PERMANENT MISSION
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA
TO THE UNITED NATIONS
AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL
ORGANIZATIONS

MISSION PERMANENTE
DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE DE SERBIE
AUPRÈS DES NATIONS UNIES
ET DES AUTRES ORGANISATIONS
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The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Serbia to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations at Geneva presents its compliments to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and has the honor to enclose the response from the Government of the Republic of Serbia – the Ministry of Education, to the call for input from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights from 18 March 2025, for the preparation of the first session of the Open-ended intergovernmental working group on an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the rights to early childhood education, free pre-primary education and free secondary education and in order for the Working Group to prepare and submit a report on progress made to the Human Rights Council for its consideration no later than at its 62nd session.

The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Serbia to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations in Geneva avails itself of this opportunity to renew to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights the assurances of its highest consideration.

Geneva, 14 May 2025

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MINISTRY OF EDUCATON

REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

SUBJECT: Open-ended intergovernmental working group on an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child- Human Rights Council Resolution 56/5

1. **What are the main barriers to public pre-primary education available free to all in law, policy, and practice in your country and what is their impact on the rights of the child? Please consider the specific situation of marginalized children and those in vulnerable situations in your response.**

Some of the main challenges include:

1) **A lack of spatial capacities and an uneven distribution of preschool institutions.** Differences in enrolment and attendance of preschool education programmes among municipalities reflect the level of their socio-economic development, so wealthier municipalities tend to have higher enrolment rates than less affluent ones. Assuming that municipalities with lower socio-economic development have more children living in poverty, it can be concluded that children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds participate less in preschool education. There is a significant disparity in preschool education capacities between municipalities of different levels of socio-economic development: wealthier municipalities have more preschool facilities, and the average number of children per institution/class is higher (which also leads to non-compliance with group size regulations). Additionally, the proportion of children attending preschool institutions is much lower in rural areas than in urban ones.

Preschool institutions lack sufficient capacity to accommodate all children—in larger cities, "waiting lists" still exist. Despite local governments co-financing attendance in private preschools and a significant increase in available spaces through the project "Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care," existing capacities in urban areas remain insufficient. The situation is different in rural areas, where the problem lies in an underdeveloped network of preschools, placing children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and substandard settlements in a more disadvantaged position. This situation is being addressed by organizing diversified programmes in spaces outside preschool institutions, in line with available local resources—a good example of this is the project "Kindergartens Without Borders."

2) **Parental attitudes and/or access issues.** The main reasons why some children are not enrolled in preschool education programmes are related to parents' belief that they have someone at home who can take care of the child and/or due to access-related problems (the service is too expensive, too far away, or the institution has enrolled too many children). Possible groups of reasons for not enrolling children in preschool education programmes, as stated by parents, include:

(a) lack of prerequisites for enrolment: insufficient capacity of the preschool institution; no appropriate age group available in the area of residence (e.g. in rural areas, there are no groups for children aged 3 to 5.5 years, only the preparatory preschool programme); transportation issues; the offered facility is too far from the place of residence; financial reasons.

(b) mismatch between, on the one hand, enrolment criteria and employment in preschool institutions, and, on the other hand, the needs of parents (complicated bureaucracy and inconsistent and non-transparent enrolment criteria; inability to reconcile parental obligations—working hours/responsibilities—with the end of the preschool programme's schedule, especially in the case of shorter programmes—no one available to take the child to kindergarten; parental unemployment).
(c) parental attitudes toward preschool education and care: the child feels better at home/does not want to attend kindergarten; the child's health condition (it is not advisable for the child to spend time in a large group, in a dusty environment, etc.); difficulties related to children with developmental disabilities and disabilities; parental dissatisfaction with the level of information and the quality of preschool education and care.

3) **Insufficient understanding of the importance of early inclusion** in preschool education and care (PEC)—coupled with the traditional belief that kindergarten is primarily for children of employed parents—results in significantly lower inclusion rates for children from disadvantaged families. Local self-government units play a crucial role in the funding and organization of preschool education and care. Consequently, the largest share of local budgets is often allocated to preschool education and care, but there are significant differences between municipalities in terms of how much attention is paid to expanding coverage and how much is invested in the development of the preschool education and care.
This situation also negatively affects the **implementation of priority enrolment**, which is regulated by law. Children entitled to priority enrolment (e.g. due to health conditions or extended maternity leave) are often enrolled in kindergartens at a later age and then face the issue of full capacity in older groups, which are already occupied by children who enrolled in preschool education and care earlier, starting from nursery level.

2. **What are the main barriers to public secondary education available free to all in law, policy, and practice in your country and what is their impact on the rights of the child? Please consider the specific situation of marginalized children and those in vulnerable situations in your response.**

Although the Republic of Serbia has a well-developed network of secondary schools with sufficient capacity to enrol all primary school graduates, **secondary education is not compulsory**. Even though secondary education is free and legally accessible to all, there are numerous obstacles that can affect its availability and quality.

Some of the main challenges include:

1) Financial difficulties. Although education is formally free, families often face costs for textbooks, transportation, school supplies, and excursions, which can be a burden for socially vulnerable groups. **Poverty is a dominant barrier** for students to get secondary education and the main factor contributing to dropout from the education system. **Belonging to marginalized social groups**—such as the Roma national minority, migrants, children with developmental disabilities and disabilities, and other vulnerable groups—also has a negative impact. Cultural differences, a lack of recognition of education as a value, traditions and customs of certain communities, and limited proficiency in the language of instruction all contribute to early dropout.

2) Regional disparities. In rural areas, access to quality education may be limited due to a smaller number of schools, poor infrastructure, and a lack of teaching staff.
3) Lack of teaching staff. Some schools face a shortage of qualified teachers, which can affect the quality of teaching and educational outcomes. Inadequate **competencies of part of the teaching staff** to work in an inclusive educational environment result in lower performance among students from vulnerable social groups, negatively impacting their continuation of schooling. The presence of **stereotypes** toward members of vulnerable social groups is also a factor that adversely affects the realization of the right to education, as it leads to **low teacher expectations**, which ultimately results in lower performance and reduced motivation to continue education.
4) Inclusion and access to education for children with developmental disabilities. Although there are legal provisions that guarantee inclusive education, in practice there are challenges in providing adequate support and resources for students with special needs.
5) Early school leaving. Some students leave schooling before completing secondary education due to economic or social reasons, which can affect their future employment opportunities and development.

3. **What are examples of innovative and sustainable financial mechanisms to support the full and effective implementation of public pre-primary and secondary education available free to all children in your country?**

- Considering that the founder of a public preschool institution is the local self-government unit, some local self-government units have adopted decisions establishing more favourable conditions for users, such as reducing their share in the monthly economic cost per child, as well as granting full exemption from kindergarten fees. A local self-government unit may also decide to grant **the right to partial reimbursement of childcare costs** (so-called subsidies) in a preschool institution founded by another legal or natural person, in accordance with regulations governing financial support for families with children. The purpose of this measure, which falls under the jurisdiction of the local self-government unit, is to contribute to broader inclusion of children in preschool education and care by facilitating their enrolment in programmes offered by accredited private preschool institutions.
- **Education Development Strategy until 2030** – This strategy outlines mechanisms for financing education, including the assessment of required funds and analysis of financial effects. It lays the foundation for the long-term sustainability of the education system in Serbia.
- **The Action Plan for the Implementation of the Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia until 2030** (EDSRS 2030) includes the measure: Improved accessibility, equity, and openness of pre-university education, through indicators related to secondary education: A developed system for collecting data and monitoring the implementation of inclusive education; The number of schools implementing a system for identifying students at risk of dropping out and providing support to them; The number of education staff who have improved their competencies for working in an inclusive environment; The percentage of students with developmental disabilities and disabilities included in mainstream secondary education.
- **REDIS 2 Programme** – Complementary Measures – Component 2. Between 2025 and 2027, the Ministry of Education will, through this programme, work on the systemic improvement of access to the education system for all children, with a focus on children from vulnerable social

groups. The subcomponent concerning the enhancement of education for vulnerable groups also includes an activity aimed at mapping instances of segregation within the education system and conducting an analysis with recommendations for desegregation measures, accompanied by a roadmap toward sustainable transition.

- Establishment of **four regional training centres** providing training, retraining, and upskilling for youth and adults. Construction has begun on training centres in Užice, Vranje, Požega, Subotica, and Vršac. The ongoing construction of training centres in Vlasotince and Pančevo is expected to be completed in 2025. In the upcoming period, training centers are also planned for Svilajnac, Kragujevac, Čačak, Niš, Vrnjačka Banja, and Kula.

- **Regulation on Financial Support for Dual Education** has been adopted, providing assistance to schools and businesses to support the training of students for occupations in high demand.

- A **programme to improve capital investments** in the infrastructure and network of pre-university education is also being implemented, achieving a cumulative realization rate of 79% in 2025, compared to the initially planned 50%.

These mechanisms contribute to improving the quality and accessibility of education, and their implementation ensures the long-term sustainability of the system.

Additionally, a **Feasibility Study on the Financing of Inclusive Education** has been developed. The purpose of this document is to support the Ministry of Education in further aligning the strategic, legal, and institutional framework of the inclusive education system in Serbia through enhanced financing.

4. **What steps is the Government taking to remove barriers and make public pre-primary and secondary education available free to all, including through allocation of adequate resources and cross-sectoral and international cooperation? Please provide examples of specific laws, regulations, measures, policies, and programmes.**

- **Act on the Network of Kindergartens** is adopted by the assembly of the local self-government unit, based on the Government Regulation on the criteria for adopting the act on the network of public preschool institutions and the act on the network of public primary schools ("Official Gazette of the RS", No. 21/2018). It is the responsibility of the local self-government unit to assess the needs of children and families within its local community, to map children who are not covered by the system, to monitor demographic trends and internal population migrations, and accordingly to plan sustainable solutions regarding the establishment of the preschool institution network within its territory. Through a proactive approach—applying for various projects and donations, connecting with different stakeholders at both the national and local levels, and recognizing the importance of preschool education—the local self-government unit can significantly contribute to improving the coverage, equity, and quality of preschool education.
- Through the project "**Inclusive Preschool Education**" (funded by a loan from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and implemented from 2017 to June 2025), various instruments have been applied to improve the accessibility of different preschool education programmes and formats. These include: the construction of new facilities, the repurposing and adaptation of available spaces within the local community, and the implementation of a grant

programme to support projects of preschool institutions and local self-government units aimed at diversifying the programme offers provided by preschool institutions.

The Government of Serbia is undertaking various measures to remove barriers and make public secondary education accessible to all. Here are some concrete examples:

- **Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System.**
- **Inclusive education** – The Government of Serbia has adopted measures to improve access to education for children from socially vulnerable groups, including the Roma population, children with developmental disabilities, and children from rural areas.
- **International cooperation** – Serbia actively participates in the work of the VET working group at the European Commission, with a key focus during the three-year cycle on transforming European vocational education toward a green economy.
- **IPA 14** "Integrated NQF System" (National Qualifications Framework)
- National Reference Point – EQAVET – Membership in the European Network for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training.
- **ET2020; Tempus; GIZ; WG School Policy, WG VET, WG Adult Learning** under the **Open Method of Coordination of the European Directorate for Education, Youth and Culture.**
- A government-level working group in the Republic of Serbia has developed **Professional Guidelines** for the Identification, Monitoring, and Support of Gifted Students, which have been in use since the 2023/24 school year.
- The **Action Plan for the Implementation of the Education Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia by 2030** foresees the measure: An improved quality assurance system in pre-university education, through the following indicators related to secondary education: Continuous participation of Serbia in international student achievement assessments (PISA, PIRLS, TIMSS); Established monitoring and evaluation system for the National Model of Dual Education; Foundations laid for a new national testing system; Improved quality assurance framework in non-formal education; Implementation of a methodology for monitoring the effects of applying new qualifications on employment and lifelong learning, based on data from sector profiles (data on student movement in the labour market and continuation of education).
- With the adoption of the **Law on the National Qualifications Framework** in 2018, the Republic of Serbia established a legal framework that introduces the principles of social partnership into the field of qualifications. Twelve sector councils have been established, leading to significant changes in curricula and programmes implemented in schools. The programmes are innovatively integrated with related disciplines, based on qualification standards, modernized, and aligned with contemporary market trends.
- **Government's "Digital Textbook / Digital Classroom for Secondary Schools"** project has been implemented.
- The Law on Secondary Education ("Official Gazette of RS", Nos. 55/2013, 101/2017, 27/2018 – other law, 6/2020, 52/2021, 129/2021, 129/2021 – other law, 92/2023 and 19/2025), in Article 36a, stipulates that certain individuals or groups may be enrolled in secondary school **under more favourable conditions** in order to achieve full equality in access to education.
- **The affirmative approach**, which supports children and students from vulnerable social groups in achieving full equality in education, includes a range of support measures that are continuously implemented: institutions establish a support team for the child or student and/or a team for inclusive education; the student has the right to an individual education plan; affirmative enrolment measures are applied at all levels of pre-university education and at higher education

institutions; and textbooks are adapted for students with developmental disabilities and disabilities (for primary school).

Pedagogical assistants who support children and students of Roma nationality (Rulebook on Pedagogical and Andragogical Assistants, "Official Gazette of RS" No. 87/2019). One of the support measures for students from vulnerable social groups also includes **external advisors–associates who contribute to improving the accessibility and quality of education.**

Intersectoral and interdepartmental cooperation. The assessment of the need for additional support is carried out by the municipal (interdepartmental) commission of the municipality or city in which the child, student, or adult resides. This commission evaluates the need for additional educational, health, and social support.