# SUBMISSION TO THE OHCHR ON THE SITUATION IN SERBIA

**RE: Call for inputs on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats**

## Q1. WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES THAT YOUNG PEOPLE IN YOUR COUNTRY FACE IN ACCESSING DIGITAL EDUCATION?

While the new Education Strategy[[1]](#footnote-2) envisages Serbia achieving a well-developed digital education by 2030; much is yet to be done. In its recent report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Government noted that numerous children lacked access to digital devices to follow online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic[[2]](#footnote-3) when formal education via digital platforms was piloted. Although the number of 10-19-year-old children with access to the Internet has increased since 2014 (from 80 to 84%, according to UNICEF), around 25% of those children, mostly from marginalised groups, remained deprived of this prerequisite for digital education.[[3]](#footnote-4) The percentage of children without access to the Internet, either by not having a technical device or network access, was larger outside urban areas. Many of those children lived in households with only one technical device, making it difficult to follow classes when more than one child was in formal education. The most commonly used device with an Internet connection was a mobile phone, which was not suitable for many aspects of online learning.

While UNICEF estimated that almost all children had access to education during the pandemic, children from vulnerable groups experienced obstacles.[[4]](#footnote-5) In the Roma community, for example, 17% of children in elementary school and 9% of children in secondary school did not have access to education during the pandemic.[[5]](#footnote-6) Some of the most common issues behind these statistics are the absence of regular electricity within these communities, or the lack of access to a digital device required to access online classes or teaching materials.[[6]](#footnote-7) The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that, due to these obstacles, at least 5000 internally displaced children, mostly Roma, were unable to access digitally transmitted classes during the early phase of online education in 2020.[[7]](#footnote-8) In parallel, most teachers faced significant issues with remote teaching and learning processes, as well as using digital technologies, due to a lack of training.[[8]](#footnote-9)

Other marginalised groups experienced various issues; however, due to the absence of comprehensive, centralised data collection, it is hard to grasp the actual scope of the situation. Migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking children, in addition to not having adequate devices such as tablets or computers, were unable to follow online classes due to the language barrier and the inability of parents to support their children’s learning efforts.[[9]](#footnote-10) While the lack of equipment was tackled through various projects, limited comparative data is available to assess the scale of children left out[[10]](#footnote-11) and the impacts on learning of those included in civil society-supported projects.

There is a lack of complete and disaggregated data on the number of children with disabilities in Serbia, including the percentage of children with disabilities included in the formal education system. In Serbia, the practice of enrolling children with disabilities in segregated schools persists. Of those enrolled in “special schools”,[[11]](#footnote-12) an estimated 70% were left out of the education transmitted via television channels during the pandemic (28% were included in alternative forms of education,[[12]](#footnote-13) and 7% were left without access to education entirely). At the same time, almost half did not interact with a teacher via digital devices or platforms.[[13]](#footnote-14) The most common obstacle for these children was the lack of support for families with distance learning, experienced by almost one-third of respondents, and the lack of network access or technical devices.

With limited attention to poverty reduction and achieving equitable access to rights for the poorest children, the anticipated effects of inflation are likely to impact them the most.[[14]](#footnote-15) The scale of this issue is especially worrying, bearing in mind that 20.8% of children in Serbia are at risk of poverty while social support measures continue shrinking.[[15]](#footnote-16) It is reasonable to assume that such a situation will negatively impact the existing inadequate access to digital education for the most vulnerable children.

## Q2. WHAT STEPS IS THE GOVERNMENT TAKING TO ENSURE DIGITAL EDUCATION IS ACCESSIBLE AND PROMOTED AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE?

The main pillars of the 2030 Education Strategy are the development of a unified information system, ICT structure improvement, capacity-building of schools, improvement of pupils’ digital competencies through the application of innovative teaching and learning programmes, enhancing digital and pedagogical competencies of teachers, and research and improvement of evaluation and monitoring systems in digital education. Moreover, the 2020-24 Strategy of Digital Skills Development[[16]](#footnote-17) aims to improve all citizens’ digital knowledge, with specific goals that apply to young people, i.e. raising their digital competencies through the formal education system. The 2022-30 Youth Strategy[[17]](#footnote-18) also emphasises building young people’s digital competencies while reiterating the importance of establishing a comprehensive data collection system to monitor and evaluate the impact of digital competency improvement programmes on the most vulnerable individuals. While the ambitions of these strategies appear commendable, no data on the progress of their implementation is available, and the strategy remains largely symbolic.

One of the ways the Ministry of Education tackled the issue of improving access to digital education for the most vulnerable was to purchase technical devices and internet cards (funded by UNICEF and the European Union) that, according to the former education minister, supported 96% of vulnerable students to enrol in classes by May 2020.[[18]](#footnote-19) The Ministry of Education established the National Aggregator of Open Educational Resources to enable unified access to various open educational resources, which was envisaged by the 2030 Education Strategy. This online library contains around 6,600 classes recorded during the pandemic. Additionally, the Ministry established learning support groups in 30 schools attended by the most marginalised children, while teachers and educational staff were able to build their digital competencies through training. More than 60% of schools implemented the “European Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the Innovative Educational Technologies (SELFIE)” tool to support children’s digital learning in pre-university education.[[19]](#footnote-20)

The effects of these measures to enhance access to digital education for marginalised groups, such as children with intellectual disabilities, are yet to be comprehensively assessed. Civil society organisations warned that children needing additional learning support could not access adequate extracurricular activities.[[20]](#footnote-21) It is, therefore, necessary to continue implementing measures to ensure all children living on Serbia’s territory have access to digital education. Moreover, recent research revealed that most teachers, pupils and parents alike perceive online education as a temporary crisis mitigation measure until regular, in-person education is restored, which indicates the necessity of developing positive attitudes and beliefs towards the long-term application of digital technology in teaching.[[21]](#footnote-22)

## Q3. WHAT STEPS IS THE GOVERNMENT TAKING TO ENSURE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE CAN REALISE THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS ONLINE IN A SAFE, EMPOWERING, AND INCLUSIVE WAY?

The Rulebook on Child Protection and Safety when Using Information and Communication Technologies,[[22]](#footnote-23) adopted by the Government in 2020, defines the protection of children on the Internet as an activity of public interest. Intended for use by the public, it includes preventative measures such as educating children, parents/guardians, and teachers on the advantages, risks, and methods to improve safety on the Internet, thereby enhancing their digital competencies. The National Contact Centre for the Safety of Children on the Internet[[23]](#footnote-24) is set up to provide advice and receive reports on children’s online safety and protection. The Centre’s website offers information on safe internet use, quizzes, brochures for children, parents, and teachers, and other valuable materials.

The “Foundations of Child Safety” started being taught as a subject in 2017/18 to fourth- and sixth-grade children once a week, including topics on safely using the Internet and social networks and protecting oneself from technical and technological hazards. The “Informatics and Computing” subject, which specifically tackles digital violence, became mandatory in the seventh grade of the elementary education curriculum as of 2019. The “Digital World” subject was included in the national curriculum and has been taught since 2020 to provide elementary school children with introductory knowledge on digital technologies, associated safety threats, and how to protect oneself online. Finally, the government continued implementing actions to raise awareness of Internet safety in schools through the National Contact Centre.

In order to ensure that young people are aware of their human rights and can realise them online in a safe, empowering, and inclusive way, it is of utmost importance to consult and include children and young people in all stages of the legislation and policy drafting, development, and implementation process, in line with Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. At the time of writing, there is no evidence of meaningful child participation in amending and creating legislation and policy on their safety online.

## Q4. WHAT ARE THE MAIN GAPS AND CHALLENGES TO YOUNG PEOPLE’S PROTECTION FROM ONLINE THREATS IN LAW, POLICY, AND PRACTICE IN YOUR COUNTRY AND THE IMPACTS ON YOUNG PEOPLE’S HUMAN RIGHTS?

Recent research has revealed that 96% of young people were exposed to harmful digital material that triggered negative emotions in 2023, with one-third reporting being exposed to such material daily.[[24]](#footnote-25) Around half of those who participated in the research were unaware of how to report harmful media materials despite several awareness-raising campaigns implemented by government and civil society actors. One in six pupils participating in extensive research conducted in 2018 said that they had experienced cyberbullying, almost the same ratio as those who experienced bullying in person[[25]](#footnote-26).

While amendments have been discussed, the Family Act[[26]](#footnote-27), a key child protection document, does not recognise digital violence as a form of violence yet. Local protocols and agreements aimed at improving cooperation regarding child protection from violence, abuse and neglect at a local level do not place focus on violence in the digital context, and there is no special emphasis on especially vulnerable groups of children.[[27]](#footnote-28) As an immediate next step, it is vital for the legal framework in Serbia to recognise online violence as a punishable offence and include protection measures and avenues for redress to its victims. Moreover, there is a general lack of effective cooperation, coordination and data exchange between child protection services, law enforcement and the judicial system,[[28]](#footnote-29) which should also be urgently addressed. It is necessary to continue raising awareness of digital violence, including peer violence in the digital environment, among children, caregivers, and teachers, while highlighting the available protection pathways in cases when such violence occurs.

## Q5. WHAT STEPS IS THE GOVERNMENT TAKING TO ENSURE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE PROTECTED FROM ONLINE THREATS?

The National Contact Centre for the Safety of Children on the Internet was envisioned as a single space for both providing preventive advice regarding child safety on the Internet and forwarding reports on harmful, inappropriate, illegal online content and behaviour to relevant stakeholders, including the Ministry of Interior, Prosecutor’s Office for High-Tech Crime, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs.

There are three ways through which children and adults can report harmful materials: by calling a dedicated hotline, filling out the form available on the Nacional Centre’s webpage,[[29]](#footnote-30) or sending an email to the Ministry of Information and Telecommunication responsible for running the platform. The online application for reporting is user-friendly and easy to follow.[[30]](#footnote-31) The main categories for reporting include cyberbullying, sexting, trafficking, identity theft, fraud and unlawful activities, and other forms of child exploitation and endangering. The description of an incident can include inappropriate online communication, falsehoods spreading and hate speech, security breaches, blackmail and threats, unlawful activities (theft, terrorism, fraud), or other inappropriate communication or activity.

Furthermore, the government has created an online platform, I Keep You Safe (*Čuvam te*),[[31]](#footnote-32) for easier reporting of (primarily peer) violence forwarded to an appropriate institution, be it the social service, court or other, for further actions. In addition to plenty of useful materials on digital safety, the platform enables a child to request emergency assistance from trusted contacts at an exact location with one click.

The Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications supported Serbia’s Association of the Blind in creating a Handbook on the Safety of Blind Children[[32]](#footnote-33) on the Internet in 2021, and such practices should be expanded to include other vulnerable groups of children.

1. [Strategija razvoja obrazovanja i vaspitanja u Republici Srbiji do 2030. godine, *Official Gazette of RS*, no. 63/2021-4](https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2021/63/1/reg). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. [Fourth and Fifth Periodic Report on the Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FSRB%2F4-5&Lang=en), para. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. UNICEF, [Inequality in the Lives of Adolescents in Serbia](https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/24821/file/Inequality%20in%20the%20Lives%20of%20Adolescents%20in%20Serbia.pdf), p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Child Rights Coalition, [Rights of the Child in Serbia 2017-2023](https://ucpd.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/izvestaj-prava-deteta-2017-2023-compressed.pdf), p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. International Organization for Migration, [Socio-Economic Impact Assessment: Impact of Covid-19 on Migrations and Mobility in Serbia](https://serbia.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1126/files/documents/SEIA%2520Report%2520Eng.pdf), p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Institute for the Advancement of Education and Upbringing, [Research Overview and Analysis: Implementation of Educational Process by Distance Learning](https://zuov.gov.rs/preuzimanje/508/zuov/552739/prikaz-i-analiza-podataka-ucenje-na-daljinu.pdf), p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. The Ministry [stated](https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/22256/file/The%20National%20Report%20on%20I%D0%95%202019%E2%80%932021%20-%20Executive%20Summary%20%28ENG%29.pdf) that 85% of refugee, migrant and asylum-seeking children were enrolled in the official education system in 2020/21, while 70% participated in distance learning. See also: Save the Children and Youth Integration Centre, [Universal Periodic Review of the Republic of Serbia (4th cycle), 43 session of the UPR Working Group (1-12 May 2023), Stakeholder Report on Human Rights Situation for Refugee and Migrant Children in Serbia](https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/country-document/2023-04/JS3_UPR43_SRB_E_Main.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Children with intellectual disabilities fall under the ‘profound’ disability category and are being educated in “special schools”. According to [UNICEF](https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/education), 4,204 primary and 2,320 secondary school children were enrolled in special schools and classes. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. For instance, correspondence between teachers and pupils via printed materials rather than interactive communication. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. UNICEF, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia & Institute for Psychology, Monitoring of Participation Methods and Learning Processes of Students from Sensitive Groups During Education Through Distance Learning, 2020, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. UNICEF, [Country Office Annual Report 2022: Serbia](https://www.unicef.org/reports/country-regional-divisional-annual-reports-2022/Serbia). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. [Strategija razvoja digitalnih veština u Republici Srbiji za period od 2020. do 2024. godine, Official Gazette of RS, nos. 21/2020-72, 8/2023-12](https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2020/21/2/reg/). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. [Strategija za mlade u Republici Srbiji za period od 2023. do 2030. godine, *Official Gazette of RS*, no. 9/2023-43](https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2023/9/1/reg). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. UNICEF Serbia, [Bridging the Digital Divide in Serbia for the Most Vulnerable Children](https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/press-releases/bridging-digital-divide-serbia-most-vulnerable-children), press release, 3 December 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. More about this tool is available [here](https://education.ec.europa.eu/selfie/about-selfie). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Child Rights Coalition, [Rights of the Child in Serbia 2017-2023](https://ucpd.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/izvestaj-prava-deteta-2017-2023-compressed.pdf), p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Ibid., p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. [Uredba o bezbednosti i zaštiti dece pri korišćenju informaciono-komunikacionih tehnologija, *Official Gazette of RS*, no. 13/2020](https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/uredba/2020/13/4/reg). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. The National Contact Centre’s website is available in Serbian [here](https://pametnoibezbedno.gov.rs). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Child Rights Coalition, [Rights of the Child in Serbia 2017-2023](https://ucpd.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/izvestaj-prava-deteta-2017-2023-compressed.pdf), p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Dobrinka Kuzmanović et al., [Internet and Digital Technology Use among Children and Youth in Serbia, EU Kids Online Survey Results, 2018](https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/12526/file/Internet_and_Digital_Technology_Use_among_Children_and_Youth.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. [Porodični zakon, *Official Gazette of RS*, nos. 18/2005-26, 72/2011-73 (other Act), 6/2015-6](https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/zakon/2005/18/7/reg). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Network of Organisations for Children of Serbia, [Intersectoral Cooperation on the Protection of Children from Abuse and Neglect in Local Municipalities: Analysis of Local Agreements](https://mapa.zadecu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Analiza-lokalnih-sporazuma-za-zastitu-dece-od-nasilja-1.pdf); See also: Child Rights Coalition, [Rights of the Child in Serbia 2017-2023](https://ucpd.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/izvestaj-prava-deteta-2017-2023-compressed.pdf), p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Child Rights Coalition, [Rights of the Child in Serbia 2017-2023](https://ucpd.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/izvestaj-prava-deteta-2017-2023-compressed.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. The reporting page is available [here](https://pametnoibezbedno.gov.rs/prijavi-problem/245). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. The National Contact Centre for Child Safety on the Internet [registered](https://pametnoibezbedno.gov.rs/extfile/sr/1815/Izvestaj-2023..pptx) 1,139 cases in 2023, 82 or roughly 7% of which were referred to a further jurisdiction. Ninety-one per cent of all referred cases were forwarded to the Ministry of Interior for further proceedings. Most of these cases fell under the categories of grooming, harassment and child pornography. Other registered cases were handled in-house as they considered education and counselling. There was no publicly available information on the outcome of these proceedings. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. The platform *I Keep You Safe* is available [here](https://cuvamte.gov.rs). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. The Handbook is available in Serbian [here](https://mtt.varius.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Prirucnik_bezbednost_slepe_dece_na_internetu.doc). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)