

*Country*  
**FACT SHEET**  
**2020\***



# SERBIA

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\* The information provided in the country fact sheets reflects the situation by end of August 2020.

**first years**  
*first priority*

**A FAIR START  
FOR *every* CHILD  
IN EUROPE**

## NATIONAL CONTEXT

*Serbia has made adequate efforts over the past year to deliver on early childhood development policies and to support families with young children.* ●●●○\*

*Serbia has a national law or act guaranteeing access to basic ECD services in Education, Health, Nutrition, and/or Social and Child Protection for all children under 6.* NO

The Government of Serbia has issued a national “Call for Action for Support to Early Childhood Development”<sup>12</sup>, supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Social Affairs, as well as by the National Council for Child Rights. It aims to initiate a coordinated and comprehensive early childhood development (ECD) action involving families, institutions, development partners and civil society organisations, and invest in children from the prenatal period to children’s entry into school. It remains to be seen how this document will be implemented.

For the moment, universal ECD policies are still not very well developed. An Inter-sectoral Commission exists at local level (both for young children at pre-school/kindergarten and school age children), but its main task is the development of individual educational plans, including consulting various actors to determine the best options for a child. In terms of healthcare services, emergency medical care and vaccinations are the only services guaranteed for all, not requiring personal documents. In education, only the one mandatory year (age five years six months to six years six months) prior to enrolment in elementary school is accessible to all children regardless of possession of personal documents. Children below three years of age are protected from institutionalisation by law, but there is no such guarantee for children above three years old.

According to the respondent organisation, the **two biggest challenges** in Serbia from the perspective of early childhood development are:

- 1. The development of legal and strategic documents on Early Child Development;**
- 2. Adopting a multi-sectoral approach to ECD, including planning, budgeting, and monitoring and evaluation (of the actions undertaken).**

\* This country sheet is based on a contribution from national coordinators, including the ratings - between ○○○○○ (worst) and ●●●●● (best)

1 In English: <http://www.savetzapravadeteta.gov.rs/doc/eng.dokumenta/Call-for-Action-ECD-Serbia-engl.non-edited.docx>

2 In Serbian: <http://www.savetzapravadeteta.gov.rs/doc/dokumenta/Poziv-na-akciju.pdf>

# IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE DURING THE FIRST WAVE

The COVID-19 crisis had a serious impact on many levels, as Serbia experienced one of the toughest lockdowns in Europe that lasted for nearly three months.

- 1. Almost no service providers pursued activities**, alongside other structures. All the regular medical check-ups and parenting support services were reduced to the emergency ones, so neither young children nor their families could get any psycho-social support.
- 2. Children could not attend nurseries or kindergartens**, which meant families close to or under the poverty line were **deprived of the one secured meal a day** for their children. Even after the lockdown was loosened, parents were discouraged from bringing their children in.
- 3.** Lack of work for those who lost their jobs or could not work because of the lockdown caused many families **serious financial problems, including lacking money to buy food**.
- 4.** In the atmosphere of lockdown, young **children were also spending their time indoors**, not getting any fresh air and necessary exercise or building their immunity.
- 5. The mental health of parents** – either working from home with the additional burden of combining work and home life simultaneously, or losing their jobs/any income – impacted on the child-adult relationship and the **mental health of the children**.
- 6.** Reports recorded **growing rates of domestic violence**, which also means that young children have been exposed directly or indirectly to the abusive behaviour in their environment.

## **The government introduced no specific measures to support families with young children.**

For the general population, a one-off €100 support payment was distributed to all citizens 18 years of age and above. For the organisations (legal bodies), a three-month support payment in the amount of a minimum wage per employee was distributed (provided the company/organisation did not dismiss more than 10% of its staff following the outbreak of the pandemic), and in addition another three months amounting to 60% of the minimum guaranteed wage will be distributed. Companies can delay paying the social benefits and taxes on salaries till the end of the year in order to keep their employees, and the banks are introducing a moratorium on personal loans till the end of the year.

# ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL DIALOGUE

The 2020 Joint Conclusions of the Economic Policy Dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans and Turkey, part of the association and accession process, makes several recommendations to Serbia in terms of its economic and social policy. Serbia is invited to extend social protection coverage and provide incentives for businesses and employees in the informal economy to mitigate the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU urges the government of Serbia to ensure cross-sectoral coordination within the government and across public administration to effectively respond to COVID-19 and to: a) take measures to preserve employment and b) ensure increased provision of effective labour market policies to the unemployed, while providing adequate unemployment compensation schemes to mitigate the social impact of the economic downturn. It is also invited to step up social transfers to ensure adequate income support for people at risk of poverty and social exclusion. All these measures are not directly targeting young children, but through the support to their parents, they address young children's quality of life and development.

The Joint Conclusions of the Economic and Financial Dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans and Turkey is not a document that highlights any particular sphere relevant for young children's development directly – such as education, care, or protection or health. It provides an overall recommendation for the country, mainly focussed on the general environment in which all citizens live, especially those close to or under the poverty line. However, the Guidance for the development of the next two-year Economic Reform Plan should be taken into account by the government, although it is not realistic to expect all the recommendations to be reflected on the government's priority list. This process has also been slowed down by the formation of a new government following the June elections.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop a coherent cross-sectoral approach to ECD, supported by legal and strategic documents;
- Strengthen social dialogue with various stakeholders, including civil society organisations and parents;
- Include children-specific priorities in the documents of the Economic and Financial Dialogue;
- Introduce specific measures for targeted support for families and children in view of the COVID-19 crisis;
- Give special attention and support to families near the poverty line;
- Ensure access to services despite the pandemic.



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The views expressed by Eurochild do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

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## The partnership

- **Eurochild** is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.
- **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programs and services connects the early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA members from 43 countries implement programs and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.
- **European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)** is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organization made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.
- **Roma Education Fund (REF)** was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organization supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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