



REPUBLIC OF CROATIA  
OMBUDSMAN

P.P.R.-17-6-6/24-13-2  
Zagreb, 31 January 2024

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights  
Ms. Helen Griffiths  
e-mail: [ochcr-registry@un.org](mailto:ochcr-registry@un.org).  
cc: [helen.griffiths@un.org](mailto:helen.griffiths@un.org)

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

Dear Ms. Griffiths,

In line with the call by OHCHR's National Institutions and Regional Mechanisms Section to contribute to the Study on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats, our response is as follows.

**1) What are the main challenges that young people in your country face in accessing digital education? Please consider the specific situation of marginalized young people and those in vulnerable situations in your response.**

In the context of education it is important to highlight that in Croatia the Ombudswoman is an A-status NHRI, who also has a mandate of the traditional Ombuds institution, national equality body, NPM mandate and whistle-blowers' protection. Additionally, there are 3 specialized ombudsman institutions – Ombudswoman for Gender Equality, Ombuds for Person with Disability and Ombudswoman for Children. , The ombudsman for children, protects, monitors, and promotes the rights and interests of children within the preschool, elementary, and secondary education systems up to the age of 18. However when it comes to multiple grounds, such as the case of Roma children in education, the Ombudswoman will act upon such cases.

In the Annual Reports to the Croatian Parliament, the Ombudswoman highlighted challenges relating to the implementation of online teaching which was introduced for the first time into the Croatian education system during the pandemic of COVID-19. The shift to online teaching



---

Savska cesta 41/3, 10 000 Zagreb tel +385 (0)1 4851 853, 4851 855 fax +385 (0)1 6431 628  
e-mail [info@ombudsman.hr](mailto:info@ombudsman.hr) [www.ombudsman.hr](http://www.ombudsman.hr) twitter @OmbudsmanHR

particularly affected students with lower socio-economic status who could not invest in quality computer equipment. The abrupt transition to digital education, requiring numerous improvisations, also raised questions about its quality.

The transition to online learning has posed challenges for children, parents, and educational professionals. Children had to cope with numerous challenges, such as isolation from peers, a lack of support and assistance with home learning, a shortage of adequate technology, inconsistent methods and approaches in online teaching, and a lack of free time. Educational professionals had to adapt to new technologies and methods to encourage student participation in the virtual environment. Parents faced the challenge of balancing work commitments while ensuring care for their children and assisting with distance learning.

Due to the closure of schools, Roma families and children had been deprived of various forms of support, further diminishing the chances of success for their children in education. Children, often facing difficulties in integrating into the education system, were left without psychological or learning support, and families at risk of poverty have been left without meal for their children which was served to children in schools free of charge. Some families did not have even the minimum conditions to follow this form of education because their housing conditions were not adequate, lacking access to electricity, internet access, or equipment (TV, tablet, or computer). The Ministry of Education distributed equipment to children in elementary education, but some children still could not participate because they had no place to charge the tablet, or the internet signal was too weak or unavailable. Often, multiple children within a family shared the same device, and some parents did not even take the tablets, fearing potential costs in case of damage. Many Roma children lacked learning support and the ability to master the material due to the low level of education of their parents, and with the closure of schools, most of them lost their only learning space. Although many Roma children need preparatory classes in the Croatian language before starting school, such televised instruction was not available. Because of all these factors, the effects of COVID-19 pandemic and online learning on Roma children will become even more visible in the future.

The closure of educational institutions and the transition to online learning has deprived young people of a part of their social life, and for those who lacked adequate infrastructure and technical conditions, it was challenging to attend classes and fulfill school and university obligations. In these circumstances, many young people have faced reduced access to education, especially those with lower socio-economic status and those in rural areas without a stable internet connection, prompting questions about the quality of distance education.

Economically disadvantaged students who lacked computer equipment and those from remote, rural areas without infrastructure for quality and stable Internet access were in a more difficult

position. According to statements from higher education institutions, additional difficulties were caused by insufficient computer's skills both among students and teachers who didn't have adequate competencies for conducting classes by using the platforms.

Online teaching and distance exams directly impacted the amount of acquired knowledge and the occurrence of unethical behavior during knowledge assessments were recorded. According to the data from the Institute for Social Research, one-third of elementary school students and nearly half of high school students reported that the pandemic had a negative impact on their lives. Students also expressed concerns about the pandemic's negative influence on their understanding of the study material.

**2) What steps is the Government taking to ensure that digital education is accessible and promoted among young people? Please provide examples of specific laws and regulations, measures, policies, and programs directed at ensuring young people's universal access to digital education.**

**3) What steps is the Government taking to ensure that young people can realize their human rights online in a safe, empowering, and inclusive way?**

Due to the growing influence of media on children, media literacy plays a very important role, which includes the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media messages in different forms. In doing so, it is important to encourage the critical skills of children and young people, that is, the ability to analyze and evaluate information necessary for interpreting and understanding media content. In this sense, the portal [medijskapismenost.hr](http://medijskapismenost.hr) was launched.

The initiators and founders of the portal are the Agency for Electronic Media and UNICEF, and the portal is managed by the Agency for Electronic Media, and the project has been supported from the very beginning by numerous other stakeholders such as the Academy of Dramatic Arts, the Faculty of Political Science and others.

The portal also includes the subpage "Stereotypes in the media" which deals with various underrepresented groups and topics in society, such as gender equality, people with disabilities, recognition of sexism and hate speech, racial stereotypes, mental health of children, etc.

**4) 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? Please consider the specific situation of marginalized young people and those in vulnerable situations in your response.**

In 2019, the ombudswoman institution published the conclusions of the conducted research on hate speech among young people on the Internet.

The research led to the conclusion that young people are continuously exposed to such speech through all media and social networks and platforms.

64% of young people believe that intolerance is present on instant messaging services (Whatsapp, Viber, Facebook messenger, Snapchat) which are mostly used among acquaintances and friends, which leads to the assumption that speech of intolerance and insults is part of communication among young people. Therefore, this type of speech has become normalized among young people.

The majority of young people did not report a hateful comment they received (68%), mainly because they felt that they were not really threatened ("the incident was not serious enough") and because they think that such incidents are common ("it happens all the time anyway, there's no point in reporting "). Therefore, the problem is insufficient reporting, and therefore the absence of sanctioning of speech that is illegal.

Over 90% of young people believe that hateful comments on the Internet can harm the person to whom they are directed, with the largest number stating that they can cause emotional and psychological problems (35%), loss of self-confidence and self-esteem (31%) and arouse a feeling of inferiority (19 %) and depression (12%) and even suicide (10%).

Although not all online speech may be illegal, this does not mean that it will not have negative effects on young people. This is precisely why continuous education about human rights should be carried out from an early age, starting with preschool education. This education should include hate speech and its harmfulness, and in order to prevent the further normalization of inappropriate speech among young people, which in some cases enters the sphere of misdemeanor, and in others criminal responsibility.

**5) What steps is the Government taking to ensure that young people are protected from online threats? Please provide examples of specific laws and regulations, measures, policies, and programs.**

The Ministry of the Interior has developed several applications and modalities for reporting violence against young people and/or hate speech.

Online abuse and/or sexual abuse can be reported via the online report of child abuse - RED BUTTON (<https://mup.gov.hr/online-prijave/online-prijava-zlostavljanje-djeteta-red->

[button/281667](#). Via the above link, one can report sexual abuse and exploitation of a child via the Internet, sexual abuse and exploitation of children in direct contact with the perpetrator, as well as any other punishable behavior committed to the detriment of the child (family violence, peer violence, physical abuse, neglect, violation of the child's privacy through the Internet.

The police also have developed mobile applications for reporting suspicious events, so the application can also be used to report events in the online world (<https://policija.gov.hr/aplikacije-za-e-dojave-sumnjivih-dogadjaja/172>).

Additionally, the National Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights and Suppression of Discrimination for the Period Until 2027 recognizes that in the context of hate crimes and hate speech, special attention needs to be paid to young people.

Special objective no. 3 of the National Plan aims to analyze the functioning of councils and representatives of national minorities and elected deputy municipal heads, mayors and prefects from among members of national minorities, as well as encourage members of national minorities to exercise their rights, especially young people and women.

**6) Can you provide information on any programs or activities your organization has implemented regarding solutions to protect digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats?**

In 2019, the ombudswoman institution conducted a survey on hate speech among young people on the Internet. The goal of the research was to gain insight into the activities and practices of young people, their perception of hate speech, whether they have witnessed such occurrences and in what way (personally or towards another person), whether they know whom to turn to and whether they notice to whom such speech is most often expressed.

Research showed that 96% of young people had seen discriminatory comments in the last three months, half had someone send a hateful comment, and 25% were exposed that type of speech through applications (WhatsApp, Viber, etc.). Moreover, the research showed that the participants considered the majority of hateful comments to be directed on the basis of national or ethnic affiliation (79%), sexual orientation (around 50%) and other discrimination grounds such as religion, gender or gender.

In the conducted research, approximately 40% of all young people knew who to turn to in the event that someone sends them hateful comments or expresses intolerance on the Internet, most of whom mention the police and the Ministry of Interior (67%), as well as administrators and site owners and the service for users (25%).

We hope that the data contained in this contribution proves informative and useful.

Respectfully,



MBUDSWOMAN  
mr.sc. Tena Simonović Einwalter, MJur