, Annex 3 – the reference list of species, and Annex 3a – the reference list of birds, which serve as the basis for preparing Annex 1 – the list of ecologically significant areas with corresponding target species and habitat types.

The report Serbia 2030: Does Serbia Govern Its (Sustainable) Development? determined that there were no significant activities in the development of strategic documents relevant to SDG 15 in 2022

(Bradaš et al., 2023). In contrast, the MEP took important steps in 2023 to improve the strategic framework in the field of environmental protection and natural resource use by starting the preparation of the draft Environmental Protection Strategy with an action plan. It was presented that this strategy will be based on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and will therefore cover five pillars: decarbonization, circular economy, combating air pollution, nature and biodiversity protection and conservation, as well as establishing sustainable food supply chains and rural development. The working group for the development of the Environmental Protection Strategy – the Green Agenda for Serbia, was established in January 2023, and several meetings of this group were held throughout the year. In addition, civil society organizations that are members of the mentioned working group (Belgrade Open School, Young Researchers of Serbia, and the Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute) conducted continuous consultations with the civil sector in 2023. The aim was to involve a greater number of stakeholders in the process of developing the Strategy to ensure a more substantial contribution to the content of the document itself (Antić et al., 2023; MEP, 2024; UNDP Serbia, 2023). Although the Work Plan of the GRS for 2023 envisaged finalizing the strategy by December 2023 (GRS, 2023C), there is still no official information on when the completion and adoption of this document can be expected.

In the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24, it was assessed that the Republic of Serbia faces significant challenges in achieving SDG 15, which represents the most negative category in the evaluation of sustainable development

goal achievement in this document. Additionally, it is stated that the Republic of Serbia is stagnating in terms of implementing activities that would lead to the achievement of SDG 15 in line with the 2030 Agenda. Out of the total of 6 indicators used in this report to monitor Serbia's progress in achieving SDG 15, only one indicator was rated as achieved, one was noted to have

remaining challenges, while for four, it was indicated that there are major challenges in meeting them (Lafortune et al., 2024). Since the ratings for the mentioned indicators were the same in the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2022 (Lafortune et al., 2023), it is clear that no progress was made in achieving SDG 15 in Serbia during the previous year.

Assessment of Progress for Prioritized Target 15.5

The report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report defines one priority target to be achieved by 2030:

Priority target	15.5 – Take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and, by 2020, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species	
Indicator	The protected areas managed according to the Law on Nature Protection occupy at least 20% of the total territory of the Republic of Serbia	All protected areas in Serbia correspond to the classification of protected areas of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), according to the rank

According to the latest data from the Central Register of Protected Natural Assets of the Republic of Serbia, published on 4 March 2024, the current area covered by protected areas is 765,537 hectares, which represents 8.65% of the total area of the Republic of Serbia (Institute for Nature Conservation, 2024b). Given that at the end of 2022, the total area under protection in our country amounted to 691,443 hectares (Bradaš et al., 2023), it is clear that in 2023, the area of protected areas increased by 74,094 hectares, i.e. 0.84% of the territory of Serbia. In addition, it should be noted that from January 2023 to February 2024, the Ministry of Environmental Protection initiated the protection or revision of protection for 11 areas, proposing an increase in the

protected area by 35 thousand hectares (MEP, 2024b). Although these areas are not included in the Central Register of Protected Natural Assets of the Republic of Serbia until the proposals are adopted by the GRS, it should be noted that, according to the Law on Nature Protection, they enjoy the status of preliminary protection from the moment the procedure is initiated. This ensures their formal protection, although it is difficult to enforce in practice because the area lacks a manager until the document regulating the protection is adopted, making it often a target for activities that threaten its natural values.

Although it is commendable that efforts are being made to increase the size of

areas under protection, the current pace is still insufficient to reach the target value by 2030 – 20% of the total territory of the Republic of Serbia to be protected under the Law on Nature Protection. This is also reflected in the failure to implement the measure "Increasing the total area that is protected and the effectiveness of management" set by the Nature Protection Programme of the Republic of Serbia 2021–2023, which aimed for the share of protected areas to reach 9% of the total territory of the Republic of Serbia by 2023 (GRS, 2021).

During the reporting period, there were no legislative activities in the field of nature protection that would enable the creation of conditions or obligations to align the categorization of protected areas in Serbia with the IUCN Protected Area Categories Standard. Therefore, it is clear that no progress has been made in achieving the target set by the indicator from the report Serbia 2030: Development Priorities - the Non-State Sector Report – that

all protected areas in the Republic of Serbia comply with the IUCN Protected Area Classification, according to the category. However, in the working drafts of the Environmental Protection Strategy – Green Agenda for the Republic of Serbia for the period 2024–2033, the measure "Increasing the area that is protected and improving the management" appears, within which it is defined that "it is necessary to amend the legislative framework for managing protected areas and improve standards for the preparation of management documents for protected areas, including the introduction of the protected area categorization and management methods in accordance with the IUCN Protected Area Classification Standard". This suggests that there is an intention by the state to implement this global standard for defining and classifying protected areas (Dudley, 2008) in the field of nature protection, but this measure cannot be considered official until the mentioned Strategy is adopted by the competent authority.

Fulfilment of Recommendations from Previous Monitoring Reports

Recommendation from previous period	Status	Comment
<p>Incorporate the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework for 2030 into the legislative and strategic framework governing the field of nature protection, which will influence the regulation of this area by 2024.</p>	Not adopted	<p>By 2024, the legislative and strategic framework in the field of nature protection has not been improved in a way that incorporates the decisions of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework for 2030. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.</p>
<p>Redefine the management system for protected areas and the protection of species and habitats through the improvement of the Law on Nature Protection and enhance the subordinate legislation regulating the functioning of the ecological network (including regulations that will further regulate the assessment of acceptability, etc.) by 2024.</p>	Not adopted	<p>By 2024, the competent MEP has not taken steps to improve the legislative framework in the field of nature protection in accordance with the recommendation. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.</p>
<p>Improve the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment and the Law on Strategic Environmental Assessment so that the procedures outlined in the law provide information on the actual state of nature at the site in question at the time of the procedure, by 2024.</p>	Not adopted	<p>The proposals for the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment and the Law on Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment, submitted to the NARS in October 2023, do not define the obligation for studies to include information about the state of nature at the specific location at the time of conducting the procedure. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.</p>
<p>Allocate and purposefully use the funds for the implementation of measures to protect endangered species and habitats in accordance with international standards on an annual basis, through the budget of the Republic of Serbia and the budgets of protected area managers.</p>	/	<p>It is not possible to assess implementation of this recommendation due to unavailability of all data required for the assessment. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.</p>

<p>Increase the activities of the MEP and the GRS in investing funds for the continuation of research aimed at establishing the Ecological Network of the Republic of Serbia and the EU NATURA 2000 ecological network in the Republic of Serbia, as well as for the continued development and updating of red data books and lists of endangered species on an annual basis.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>The Budget Law of the Republic of Serbia for 2024 does not specifically allocate funds for the establishment of the Ecological Network of the Republic of Serbia and the EU NATURA 2000 ecological network in Serbia. A new project dedicated to the establishment of the Natura 2000 ecological network is expected, which will be financed from IPA funds (Antić et al., 2023). The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.</p>
<p>By 2024, develop a plan to improve the capacities of services and institutions responsible for nature protection at the local and national levels (environmental protection inspectorates, nature protection institutes, local government services for environmental protection) through the MEP and implement it annually.</p>	<p>Not adopted</p>	<p>It is not known that the competent Ministry carried out activities in accordance with the recommendation during the reporting period. The recommendation has not been adopted since 2023.</p>

Recommendations

1. MEP needs to incorporate the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework for 2030 into the legislative and strategic framework governing the field of nature protection, which will influence the regulation of this area by 2025. Additionally, due to the impact of other sectors such as agriculture, mining, energy, and others on biodiversity conservation, it is necessary for other relevant ministries to align their legislation in these areas with this international agreement.
2. MEP needs to redefine the management system for protected areas and the protection of species and habitats through the improvement of the Law on Nature Protection and enhance the subordinate legislation regulating the functioning of the ecological network (including regulations that will further regulate the assessment of acceptability, etc.) by 2025.
3. MEP and NARS need to improve the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment and the Law on Strategic Environmental Assessment so that the procedures outlined in the law provide information on the actual state of nature at the site in question at the time of the procedure, by 2025.
4. During 2024, increase the activities of the MEP and the GRS in investing funds for the continuation of research aimed at establishing the Ecological Network of the Republic of Serbia and the EU NATURA 2000 ecological network in Serbia, as well as for the continued development and updating of red data books and lists of endangered species on an annual basis.
5. By 2025, MEP needs to develop a plan to improve the capacities of services and institutions responsible for nature protection at the local and national levels (environmental protection inspectorates, nature protection institutes, local government services for environmental protection) and implement it annually.
6. The MEP needs to adopt and implement the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Protected Area Categories Standard in the Republic of Serbia by 2025.
7. The MEP needs to significantly accelerate activities on declaring protected areas in the Republic of Serbia by 2025 and increase the total area under protection to at least 11%.
8. The SORS needs to improve the monitoring of the achievement of SDG 15 in Serbia by tracking and presenting data for at least one indicator for each target of SDG 15 by 2025.

Abbreviations

CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CPI	Corruption Perception Index
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ECOFIN	Economic and Financial Affairs Council of the European Union
EDS	Elektrodistribucija Srbije
EMS	Elektromreža Srbije
ERP	Economic Reforms Programme
ESRP	Employment and Social Reform Programme
EU	European Union
FSA	Financial social assistance
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GHG	Greenhouse gas
GQII	Global Quality Infrastructure Index
GRS	Government of the Republic of Serbia
GVA	Gross Value Added
INECP	Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan for the Period from 2030, with the vision until 2050
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
LL	Labour Law
LPS	Law on the Planning System of the Republic of Serbia
LSGU	Local self-government unit
MAFWM	Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management
MCTI	Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure
MEP	Ministry of Environmental Protection
MESTD	Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development
MF	Ministry of Finance
MFWD	Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography
MH	Ministry of Health
MHMRSD	Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue
MOI	Ministry of the Interior
MJ	Ministry of Justice
MLEVSA	Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs

MME	Ministry of Mining and Energy
MPALG	Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government
NARS	National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
OGP	Open Government Partnership
PCE	Data on availability of pre-school care and education
PPS	Public Policy Secretariat of the Republic of Serbia
RES	Share of renewable energy sources
SCTM	Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SEPA	Serbian Environmental Protection Agency
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SORS	Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia
UN	United Nations
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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