

# SERBIA

## Key Contextual Data

*Compiled by*

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## Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

### Please note

In alignment with country-specific usage, the terms used in this report for the main forms of centre-based ECEC provision are **nursery** (*jaslice*, 0–2), **kindergarten** (*dečji vrti*, 3–5½) and **preparatory pre-primary programme** (PPP, *pripremni predškolski program*, 5½–6)<sup>1</sup>. Any additional forms are described where appropriate.

### Historical milestones in ECEC in Serbia

1844	– First custodial institution for young children established in Subotica, Vojvodina – First Froebel-inspired 'playschool' opens in Subotica.
1891	The Child Protection Act includes 2 years of training for playschool educators in Hungary (to which Vojvodina belonged at the time).
1890	Goals and activities of playschools are officially defined for the first time in the "Guidebook of Serbian Religious Playschools". The focus is on preparing children for school entry (at age 7) and their physical development. However, playschools are still welfare institutions rather than educational ones.
1898	Under the National Schools Act, a Curriculum for Playschools was prescribed based on the Froebel and Montessori pedagogical concepts – playschools now have a mandate to prepare children between the ages of 5 and 7 for school through play and organised activities.
Up to 1914	Gradual expansion of playschools
1918 to 1945	Playschools become secular institutions and are no longer affiliated to the church.
1929	The Public Education Act – kindergartens become an integral part of the education system.
As from 1940	A one-year training for educators in the Serbian language is introduced and becomes obligatory.
1948	Regulations on the establishment of ECEC centres
1950	The magazine "The Pre-school Child" was established and published quarterly
1952	Rulebook for preschool institutions foresees two types of regulated institutions for children: (1) nursery settings involving daily attendance, and (2) pre-primary settings involving a half-day educational programme.
1957	Under The Republican Law on Kindergartens, the two types of preschool institutions are merged into one and renamed 'kindergartens'.
Post WWII	ECEC is influenced by the Soviet programmes and Soviet pedagogy, including Vygotsky's theories. Kindergartens become public (state) institutions.
1961/62	Pre-school Pedagogy is included as a scientific discipline at Belgrade University.
1970s and 1980s	Enrolment rates rise gradually.
1971	"The Pre-school Child" – a practice-oriented magazine – is reissued in a new format, now publishing scientific articles alongside more practical ones.
1972	The Early Education Act is adopted.
1974	The Child Protection System is introduced – Kindergartens develop into institutions providing support appropriate to the needs of families and children and are

<sup>1</sup> **Editors' note:** International data sources use varying ways of presenting the age range of children enrolled in ECEC settings. The SEEPRO-3 editors have chosen the following age-inclusive format: **0–2** years for settings **up to** 3 years of age and **3–5** years for pre-primary settings in countries with a primary school entry age of 6 (3, 4 and 5 year-olds). In the case of Serbia, these formats are **0–2** and **3–5½** years.



	defined as part of a unique system of child protection. The Early Education Act characterises a state and centrally regulated system both at the federal level of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and at the republic level of the former Serbian Republic (being one of the six republics of Yugoslavia).
1975	A new official programme for ECEC is launched, following on from those in 1952, 1959 and 1968, each introducing specific 'reforms'.
1976	The <i>Framework Programme on teaching and educating children in preschool institutions and preparing children aged 6 to 7 years for primary school</i> is adopted, which highlights, among other things, the importance of play in children's learning and development.
1979 – 1982	A detailed evaluation study called "Basic characteristics of development and educational processes in kindergartens in Serbia" is published, the first programme evaluation ever to be carried out in Yugoslavia. It was funded by the Self-Management Community of Interest of Child Care in Serbia, which at that time was in charge of the overall policy of social childcare. It represents the first official policy in the field to draw on scientific research.
1984 – 1996	Based on the results of the evaluation study, a series of projects on different aspects of ECEC are conducted. Kindergartens start to envisage the child as an active, interactive, creative person; addressing the needs of individual children is emphasised.
1992	The Act on the Social Care of Children is adopted.
1994	A <i>Framework Programme for the preschool education of children up to 3 years of age</i> is adopted
1996	A <i>Framework Programme for the preschool education of children from 3 to 7 years of age</i> is adopted, giving an official choice between two programmes: Model A (constructivist approach, the curriculum applied in an open system of teaching and education) and Model B (cognitive-developmental programme approach).
1999	ECEC comes under the jurisdiction of three national ministries: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Affairs and Ministry of Health.
2003	ECEC becomes part of the formal education system and now falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. The Education System Foundations Act places a focus on democratic principles, respect for children's rights, age equity, and protection against discrimination.
2005	A general strategy of 'Quality education for all' is introduced – but there is still a lack of understanding of the value of early childhood education.
2006	The preparatory preschool programme (PPP) becomes compulsory for all children and free if children participate in a daily 4-hour programme, in accordance with the amendments of the Education System Foundations Act.
2006	Revised <i>Framework Programme for preschool education</i> is adopted, divided into three interconnected units for (1) Children up to 3 years, (2) Children from 3 years up to the preparatory programme and (3) The Preparatory Preschool Programme.
2007	The 2-year professional education course for educators is extended to 3 years, with the option of completing an additional year for a specialisation.
2010	The Early Education Act is adopted with the goals of supporting overall child development, strengthening the educational role of families, creating equal access opportunities, and promoting democracy and openness.
2011	In the document 'Development and improvement of quality in pre-school, primary and general secondary and arts education – 2010-2020', quality assurance through standardisation and assessment are emphasised more than quality development.
2012	The 'Strategy for the development of education in Serbia up to 2020' aims to create good conditions for the well-being of all children before they enter school. The 'Policy on evaluation and self-evaluation of pre-school institutions' contributes towards improving setting quality.

2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The <i>Preschool Curriculum Framework ‘Years of Ascent’</i> is adopted – founded on contemporary theoretical perspectives on childhood, early childhood learning and development, contemporary curriculum theories, cross-national analysis of ECEC curricular documents and examples of inspiring high-quality preschool education programmes worldwide. It defines the approaches necessary for early childhood education and care (see section on <i>Curricular Framework</i>).</li> <li>– <i>Guidelines of various pre-school education programmes</i> are updated to include current theories on education in (early) childhood and relevant international reports.</li> <li>– <i>Rulebook on Competence Standards for ECEC teachers</i> is adopted.</li> </ul>
2019	Amendments to the Early Education Act are adopted.
2020	Amendments to the Education System Foundations Act are adopted.
2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– ‘Strategy for the Development of Education in Serbia by 2030’ is adopted.</li> <li>– Rulebook on competence standards for Expert Associates (specialist support staff) in preschool institutions adopted</li> <li>– Rulebook on programme of all forms of work of Expert Associates in preschool institutions adopted</li> <li>– Rulebook on conditions for realising educational programmes and other forms of work and services provided by the preschool institution adopted</li> <li>– Professional guidelines for the further development of preschool programmes adopted</li> </ul>

Sources: Pešić et al. 2001; Stojanović et al. 2018; Eurydice 2023

## ECEC system type and auspices<sup>2</sup>

Serbian ECEC is organised as an integrated system<sup>3</sup> for children between 6 months and 6 years. Since 2003, overall steering policies for ECEC institutions (*predškolsko vaspitanje i obrazovanje*) come under the jurisdiction of the national Ministry of Education (*Ministarstvo prosvete*).

Local government authorities are responsible for the provision of ECEC services. Local government assemblies set up a network of state ECEC institutions according to the criteria specified in the Education System Foundations Act (*Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja*, Official Gazette 2021b). With regard to the organisation and implementation of educational activities, municipalities and ECEC institutions can also make their own decisions.

## General objectives and legislative framework

The overarching goals of early childhood education are to support:

- The overall development and well-being of young children, by stimulating their potential and enhancing their experiences of and knowledge about themselves, others and the wider environment
- The upbringing role of the family
- Integration into society
- The development of children’s potential as a crucial factor of individual and societal progress.

<sup>2</sup> The Eurydice country report on ECEC in Serbia provided orientation on legal and regulatory aspects. All other sources are clearly indicated within the text and in the references section.

<sup>3</sup> Not, however, in terms of staffing requirements for work with under 3 year-olds and 3 to 6 year-olds.

The following principles of ECEC are referred to in legislation: availability, democracy, openness, a holistic approach, authenticity, development of various forms of ECEC provision (Bogovac 2018).

Based on the Education System Foundations Act (Official Gazette 2021b), the field of early childhood education is regulated mainly by the Early Education Act (*Zakon o predškolskom vaspitanju i obrazovanju*) (Official Gazette 2021a). The preparatory preschool programme (*pripremni predškolski program* – PPP), which has been compulsory since 2006/2007, is regulated by a by-law issued in 2006.

## ECEC entitlement and compulsory enrolment age

There is no legal entitlement to a place in a nursery (from 6 months to 3 years of age) or kindergarten (from 2 to 5½ years of age). Attendance at both ECEC settings is voluntary, whereas the preparatory pre-primary programme (PPP) is compulsory for the year preceding primary school. Primary schooling begins at 7 years of age.

## Main types of provision

“ECEC institutions” (*predškolska ustanova*) in Serbia offer **multi-purpose, integrated services** for young children and families. According to the Early Education Act, each ECEC institution has to provide education, care, social and health protection and a compensatory pre-primary programme. Besides early childhood education for different age groups of children (nurseries, kindergartens, pre-primary groups), nutrition, preventive health care and social protection of children are provided within the institution/settings. The specific options are determined by the needs of children and their parents, institutional capacities and resources provided by the local authorities. The umbrella term “ECEC institution” thus covers a wide range of facilities for young children and families with multiple functions. These services are available in each municipality.

Local government in Serbia is realised within local government units (municipalities, cities and Belgrade city) (Vujadinović et al. 2016). ECEC institutions are public services established and founded by the government, province government or local self-government. However, they may also be founded by a separate legal entity or an individual and then have the status of private ECEC provision. One ECEC institution (*predškolska ustanova*) may include different numbers of ECEC settings with a minimum of 5 and up to 100 educational groups. The number of ECEC centres within one ECEC institution can differ (from one to more than twenty), depending on the number of preschool children, family needs and local resources. The early childhood settings (*dečji vrtić*) include:

**Nurseries** (*jaslice*) for children aged between 6 months and 3 years, who attend on a full-day or half-day basis. A full-day programme lasts between 9 – 12 hours per day; half-day programmes are open for up to 6 hours.

**Kindergartens** (*dečji vrtić*) for children from 3 to 5½ years of age, who also attend on a full-day or half-day basis.

**Preparatory pre-primary programme** (PPP – *pripremni predškolski program*): compulsory pre-primary groups for children in the year before starting primary school between 6½ and 7 years of age. In order to attend this programme, children must be at least 5½ years old. The programme lasts for a minimum of nine months for 4 hours a day and can be offered either in kindergartens or in schools. It aims to ease the transition between early childhood education

and primary school, to address socio-cultural differences among children, and to provide children with activities for enhancing their social and cognitive skills. In 2022, there were 1,749 groups offering a 4-hour/day programme and 1,796 offering a full-day programme (SORS 2023a).<sup>4</sup>

**Private ECEC provision** is available and is usually organised in settings with mixed-age groups, except for the pre-primary groups (PPPs). They include some Waldorf and Montessori settings.

In 2022, there were 461 ECEC institutions altogether, maintaining 2,835 facilities (2,417 public, 418 private) and 11,511 educational groups – a significant increase since 2005, when there were 289 ECEC institutions and 1,873 facilities (SORS 2023a, b).

There are no national statistics which differentiate between settings for under 3 year-olds and over 3 year-olds.

## Provider structures

Most ECEC settings are public services; at the same time, there are also a number of facilities managed by private entities. Public services are established by the local governments. Private service providers of the compulsory preschool programme (PPP) must be accredited by the Ministry of Education.

In 2022, most children (88.1%, 201,885) attended public provision (SORS 2023b).

Although there are more private service providers than public ones, they maintain significantly fewer centre-based settings. The number of children attending public services is approximately 7,5 times larger than those attending private provision.

Recently, the number of private facilities has been increasing, also because of increased demand. In 2017, 172 private providers ran 203 ECEC settings attended by 11,078 children (Bogovac 2018). By 2022, numbers had increased to 298 private ECEC institutions, with 418 facilities attended by 27,145 children (see *Table 1*).

*Table 1*

**Serbia: Number of centre-based settings and children enrolled by provider type, 2022**

	ECEC institutions	Centre-based facilities	Children enrolled
Public	163	2,417	201,885
Private	298	418	27,145
<b>Total</b>	461	2,835	229,030

Sources: SORS 2023a, b

## Participation rates in regulated provision

In 2022, 25.1% (57,478) of children under 3 years of age and 74.9% (171,552) of 3 to 6 year-olds attended an ECEC setting. Almost all children in the relevant age-group (97.3%, 62,958) attended the pre-school preparatory programme. More than half (59.5% in 2021) attended the full-day programme (SORS 2023b). In 2022, 6,983 children were unable to attend an ECEC setting due to a lack of places (SORS 2023a).

<sup>4</sup> All statistical indicators in this report refer to Serbia excluding Kosovo.

However, attendance rates vary greatly by children's backgrounds: in 2018, while 63.9% of children had access to early childhood education, this was the case for only 27% of children from rural areas, 9% from low-income families, and 6% of Roma children (UNICEF 2019).

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, or children of single parents, are generally given priority for admission or their parents pay lower fees (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 61).

Table 2

**Serbia: Number of children and attendance rate in ECEC settings by age, 2022**

Age group	Number of children	Attendance rate, in %
6 months – under 2 years	25,977	25.1
2 to 3 year-olds	31,501	
3 to 4 year-olds	39,358	74.9
4 to 5 year-olds	41,476	
5 to 5.5 year-olds	29,016	
5.5 to 6.5 year-olds	58,116	97.3
6.5 to 7.5 year-olds	3,586	
<b>Total</b>	<b>229,030</b>	

Source: SORS 2023a, b

In 2021/22, over two thirds of children (68.1% – 152,296) attended an ECEC setting for more than 9 hours per day; only 7,425 (3.3%) children attended for less than 6 hours. 28.5% (63,719) attended a pre-primary programme; nearly 60% of these attended the fee-paying full-day programme (37,889, SORS 2023a, own calculations).

According to Eurostat data, in 2021, more than 80% of children under 3 years of age were not enrolled in an ECEC setting. Those enrolled usually attended for more than 30 hours per week. The share of children from the age of 3 until compulsory school age who do not attend a centre has decreased slightly over the last seven years, but still amounted to over 40% in 2021. In this age group, more than a third of children spend more than 30 hours a week in a centre (Table 3).

Table 3

**Serbia: Participation rates in ECEC centre-based settings by age and duration of attendance, 2015 to 2021**

Year	Weekly attendance rate	Under 3 year-olds, in %	3 years to minimum compulsory school age, in %
2015	1 to 29 hours	2.0	19.7
	Over 30 hours	12.0	33.1
	No enrolment in ECEC	86.0	47.2
2021	1 to 29 hours	2.7	23.9
	Over 30 hours	15.3	34.5
	No enrolment in ECEC	82.0	41.7

Source: Eurostat 2023b

## Financing and costs for parents

In 2017, 3.98% of the gross domestic product was spent on education, 0.65% on the ECEC sector (Eurydice 2023).



The funding model for ECEC institutions is decentralised and predominantly covered by the local self-governments. Full-day programmes in public ECEC services are usually funded up to 80% by the local government and up to 20% by parents. For children without parental care and children with disabilities, participation is covered by the national level and for children from materially deprived families, participation is covered by local self-government (LSG). The four-hour compulsory preparatory pre-primary programme is financed at the national level.

Private institutions do not receive state subsidies; they are financed solely through parental contributions, although there may be local government support for subsidising the costs of some private institutions in some local communities (e.g. Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš).

Parents pay income-related monthly fees for enrolment in public institutions ranging from 5,950 to 9,705 RSD (between 50 and 80 €). Participation in the full-day ECEC programme costs 7,770 RSD (65€). The cost for attending private ECEC settings ranges from €150 to €400 per month (Eurydice 2023).

The compulsory pre-primary programme is free of charge.

## Staff to child ratios and group size

The composition of the groups in the ECEC settings may be same-age or mixed-age – except in the pre-primary groups (PPP), which are only attended by children between 5½ and 6½ years of age. The number of groups depends on the number of children and is determined by the respective management and varies from 5 to more than 100 depending on the institution.

The maximum group size supervised by two qualified member of staff depends on the age composition of the children:

Table 4

**Serbia: Maximum group size in ECEC settings by age**

Age group	Maximum group size
6 months to 1 year	7
1 to 2 years	12
2 to 3 years	16
3 to 4 years	20
4 to 5½ years	24
5½ to 6½ years	26

Source: Eurydice 2023

Exceeding the group sizes by up to 20% is still in accordance with the law (Bogovac 2018).

In a regular group, the number of children with disabilities is limited to two. The total number of children in the group is then reduced by three children for each child with a disability.

## Curricular framework

In Serbia, there has been a national-level curricular framework for ECEC settings since 1976. Educational activities in each ECEC centre are carried out in line with the national curricular framework. Children with special educational needs and disabilities are entitled to an Individual Education and Care Plan developed by the ECEC centre staff.

In 2018, a new conceptual framework for ECEC (*Years of Ascent – Pre-school Curriculum Framework*) was developed by the Institute of Pedagogy and Andragogy at the University of Belgrade, in cooperation with the Institute for Improvement of Education, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, and UNICEF (MoESTD 2018). The detailed document is structured in two main parts:

- (1) 'Conception of the Preschool Curriculum Framework', which includes the underlying theoretical postulates and values, the overall educational goals and child-focused goals and
- (2) 'From the Curriculum Framework to the Real Curriculum', which focuses on three areas central to developing the curriculum in practice: Supporting children's well-being (relationships, participation in different kinds of activities); contextual factors (physical environment and key persons – peers, family, community, teacher); and key teacher strategies (planning, teamwork, monitoring, documentation and evaluation).

The Framework is founded on theoretical postulates of socio-cultural theory, sociology of childhood and post-structuralism. These share the common perception of childhood as a visible social category and as being valuable *per se* and is based on the holistic idea that all children have unique abilities and equal rights to have their uniqueness recognised and acknowledged. Children are seen as competent individuals whose potential is nurtured through supportive and stimulating relationships with adults; as active participants in the community of peers and adults; and as creative and playful beings who are eager to learn. Whereas children were traditionally seen as "vulnerable and in need of protection" and the programme as "child-centred" or "educator-centred", the emphasis is now shifting towards a practice based on the quality of relationships and shared participation (Bogovac 2018; Krnjaja and Pavlović-Breneselović 2014). Based on a democratic and inclusive approach, education is understood as an integrated process of education and care embedded in each segment of joint cooperation between adults and children and an orientation towards long-term goals. The focus of evaluation is not primarily on the learning outcomes of the children, but rather on the quality of the key elements of the curricular framework.

The aims of the curriculum include ensuring that all children have equal opportunities for learning and development; feel accepted and safe; can build trusting and respectful relationships; develop basic skills for lifelong learning (e.g. curiosity, resilience, self-confidence, positive identity); and have the opportunity to explore a wide range of learning areas. Ensuring that families can actively participate, and that the well-being of all children is supported are two further aims.

Key specified competences for lifelong learning in ECEC include:

- Communication in the mother tongue (e.g. through early literacy)
- Communication in a foreign language (e.g. by embedding a foreign language in different activities)
- Mathematical, scientific and technological skills (e.g. by promoting logical thinking, encouraging exploration)
- Digital literacy
- Learning to learn (e.g. through reflective practice)
- Social and civic competences through the development of a sense of community
- Initiative and enterprise (e.g. through free play, support in problem solving)
- Cultural awareness and expression (e.g. by developing a cultural identity, encouraging expression of different ideas)-

## Digital education

Digital literacy is included as a key competence in the newly developed Pre-school Curriculum Framework (*Years of Ascent*). It is seen to develop through a meaningful use of digital technologies as tools that empower children to access information, as a means for expression and representation, and for the documentation of different activities. Digital competence also includes developing an appropriate attitude towards the culture and use of digital technologies.

## Monitoring – evaluation

In general, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the monitoring of educational institutions and supervises the work of the Institute for the Improvement of Education and the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation, which are in charge of external evaluations of educational institutions.

Quality standards for ECEC centres were defined and adopted by the National Education Council. The role of the quality standards for ECEC centres in Serbia is to provide “an equal and objective assessment of the quality of work in ECEC centres and to enable high quality, consistent and effective implementation of the legal requirements” (Rulebook on evaluating the quality of the institution's work 2019, Official Gazette 2019). The quality framework in Serbia contains standards and indicators both for external and internal evaluation based on national quality standards, including four areas of evaluation, 15 standards and 64 indicators (Quality Standards of the Institution's Work 2018, Official Gazette 2018). In the recently issued Preschool Curriculum Framework *Years of Ascent* (MoESTD 2018), monitoring and evaluation in early education settings are referred to as the documentation and assessment of children's work. The quality of curriculum implementation is evaluated according to the following key dimensions: learning environment; quality of relationships; learning through participation; inclusion, diversity and democratic values; and cooperation with the family and the local community. Self-evaluation does not serve to assess the work of the ECEC Teachers or Expert Associates (specialist support staff), but instead, the data obtained in this way are the basis for a joint re-thinking and changing of practices (MoESTD 2018).

### *Child-related assessment*

For ECEC programmes, there are no official regulations for formative or summative child-related assessment, and there are no specific recommendations for settings for under 3-year-olds. In settings for the 3 to 6-year-olds, the emphasis is not so much on children's performance but on a holistic understanding of their development and learning. "The purpose of monitoring children is not to assess their development capacities and achievements but to obtain a more complete understanding of children's development and learning and provide further support for their well-being" (Preschool Curriculum Framework *Years of Ascent* 2018, MoESTD 2018). The methods suggested are documenting observations, children's 'products', photos, picture books or video clips in the child's portfolio. Importance is placed on the children's own views and those of their parents.

### *Centre-level assessment*

In Serbia, internal self-evaluation is strongly framed (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 128). Internal evaluation is required for all educational institutions as the results are used for external evaluation. It is carried out in predetermined intervals, in accordance with internal

educational institution plans. Self-evaluation standards and procedures are defined by the Ministry and other responsible bodies (Eurydice 2023). They include the following key dimensions: educational work, support to children and family; professional learning community; leadership and organisation.

Internal quality assurance is a continuous process of re-thinking and re-evaluation of current practices, of identifying ways for improvements, further development and management. It is performed each year for some areas of evaluation (specific areas in focus), while an overall quality assurance procedure (with all areas of evaluation included) is conducted every four to five years. The internal evaluation covers a whole set of inputs provided by the institution leadership, ECEC teachers, other staff, parents, children and the local community. The Internal Evaluation Team is in charge of the internal evaluation process (data collection, planning, reporting, etc.). Support to the Team is given by the district school authority and the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation.

### *External evaluation*

External evaluation is carried out through expert pedagogical supervision at least once every five years in cooperation between the Ministry of Education and the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation (Rulebook on evaluating the quality of the institution's work, 2019, Official Gazette 2019). In practice, external evaluation is done by members of the Institute who have been trained for external evaluation. All the areas of quality which are defined by quality standards for work of centres are evaluated and graded, ranging from 1–4. It is also prescribed that the centre should draw its Plan for Quality Improvement based on the external evaluation report it has received from the Institute (Baucal et al. 2016; Bogovac 2018).

## **Inclusion agenda**

Children with disabilities have a right to enrolment in a regular ECEC setting, the right to an individual education plan and to the provision of additional support. Not more than two children with disabilities can be included in one ECEC group. In such a case, the regular group size of children is reduced by 3.

In some cases, ECEC centres have to cope with an insufficient number of expert associates compared with the number of groups and children. At the same time, ECEC teachers and specialist support staff are often insufficiently empowered to enact inclusive practices in the early years. There is a lack of instructional guidance for practitioners on social inclusion and for the early identification of developmental disorders and disabilities, of methodology for appropriate stimulation as well instructions on strengthening resilience in early childhood.

The inclusion of children from vulnerable populations (children with disabilities, children from migrant families, national minorities) needs to be increased in ECEC institutions and diversified programmes. Inclusive education in ECEC needs additional systemic and comprehensive efforts through inter-sectorial collaboration. It would be extremely important to develop institutional learning and professionalise the decision-making process at all levels of the system in order to meet the needs of different vulnerable groups of children and to provide sustainable impact on their development and learning in early years (Baucal et al. 2016).

Two recent policy initiatives will be presented below which have focused on improving the entire ECEC system, including the inclusion of children with special educational needs and disabilities.

The first is the "Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care" project launched in 2018 by the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (Ministry of Education 2023). This policy initiative primarily seeks to improve equality of access to high quality early childhood education and care services for all children aged 3 to 6½ years, especially those from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. With 47 million euros, conditions are to be created through:

- Improving access to ECEC services for all children ages 3 to 5½ years, with a focus on the most disadvantaged ones, by increasing the supply of high-quality preschool places in at least 30 municipalities
- Enhancing the quality of an ECEC system characterised by a holistic approach towards supporting the learning, development and well-being of children through the implementation of the new Preschool Curriculum Framework
- Improving the initial education of ECEC teachers, professional development and career advancement of practitioners in ECEC institutions
- Improving the competences of principals in ECEC institutions
- Improving ECEC monitoring and evaluation.

Grants were awarded to at least 30 municipalities to be used for funding projects in the local communities aimed at improving coordination and cooperation among relevant actors in providing ECEC services.

The second (EU funded) policy initiative "Support to Preschool Education System Reform in Serbia – SUPER" was launched by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in 2019 (Government of the Republic of Serbia 2019). This project aims to improve the quality of inclusive preschool education in 50 local municipalities through improved access, in particular for vulnerable groups. Strategies include:

- Locally adapted action plans that respond to community needs, particularly to the needs of vulnerable groups
- Improving networking capacities to optimise the use of available resources
- Providing awareness-raising material to promote ECEC services, particularly to increase the inclusion of vulnerable groups
- Strengthening the professional competences of ECEC staff through appropriate CPD for ECEC Teachers and Expert Associates
- Harmonising the Preschool Curriculum Framework and the new bylaw for pedagogical documentation
- Capacity building for self-evaluation (recognised as a challenging issue in ECEC in Serbia)
- Developing the legislative framework in accordance with the new laws and Preschool Curriculum Framework.

Based on a systematic approach towards implementing the SUPER project, special attention was paid to ensuring internal and external coherence, synergy, and effectiveness to ensure sustainability. This was achieved through various synergy efforts. These included the implementation of the activities of the project "Inclusive early childhood education and care" and the EU-funded project "Equipment of ECEC facilities", as well as support of the curriculum implementation process. This made it possible to provide furniture, IT equipment and didactic resources to all 50 institutions involved in the SUPER project, as well as to five institutions that were designated as cluster centres within the framework of the inclusion project.

#### *Children with special educational needs and disabilities*

Inclusive education has been actively pursued since 2010/11. The Education System Foundations Act (2003, last amended 2020) stipulates that there must be no discrimination or segregation,

that Individual Education Plans are drawn up and that children with special needs should be included in regular ECEC provision as far as possible. However, they may also attend a so-called development group if they can only receive the appropriate educational, health or social support there.

### *Children with a migration background – Children from Roma communities*

According to the 2011 Census, Serbia is a relatively ethnically homogeneous society: ethnic Serbs accounted for 83% of the total population, while ethnic minorities included Hungarians (3.5%), Romani (2.1%) and Bosnians (2%) (OECD Library 2020).

Children from national minorities may attend pre-school and childcare settings in their national language or a dual-language setting.

In terms of legislation, there are no different categories for migrants and refugees in Serbia. After the refugee wave of 2015, persons from Syria constituted the largest group, followed by immigrants from Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the closure of the Balkan route, it is now primarily single men from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Algeria and Morocco who seek asylum in Serbia.

In September 2017, approximately 700 children from families with a migrant background started their schooling in Serbia, 130 of them in one of the 12 primary schools in the country capital, Belgrade (Feinstein International Center 2018).

There are no accessible data available regarding the number of children in ECEC settings with a non-Serbian background.

## Parental leave arrangements<sup>5</sup>

**Maternity leave** (*porodiljsko odsustvo*) lasts 28 compulsory days before the birth and three months afterwards. This period is remunerated at 100% of the former average income on which social security contributions were paid during the 18 months prior to this period. The minimum pay is 39,866.67 RSD (€340.05).

A supplementary **Childcare leave** (*odsustvo sa rada radi nege deteta*) per family can be taken after the end of maternity leave for the first and second child for 8.2 months – it ends 365 days after the start of maternity leave. With the mother's consent, this time can also be transferred to the father, but it cannot be taken at the same time by both parents. Under special circumstances (long term illness of a child of a child needing special care), one parent may stop working or work part-time until the child is 5 years old. This time is compensated in the same way as Maternity leave or with salary compensation for hours not worked. Otherwise, an unpaid period can be taken until the child is 3 years old, during which time the health insurance, including the employer's payments, continues.

There is no legal entitlement for either **Paternity leave** or **Parental leave**.

In 2022, only 14 fathers received Maternity leave benefits and only 373 took the Supplementary childcare leave. Further statistical data on take-up is not available.

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<sup>5</sup> The brief summary in this section is based on the country note for Serbia-by Marian Pantelić in the *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023* (see References).

## Current challenges for the ECEC system in Serbia

Country expert assessment by *Lidija Miskeljin*<sup>6</sup>

The systemic approach that education policy in Serbia has adopted towards improving the ECEC system, as well as building inclusive early childhood education and care of high quality, has enormous potential in terms of sustainable education reform. At the same time, it carries challenges and risks because it requires coordinated action at all levels of the system. The concept of a competent ECEC system implies taking responsibility at every level of the system. Implementing shared responsibility would mean:

- Ensuring the coherence of reform initiatives and measures through coordination and harmonisation of all projects and activities in the field of early childhood education and care
- Focusing on strengthening the internal capacities of the ECEC institutions for ongoing development and change. This includes transforming the culture of the ECEC institution into a community of learning and establishing model centres of inspiring practices as centres of horizontal learning and dissemination.
- Focusing on the continuing professional development of practitioners, with an emphasis on strengthening the capacity for reflective practice; enhancing the capacity for self-evaluation as a continuous process of developing the quality of practice and not as a technical issue according to the model of external evaluation; harmonising the CPD programme offers with the contemporary approach and the Preschool Curriculum Framework.
- Reform of the initial education of ECEC Teachers (both in structure and content) in accordance with contemporary approaches towards early childhood education and care, the profession of an ECEC Teacher, institutional practices and programme.
- Ensuring the inter-departmental and inter-sectoral cooperation and coordination at the central (various ministries) and the local level (social protection, health care and employment) regarding ECEC, i.e. strengthening co-operation between the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government to act in line and to issue harmonised instructions to the Local Self-Governments regarding ECEC
- Ensuring coherency and coordination between the Ministry of Education with Local Self-Governments to align different relevant legal provisions (e.g. sanitary inspections, etc.) regarding ECEC as well as a coherent and regular communication between the Ministry of Education, the LSGs and the ECEC institutions to implement the policy priorities and reform initiatives set by the Ministry of Education.
- Focusing on strategic development and planning of the ECEC system at the local level: this would mean supporting LSGs to better plan their ECEC services and networks in terms of implementing different measures aimed at ensuring accessibility, equity and quality in ECEC as well as enhancing the overall responsibility of local self-governments regarding early childhood education and care (Pavlović-Breneselovic and Miskeljin 2021).

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from the Final Project Report — Support to preschool education system reform SUPER

## Demographic data

*Please note: For reasons of comparability, data on children are always reported up to 6 years of age, even if compulsory schooling starts earlier or later in some countries.*

### Total population

In 2022, the total population of Serbia was 6,797,105. Over the last 20 years it has consistently decreased slightly (2000: 7,527,952; 2010: 7,306,677; 2020: 6,926,785) (Eurostat 2023a).

### Total fertility rate

In 2021, the average of the total fertility rate in the EU27 (from 2020) was 1.53. The highest total fertility rate in the 33 SEEPRO-3 countries was in France (1.84), the lowest in Malta (1.13). With 1.52, Serbia is exactly on average (Eurostat 2023c)<sup>7</sup>.

### Children under 6 years of age

Table 5

**Serbia: Children under 6 years of age according to age group, 2022**

Age	Number of children
Under age 1	61,887
1 year-olds	61,367
2 year-olds	64,065
3 year-olds	63,623
4 year-olds	64,515
5 year-olds	64,313
<b>0 to under 6 year-olds, total</b>	<b>379,770</b>

Source: Eurostat 2023a

The share of children under 3 in the total population in 2022 was 2.8%, that of children under 6 5.6%. These proportions were approximately in line with the EU 27 average.

Table 6

**Serbia: Children under 6 years of age – share in total population compared with EU average, 2000 to 2022, in %**

	Comparison Serbia/EU	Under 3-year olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2000	Serbien	2.8	3.2	6.0
	Ø EU15 <sup>8</sup>	3.2	3.2	6.4

<sup>7</sup> Data for **Ukraine** and the **UK** (2021) are from Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/296567/fertility-rate-in-ukraine/> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284042/fertility-rate-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>). Data for the **Russian Federation** (2021) are from WorldBankData (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=RU>).

<sup>8</sup> The data for 2000 include the EU15-Länder at that time (AT, BE, DK, DE, IE, EL, ES, F, FI, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK). The 2005 data (EU25) include CY, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, MT, PL, SI, SK. Data for 2015 include the additional EU28 countries BG, RO und HR. Data for EU27 (from 2020) comprise the countries of the EU28 without the UK.



	Comparison Serbia/EU	Under 3-year olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2005	Serbien	3.1	2.9	6.0
	Ø EU25	3.1	3.1	6.2
2015	Serbien	2.8	2.8	5.6
	Ø EU28	3.0	3.2	6.2
2022	Serbien	2.8	2.8	5.6
	Ø EU27(2020)	2.7	2.9	5.7

Source: Eurostat 2023a, \* own calculations, deviations due to roundings

## Single households with children under age 6

In 2022, over one third (35.1%) of households with children under 6 were couple households. Households with single parents accounted for only 0.6% – almost exclusively single mothers.

Table 7

Serbia: Households with children under age 6, 2022\*

Household type	Total households	Share of total households, in % <sup>+</sup>
Households – total	811,400	
Couple households	284,400	35.1
Other types of households	522,000	64.3
Single households, total	5,000	0.62
Single households, women	4,500	0.55
Single households, men	500	0.06

Source: Eurostat 2023g, \* own calculations.

## Employment rates of parents with children under age 6

In Serbia, in 2022, the overall employment rate for men (15-64 years) was 71% and for women 57.9% (Eurostat 2023e).

In 2022, 64.4% of women and 78.3% of men (18-64 years) with children under 6 were employed. Compared with the average of the 27 EU-countries (2020), the shares of employed fathers were thus below the EU-average (87.2%); those of mothers corresponded with the EU-average (63.6%) (Eurostat 2023d).

Table 8a

Serbia: Employment rates of parents with children under 6 compared with EU countries, 2010 und 2022

	2010	
	Mothers, in %	Fathers, in %
Serbia	43.6	72.0
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU countries <sup>9</sup>	Denmark: 82.7	Netherlands: 93.4
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU countries	Hungary: 31.7	Latvia: 72.7

<sup>9</sup> AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, UK

	2022	
	Mothers, in %	Fathers, in %
<b>Serbia</b>	64.4	78.3
Highest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries <sup>10</sup>	Luxembourg: 81.9	Sweden: 95.1
Lowest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries	Luxembourg: 81.9	Sweden: 95.1

Source: Eurostat 2023d

For other SEEPRO-3 countries that, like Serbia, were not part of the EU27(2020) in 2021/2022, data are displayed in *Table 8b*:

*Table 8b*

**Employment rates in non-EU SEEPRO-3 countries, 2021/2022/2023**

Countries	Parents with children under 6 years		Overall employment rate	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %	Women in %	Men in %
*Norway (2022)	82.9	94.3	75.4	80.1
***Russia (2021/2022)	67.1 (2021)	k.A.	55.6 (2022)	70.4 (2022)
*Serbia (2022)	64.4	78.3	57.9	71.0
**Switzerland (2022/2023)	46.9	95.3	60.0 61.1 (2023)	83.5 84.2 (2023)
+Ukraine (2021)	n.d.	n.d.	60.7	69.9
+++United Kingdom (2021/2023)	75.6	92.1	++72.3	++79.2
with dependent children	72.4	93.1		
with children under 2 years	70.7	95.0	++72.1 (2023)	++79.4 (2023)
with children 3–4 years				

\*Eurostat 2023e, 2023d

\*\*[BFS] Bundesamt für Statistik. 2023. *Erwerbsquoten in Vollzeitäquivalenten nach Geschlecht, Nationalität, Altersgruppen, Familientyp* [Full-time equivalent employment rates by gender, nationality, age groups, family type]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/de/je-d-03.02.00.01.03>

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<sup>10</sup> AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HR, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK



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