



REPUBLIC
OF SERBIA



COMMISSIONER
FOR PROTECTION
OF EQUALITY

REGULAR ANNUAL REPORT OF THE COMMISSIONER FOR PROTECTION OF EQUALITY FOR 2024

Belgrade, March 2025



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Уредница

Бранкица Јанковић, повереница за заштиту равноправности

Издавач

Повереник за заштиту равноправности

За издавача

Бранкица Јанковић

Припрема и штампа

ЈП „Службени гласник“

Тираж

100

All terms used in the masculine grammatical gender denote both the masculine and the feminine genders of the respective persons

Table of Content

<i>Foreword</i>	7
<i>Summary</i>	11
RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADVANCE EQUALITY AND ELIMINATE DISCRIMINATION	31
ABOUT THE COMMISSIONER FOR THE PROTECTION OF EQUALITY ...	41
COMMISSIONER'S WORK IN 2024 IN NUMBERS	44
COMMISSIONER'S ACTIONS RELATED TO PROTECTION AGAINST DISCRIMINATION IN 2024	45
<i>Citizens' Complaints</i>	48
<i>Recommended Measures</i>	53
<i>Opinion on Draft Laws and Other Legal Documents and Submitted Initiatives</i>	58
<i>Other Outcomes of Proceedings</i>	62
<i>Court Proceedings</i>	63
Civil Proceedings	63
Misdemeanour Proceedings	65
Criminal Proceedings	65
<i>Situation Testing</i>	66
<i>Proposals for Review of Constitutionality and Legality</i>	67
COMMISSIONER'S ACTIONS IN 2024 CONCERNING THE PROMOTION OF EQUALITY	69
REPORTS, SURVEYS AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS	69
TRAININGS AND EXPERT MEETINGS	79
<i>Trainings</i>	79
<i>Expert meetings, conferences and other activities</i>	83
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND IMPLEMENTED PROJECTS ..	97
<i>Cooperation with the European Network of Equality Bodies (EQUINET)</i> ..	103
DESCRIPTION OF THE SITUATION AND KEY PROBLEMS IN THE FIELD OF EQUALITY PROTECTION	108
REPORTS AND OTHER INSTRUMENTS OF THE EU, INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND TREATY BODIES	108

PRACTICE OF THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE AREA OF PROTECTION AGAINST DISCRIMINATION	117
REPORTS AND SURVEYS BY NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANISATIONS	119
COMPLIANCE OF GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES WITH THE COMMISSIONER'S RECOMMENDATIONS.	125
KEY ISSUES IN EQUALITY PROTECTION.	144
DISCRIMINATION ON THE GROUNDS OF SEX AND MARITAL AND FAMILY STATUS	158
DISCRIMINATION ON THE GROUNDS OF DISABILITY	182
DISCRIMINATION ON THE GROUNDS OF HEALTH STATUS	191
DISCRIMINATION ON THE GROUNDS OF AGE	206
DISCRIMINATION ON THE GROUNDS OF NATIONAL AFFILIATION OR ETHNIC ORIGIN.	221
COMPLAINTS CONCERNING OTHER PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS	238
<i>Discrimination on the Grounds of Membership in Political, Trade Union and Other Organisations and on the Grounds of Religious and Political Beliefs</i>	<i>239</i>
<i>Discrimination on the Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity . .</i>	<i>244</i>
<i>Discrimination against Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, Migrants and Asylum-seekers.</i>	<i>253</i>
<i>Discrimination on Other Grounds.</i>	<i>258</i>
MULTIPLE AND INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION.	269
DISCRIMINATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE – EQUALITY IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE.	270
MEDIA REPORTING	276
REPORT ON EXECUTION OF THE FINANCIAL PLAN	282
COMPLIANCE WITH DUTIES UNDER LAW ON FREE ACCESS TO INFORMATION OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE	285
ANNEX 1: STATISTICAL OVERVIEW OF COMMISSIONER'S CASES IN 2024	287
ANNEX 2: BUDGET EXECUTION FOR 2024	298
ANNEX 3: REFERENCES.	301



FOREWORD

Dear members of parliament,

Dear readers,

This is the Regular Annual Report for the year 2024 by the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, an autonomous state authority that enjoys full independence in the performance of its tasks under the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination.

Amidst widespread uncertainty, fear and divisiveness, it is essential to recall that respect for human rights, the rule of law, equal treatment before the law, equality, ability to sustain a dignified living from one's own work and trust in institutions must be the cornerstones of a democratic society. Indeed, this is what our citizens, those whom all institutions and authorities should serve, expect of us. As the world remains in a seemingly unending turmoil, and as issues, problems and actors emerge and shift, only two utterances spoken long ago stand as unchanging truths: Life is invaluable and nothing hurts more than injustice. Hopefully, we will be eventually able to grasp what really happened to us towards the end of 2024, when reality brought our daily lives to a halt and shook the very foundations of our society, as massive tragedies always do. Fifteen persons lost their lives, and many others were severely injured in the Novi Sad Railway Station canopy collapse. I believe we can all agree that the casualties should be honoured and those responsible should be brought to justice. In doing so, we should be driven not just by compliance with our Constitution and laws, but also by our innate moral compass. Together with the rule of law, equality, freedom of thought and expression, understanding and mutual respect, as well as solidary and empathy, form the core set of values that are indispensable for building a solid foundation capable of withstanding tectonic shifts in any society. And this is why institutions must function in accordance with

the law, professionally and accountably, acting in an efficient, transparent, unbiased and non-selective manner.

Just as in previous years, the institution of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality received communications from citizens who alleged various violations of their right to equality, filed complaints and sought help and information concerning the exercise of various rights and services. Discrimination violates the principle of equality and efforts to eliminate it are paramount both for the development of the society as a whole and each of its members individually. Our personal characteristics must not serve as grounds for unequal treatment, exclusion or preference in the workplace, when accessing administrative services, before courts, in medical centres... Otherwise, we risk becoming desensitised to the plight of the disenfranchised, forgetting all the while that tomorrow we could be ones who are denied the exercise of a right just because of our sex, national affiliation, property status, membership in a political party... and no one will care.

In this Report, we present cases of discrimination which we addressed in the course of 2024. During the year, we acted in more than 3,600 cases, resulting in the formation of more than 700 case files pursuant to complaints. Public authorities and other entities were issued with more than 400 recommended measures for achieving equality and protection from discrimination; we issued more than 40 opinions and initiatives to amend regulations; we filed a proposal for a review of constitutionality and legality with the Constitutional Court; we filed a strategic lawsuit and three criminal charges; we issued 12 public warnings... In addition, we independently organised 11 conferences and expert meetings, we actively participated in more than 730 events, we issued five publications and we conducted three surveys. The trainings we provided to improve the recognition of and the response to discrimination involved more than 1,200 participants. The Report also presents the state of play regarding the achievement of equality and an assessment of the efforts made by public authorities, an overview of identified positive developments and recommended measures to improve the situation in the field of equality, as well as an overview of cooperation with public authorities, national and international organisations, institutions and the media.

Recognising the need to raise awareness of the importance of educating children and young persons on discrimination, the unacceptability of any form of violence and, more generally, the importance of creating content and providing conditions that would enable all boys and girls to achieve their goals regardless of their personal characteristics – sex, skin colour, religion, national affiliation, language, disability or any diversity, during the year we launched new interactive workshops for primary and secondary school pupils. We also issued a number of initiatives and recommended measures for achieving equality, which may contribute

towards sound and continual support, preventive health care and other conditions that will provide equal opportunities for every child's development and education.

As regards grounds for discrimination, sex was the most commonly cited grounds for discrimination in the complaints we received. Gender equality was very much in the public eye for most of the year. Unfortunately, the predominant topics were femicide, cases of gender-based violence, harrowing experiences of nursing mothers and reports of the so-called obstetric violence. The issue of inheritance was in the public focus primarily due to media interest in the survey conducted by the institution of the Commissioner under the project "Fair Inheritance – a Step towards Women's Empowerment", and also as a result of our perception of gender equality from women's point of view in Serbia, which also included an analysis of the legal framework. Driven by a firm belief that culture can contribute much more than just individual strategies and action plans, we designed our second exhibition in the series entitled "The Greats of Serbian Culture and Science" to honour the women who refused to be marginalised and transformed the society for the good in spite of all obstacles.

Sex as the most commonly cited grounds for discrimination is followed by disability, health status and age. Compared with 2023, we received more complaints on the grounds of membership in political, trade union and other organisations and fewer complaints on the grounds of sexual orientation and national affiliation or ethnic origin. During the year, I visited national minority councils and shared with their representatives my thoughts on current challenges in the exercise of human rights.

Citizens mostly complained of discrimination in procedures before public authorities, in the fields of health care, labour and employment, education and vocational training and in providing public services or using facilities and areas. As had been the case in previous years, the cases in the field of labour and employment usually involved multiple and/or intersectional generation: sex and marital and family status in connection with pregnancy and maternity, health status and disability in connection with reasonable adjustments and assignment to an appropriate job. The right to dignified work and equal pay without discrimination affects citizens' livelihood and quality of life, efficiency of business operations and development of the society as a whole, which is why we were strongly committed to cooperating with our country's business community, including by organising workshops/trainings for employers and employees, and we also presented the new edition of the Equality Code – Guidelines for Developing Antidiscrimination Policies by Employers, as well as the Guidance on Reasonable Adjustments of Workplaces and Jobs for Persons with Disabilities. The Commissioner's Partnership for Equality has been joined by hundreds of companies and chambers of commerce, which employ thousands of workers.

While there has been an encouraging trend of increasing compliance with the recommendations issued by the institution of the Commissioner, concerns remain over hate speech, various forms of violence, vulgarity, inappropriate and offensive comments in the media and public space and on social networks, which create fear and a hostile, degrading or humiliating environment for many people. It is all too easy to cause fear and engender prejudice, and for this reason I have been underscoring for years that words spoken in the public space carry particular weight and involve huge responsibility.

Although certain regulations have been adopted and improved, many obligations still remain. Some of them concern acceptance of the initiatives and recommended measures issued by the institution which I head, which should enable citizens equal and unhindered access to service desks of the Republic Geodetic Authority, easier access to financial social assistance by introducing less stringent property requirements relating to land ownership, in particular for elderly citizens, more efficient response to gender-based and peer violence, more humane treatment of pregnant women and nursing mothers at gynaecology and obstetrics clinics, lower cost of female hygiene products and free textbooks for school children in the entire territory of Serbia. I consider this last initiative to be particularly important, because free textbooks should not be a privilege available only to children in large cities, and should instead be a means to genuinely help and support all our children, regardless of which city or village they live in. There are also other challenges which are not exclusive to Serbia, as our counterparts in the region and other European equality bodies have reported similar issues. But we will not give up – full equality will only be achieved when the most vulnerable and the most threatened among us are equal. Each of us should look into the mirror of our own prejudice and take a step towards a more tolerant and more just society, free from discrimination on any grounds.

We believe that the present Report will provide a thorough overview of the situation regarding protection of equality and can serve as a sound platform for dialogue and public policy-making in many areas of public life which are relevant for the situation of each Serbian citizen. „As citizens, we must prevent wrongdoing because the world in which we all live, wrong-doer, wrong sufferer and spectator, is at stake.“ (Hannah Arendt). This is the thought I shared instead of a conclusion in the first report on the work of this institution I signed as the Commissioner. While much has changed since 2015, I feel an urge to end this foreword with the same quote.



Brankica Janković
Commissioner for the Protection of Equality

SUMMARY

The present Report, as well as earlier annual reports of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality (hereinafter referred to as the “Commissioner”), examines the situation regarding equality protection in the Republic of Serbia in 2024 primarily on the basis of the institution’s practice. However, the activities we implement are not absolute indicators of the actual state of affairs, the Report is also informed by other available sources to provide as complete an insight into the state of play as possible - reports and acts of the EU, international organisations and treaty bodies, reports and surveys by national institutions and organisation, case law of the European Court of Human Rights, as well as findings from specific expert meetings and events related to the promotion of equality.

During the year, the Commissioner was contacted by several thousand citizens in connection with various violations of rights and requests for information, and requests for assistance and support in the exercise of various rights and/or services, whether by filing complaints against discrimination or by other means, including by telephone, electronically or directly by communicating with Professional Service staff, which shows that citizens are increasingly making use of the protection mechanism, taking into account the upward trend in the number of citizens who contacted this institution in this year and in previous years. Significant number of these contacts are not formal, meaning that no complaints were filed; instead, citizens only point to violations of various rights.

The Commissioner directed her work on the promotion of equality through the review of citizen’s contacts, as well as by responding to invitations for cooperation and joint actions by other authorities and civil society organisations.

As regards protection against discrimination, the Commissioner acted in 3,695 cases, in 714 of those complaints, public authorities and other entities were issued with 422 recommended measures for achieving equality, 16 initiatives to amend regulations, 26 opinions on draft laws and other legal documents, one proposal for a review of constitutionality and legality was filed with the Constitutional Court, one strategic lawsuit was initiated and three are pending, three criminal charges were filed and 12 public warnings were issued. 38 announcements 4 public notification were issued. Many of the cases involved certificates of no pending proceedings/no discrimination found in proceedings conducted by the Commissioner for persons who are being or are employed in the field of education (2,498). Furthermore, this institution independently organised 11 conferences and expert meetings, actively participated in more than 730 events, delivered dozens of trainings attended by more than 1,200 participants, issued five publications and conducted three surveys.

The highest number of cases formed pursuant to complaints involved discrimination on the grounds of sex (192), disability (78), health status (77), age (77), national affiliation or ethnic origin (71), marital and family status (37), followed by personal characteristics which featured in fewer complaints, including membership in political, trade union and other organisations, religious or political beliefs, property status, skin colour, sexual orientation, race, gender identity, appearance etc.

It should be noted that sex and marital and family status as grounds for discrimination in most cases occur together, as multiple and/or intersectional discrimination, primarily because of the situation of women with regard to pregnancy and motherhood; for this reason, these grounds are addressed together in this Report. As regard multiple discrimination, in addition to sex and marital and family status, the following grounds are indicated: age and disability, health status, national affiliation etc.

The largest number of complaints were filed in the procedure before public authorities, followed by health care, in employment procedure or at work, education and vocational training, in providing public services or using facilities and areas, public sphere, public information and the media, private relations and other areas to a lesser extent.

As had been the case in previous years, the largest number of complaints was filed against public authorities, followed by complaints against natural persons, legal entities (usually employers), while the fewest complaints were filed against groups of persons and organisations. In terms of numbers of complaints by regions, the distribution is equal, with the exception of the region of Kosovo and Metohija, while the Belgrade region still leading as the region with the largest number of complaints.

In the course of 2024, 42 opinions were passed, in cases pursuant to 26 complaints this institution passed opinions which found breaches of the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination and recommended measures, in two cases no breaches were found, but recommended measures for achieving equality were passed, while 14 opinions found no breaches of rights. In the procedures pursuant to 14 complaints, the complainants agreed in accordance with the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination that the consequences of discriminatory behaviour had been eliminated or had withdrawn their complaints, and the procedures were terminated accordingly.

This year, just like in previous years, the Commissioner monitored the situation in the field of equality protection and highlighted various issues faced by vulnerable groups of citizens and suggested solutions to overcome them in practice in the recommended measures and initiatives submitted to the Government and line ministries. During the reporting year, 422 recommended measures were issued for the achievement of equality and the protection against discrimination.

Thus, when new Government was being formed, a recommendation was issued to the prime minister-designate relating to the balanced representation of women

and men in the future Government, because balanced participation of men and women in decision-making and public policy-making is one of the preconditions for the development of the society, ensuring a fairer distribution of power, the use of the potential of all members of the society and provision of sustainable development. Recommended measures were issued to the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts stating that this institution should undertake relevant measures to achieve the gender equality principles during its elections for membership, as well as to put additional efforts in the promotion of women's scientific and artistic contribution.

To protect women in connection with motherhood, recommended measures were issued to gynaecology and obstetrics clinics, as well as to the Ministry of Health. These recommendations related to the need to improve the position and human treatment of women before, during and after childbirth and induced miscarriage. It was recommended to medical centres as primary health care institutions to undertake all necessary measures and activities aimed at ensuring accessibility of healthcare institutions and healthcare services for persons with disabilities. Also, it was recommended to all local self-government units to ensure compliance with technical standards of planning, design and construction of buildings that ensure accessibility, while all media outlets with national coverage was recommended to provide broadcasting of their content in accessible formats.

All banks were recommended to ensure access to basic banking products and services to persons with the refugee status, such as the opening and use of payment accounts.

Recommended measures were also issued to various ministries to undertake measures within their sphere of competences on the improvement of equality of certain social groups. Thus, to popularise and improve female sports, achieve gender equality and prevent gender-based violence in sport, the Ministry of Sport was recommended to prepare a proposal of a strategic sport development document and specifically define the measures relating to the development of female sports and its promotion at all levels, and increase of investment in female sport. The Ministry of the Interior was recommended not to enter a description of the basis for residence permit in personal documents in case of victims of trafficking. The Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs to issue an instruction on acting of local self-government units in the provision of the personal aide and personal assistant service for persons with disabilities who have their permanent place of residence in the territory of one local self-government unit, but attend school or work in the territory of another local self-government. It was also recommended to this Ministry to amend the provisions of the bylaw governing payment of benefits based on the entitlements under the law governing veteran and disability protection. It was recommended to the Ministry for Care

for Families and Demography to expand the possibilities for the use of vouchers the state ensured for rehabilitation and recreation of patients with rare diseases.

Recommendations were also issued to the General Secretariat of the Government aimed at full implementation of the Government's Decision regarding the employment of all 44 male and female members of the Roma national minority who successfully completed the Vocational Training Programme; to the National Health Insurance Fund regarding the continual supply of a hormone medicinal product which is necessary after sex reassignment surgery, increased quantity of medicinal products for patients with renal diseases, as well as application of off-label medicinal products; to the Centre for Social Work Žitište in connection with the empowerment a poor family to prevent and/or eliminate circumstances due to which children could be displaced from their family again; to the Public Enterprise "Pošta Srbije" (Serbia Postal Service) to make communication with citizens on any platform accessible for citizens with sensory or other disabilities, as well as for all citizens who cannot use online applications for various reasons; to certain schools and one school administration aimed at the prevention of segregation of Roma children and the development of a comprehensive desegregation plan; to the city of Novi Sad in connection with making equal the position of children that attend preschool institutions founded by the city and children who are forced to attend private preschool institutions; to the City Electoral Commission aimed at the organisation of elections for councillors for the City Council of Belgrade in such a manner as to ensure to blind and visually impaired persons to vote in an accessible manner; to the Municipality of Bujanovac and the Medical Centre in Bujanovac regarding the removal of a discriminatory graffiti; to the Medical Centre Preševo to take into account the national structure in the territory of the municipality when selecting candidates; to the Municipality of Ub to initiate works on the rehabilitation and recultivation of non-sanitary landfill in Bogdanovica in the vicinity of a settlement populated mainly by the Roma; to the City Municipality of Savski venac and the City Municipality of Zvezdara to refrain from forced eviction of several Roma families until they previously ensure alternative accommodation for them, compliant with the adequate housing criteria; to the City Centre for Social Work – Novi Beograd Unit to evaluate the needs of families with small children whose entire possessions were burned in a recent fire etc.

The recommendations given in the opinions were complied with in 71.4% of the cases, in 28.6% of the cases they were not complied with, while in 12 cases the time limit for compliance has not yet expired. As regards compliance with the recommended measures to improve equality issued to public authorities and other persons, the rate of compliance is 98.4% which together with compliance with the recommendations given in the opinions makes up an average compliance rate of 85.1%. The trend of increasing compliance with the Commissioner's recommendations observed in previous years has continued. The instances of non-compliance with the recommendations were primarily those of discriminatory speech in the

public sphere against the LGBT+ population and members of the Roma national minority, discrimination on the grounds of membership in political, trade union and other organisations, failure to provide services to children with disabilities, as well as discrimination against graduate lawyers who completed private faculties.

Compliance with the Commissioner's recommendations has resulted in easier exercise of the rights or elimination of obstacles for their exercise, and improved position of the social groups and individuals concerned. Thus, for example, recommendations have resulted in: the improved treatment of women in gynaecology and obstetrics clinics; ensured accessibility of certain public facilities (medical centres, municipalities, branches of the National Health Insurance Fund, public enterprise "Pošte Srbije" (Serbia Postal Service), hospitals, special rehabilitation hospitals, school etc); increased number of programmes in formats accessible to persons with auditory or visual impairment; ensured consistent application of regulations relating to accessibility of buildings at the local self-government level; increased number of women who are members of Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts; increased attention directed at female sport; the expanded list of medicinal products covered by the National Health Insurance Fund; the expanded list of health care facilities where persons with rare disease can exercise their right to vouchers; improved access to banking products and services for refugees, persons with approved subsidiary protection and asylum seekers; rectification of the consequences of discriminatory acting of employers in individual cases of discrimination in employment procedure or at work; ensured personal aide service in individual cases; an instruction submitted to all local self-government units on acting and inter-municipal cooperation when ensuring the personal aide and personal assistant service; developed desegregation plans in certain schools near settlements populated mainly by the Roma; in specific cases: support provided to families after a fire, discriminatory graffiti removed, parent who do not exercise parental right were allowed to have insight in grades and results achieved by their children, facilitated reception of persons in homelessness situation in shelters, registration of persons without registered address of residence etc.

Following a decision of the Constitutional Court determining that the provision of the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children is unconstitutional, the disputable Article was amended and the manner of calculation of wage compensation was unified for the duration of maternity leave and absence from work for child care for women who were prevented from working because of complications in pregnancy maintenance and women who had no complications during pregnancy in such a manner that instead of taking into account 18 months preceding the month when maternity leave began for the calculation of wage compensation, 18 months preceding absence from work due to complications in maintenance of pregnancy are taken into account.

In the process of enactment of laws and other regulations, the Commissioner issued a total of 26 opinions on drafts of laws and other legal documents. Some ministries, in breach of the law, fail to submit draft laws and other regulations for an opinion. Another problem, in breach of a legal duty, is lack of assessment of the impact of regulations on the exercise of social and economic rights of vulnerable persons which is mandatory in accordance with Article 14 of the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination. Such practice results in the adoption of regulations which, when applied, cause consequences that were not considered during their passing, have negative effects on certain social groups or put citizens in a less favourable position. In several cases, after adoption of regulations without compliance with the statutory procedure, the procedure for review of constitutionality and legality was initiated before the Constitutional Court, such as in case of the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children and the Law amending the Law on the Procedure of Registration with Real Estate Cadastre and Infrastructure Cadastre.

In addition, this institution has been emphasizing for years that certain regulations, strategic documents and/or action plans have not been passed or amended for a longer period of time, such as the Family Law, the Law on Extra-Judicial Proceedings, the Labour Law, the Law on Working Practice, the Law on Certification of Signatures, Manuscripts and Transcripts, the Law on Infringements, the Law on Enforcement of Criminal Sanctions etc., while the Convention No. 190 of the International Labour Organisation has not been ratified. Also, documents have not been passed relating to the development of adult education, socially responsible business, implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, the improvement of the position of national minorities etc. The adoption of strategic documents and the development of action plans are necessary to establish a framework for acting, or ensure the continuity in the implementation of measures and activities, and it is also important for strategic documents to be passed on the basis of an analysis of the situation, on actual bases and citizens' needs and to include means for the achievement of objectives leading to the improvement of the quality of citizens' lives.

The institution also issued several initiatives for amendments to certain regulations, some of which affect a number of citizens, including: the Law on Social welfare, the Criminal Code, the Law on Enforcement of Criminal Sanctions, the Law on Public Order and Peace, the Law on Procedure of Registration with Real Estate Cadastre and Infrastructure, the Law on Transplantation of Human Organs, The Law on Human Cells and Tissues, The Law on Rights of Veterans, Disabled Veterans, Civilian Invalids of War and Members of Their Families, the Law on Health Care or a special regulation that would govern the work of Urgent Medical Assistance services, the Bylaw on the List of Medicinal Products Covered by Compulsory Health Insurance, the Bylaw on Detailed Conditions and Standards for the Provision of Social Welfare Services etc. An initiative was submitted on several occasion to the Ministry of Justice to pass secondary legislation in accord-

ance with the Law amending the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, relating to keeping of records of the protection against discrimination, according to which courts must submit to the Commissioner anonymised decisions in this field for the previous year until 31 March of the current year at the latest. However, although the deadline expired, this piece of secondary legislation was not passed, and the Commissioner was thus not able to create these records.

The importance of the appropriate application of regulations is also evident from the case of a “private” faculty and graduate lawyers who completed this faculty, who contacted the Commissioner. They stated that they were discriminated when they were registered with the Directory of Trainee Lawyers and Trainee Lawyers who are Volunteers at the Bar Association of Belgrade. Namely, contrary to the provisions of the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, the Bar Association have not decided on their requests although they at the same time decided on requests filed by persons who completed a “state” faculty of law, stating that the Rules of Procedure of the Board of Directors allows them not to pass a decision when an equal number of members vote “for” and “against”, although the provisions of the Law on General Administrative Proceedings lay down that in situations when the number of votes is equal, the vote of a chairperson of a collegial authority is decisive.

In the course of 2024, the Commissioner initiated one strategic lawsuit against the Bar Association of Niš because of discrimination on the grounds of age, while three other strategic lawsuits initiated in previous years are still ongoing, including one in which the Commissioner intervenes as a third party. Two lawsuits were initiated because of discrimination against children with disabilities, and one because of discriminatory speech against LGBTI persons. In 2024, two criminal charges were filed to a competent prosecutor’s office. Two criminal charges were filed because of discrimination against persons on the grounds of their Roma national affiliation and one because of discrimination on the grounds of sex.

During the year, an informal student group carried out situation testing of architectural accessibility of social work centres in 17 municipalities in Belgrade. According to the report, three buildings of the City Centre for Social Work department are not accessible for persons with disabilities, which will supported by evidence in complaints. Situation testing has huge potential in terms of providing stronger evidence of discriminatory conduct in individual cases, and is also used to raise public awareness and develop public policies, which why it should be used to a greater extent. A proposal for review of constitutionality and legality of the Law on Procedure of Registration with Real Estate Cadastre and Infrastructure was also filed with the Constitutional Court.

The Regular Annual Report of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality for 2023 was submitted to the National Assembly in March 2024, but was not reviewed during the year, either in a meeting of the competent parliamentary committee or in a plenary session.

We prepared a number of publications, including: *Analysis of the Legal Framework Relevant for the Field of Inheritance*; *Prevalence of Hate Speech in Serbian Media*; *Legal Framework Relevant for Marginalised Groups of Women in the Republic of Serbia*; *Equality Code - Guidelines on Developing a Code of Antidiscrimination Policies for Employers in Serbia*; *Guidance on Implementing Activities Concerning Reasonable Adaptation of Workplaces/Jobs to Persons with Disabilities*.

We also conducted three surveys: *Perception of the Roma Community on Discrimination*, *Survey on Inheritance Rights and Attitudes towards Inheritance in Serbia* and *Survey on Perception of Women at Increased Risk of Discrimination on Gender Equality*.

In addition to the foregoing, a number of trainings and workshops were held on the subject of recognising and responding to discrimination, as well as on applying the anti-discrimination regulations. The trainings were attended by more than 1,200 participants, including police officers, the staff of the Ministry of Defence and the Serbian Armed Forces, members of parliament, employees at the National Employment Service, representatives of all registered national councils of national minorities, teachers, non-teaching staff and representatives of students' parliaments in primary and secondary schools, the youth, students and pupils, employees in automotive, electrical and textile industries, representatives of companies and employees in human resources services, employees in local self-government units, civil servants, persons living in informal settlements, representatives of the media etc.

We held a number of conferences and expert meetings during the year. To mark the International Tolerance Day, we held the regular annual conference dedicated to the promotion of equality and tolerance entitled *Everyone Should Know What Equality Means*. At the conference, the traditional annual media awards for tolerance were awarded and the winners of the "Municipality/City of Equal Opportunities" for 2024 were announced. In the TV/radio category Amela Bajrović (Freemedia.rs), Tamara Stojanović (TV N1), Jovana Urhin (TV Una) and Tanja Komarica (TV Blic) were awarded. In the online media/portals category Aleksandar Đokić ("Vreme" portal), Slađana Dimirtijević (UNS portal), Dragana Prica (021.rs) and Ganja Nikolić ("Niške vesti" portal) were awarded, while in the print media category, prizes were awarded to Olivera Milošević (Politika) and Stefan Slavković (Lice ulice). This year's winner of the "Municipality/City of Equal Opportunities" award was the municipality of Vrnjačka Banja, while awards for the exceptional contribution to the promotion of equality were presented to the city of Sombor and the municipality of Trstenik. We also hosted the exhibition *Great Women of Serbian Culture* at the House of Jevrem Grujić in Belgrade, with the supporting workshops/roundtables for primary and secondary school pupils.

We also hosted the conference under the title *My Future – Who Should Take Care of It? For Greater Inclusion of Older Persons*, dedicated to innovations in the care for older persons, promotion of active and healthy aging, digital literacy, as

well as achievements and challenges faced by the elderly and their caregivers. The conference *Light and Shadow – the Roma in the Education System* presented the findings of a survey on the Roma community perception of discrimination. To celebrate the International Women's Day, 8 March, we organised the panel discussion under the title *Gender Equality – from Priority to Identity Crisis*, while the property rights and women's renunciation of their inheritance was discussed at the conference under the title *Fair Inheritance – a Step Towards Women's Empowerment*. The conference under the title *Between Law and Reality: Women's Perspectives on Gender Equality in Serbia* was also held on the same occasion, which presented the results of a survey of the perception of gender equality from the perspective of women in Serbia, as well as an analysis of the legal framework relating to discrimination against women from vulnerable social groups, with the aim of contributing to a comprehensive overview of the situation and the shaping of public policies in the field of gender equality. During the year, a conference was also held where the main results were presented of surveys under the title *Attitude of Citizens on Discrimination in Serbia* and *Attitude of Representatives of Public Authorities Towards Discrimination* conducted in the previous year. To mark the International Day for Countering Hate Speech, the conference under the title *Countering Hate Speech – Through the Promotion of Dialogue and Tolerance Towards the Elimination of the Cause* was organised.

The World Children's Day was solemnly marked by the award of prizes and exhibition of the best children's work from the Commissioner's competition "Bridge of Understanding – Intergenerational Solidarity". More than 700 pupils sent their works on the topic of intergenerational cooperation this year, which speaks of children's awareness of intergenerational cooperation and exchange.

We conducted our regular programme "Moot Court in the Field of Protection against Discrimination", designed to build the capacities, knowledge and skills of future lawyers, students at faculties of law in the Republic of Serbia, for the protection against discrimination. This year, the case concerned discrimination on the grounds of national affiliation in the digital sphere. Teams from the Faculty of Law of the University in Novi Sad won the first and the second places at the competition, student Jovana Radak from the same University was awarded as the best speaker, while the team from the Faculty of Law in Niš won the prize in the category of the best written petition.

As part of the programme under the title "Don't Judge a Book by Its Covers – Living Library in Serbia", implemented by the Commissioner since 2012, three Living Libraries were held during the reporting year, including in Indija, Bečej and Ripanj. Also, the traditional action "Equally to the Finnish Line" was held for the 13th time at the 37th Belgrade Marathon.

Activities of the Commissioner's Youth Advisory Panel continued throughout the year, through cooperation in matters concerning elimination and protection

against discrimination of children and young persons, consultations, regular meetings and thematic activities. Six educational workshops for members of the Panel with the aim of empowering the youth to recognise the examples of human rights human rights violation in their environment, as well as to convey a strong message of the importance of the respect of equality for every individual and the society as a whole. In addition, young panellists, together with representatives of the Commissioner's Professional Office, attended a training by the Council of Europe on the use of Compas/Compasito methodology, with the aim of strengthening the capacities of schools for education of children and the youth on human rights, after which they had an opportunity to take part as educators in eight workshops for teachers, non-teaching staff and representatives of students' parliaments in primary and secondary schools in Belgrade, Kragujevac, Novi Sad, Indija, Niš, Leskovac and Kovačica.

We also continued our successful cooperation within the European Network of Equality Bodies (EQUINET) through regular participation of representatives of the institution in the work of all working groups and clusters within this network. In addition to activities organised as part of working groups and clusters, the main event that marked activities of EQUINET in 2024 was certainly the adoption of two Directives establishing a set of minimum standards for equality bodies. The Commissioner actively participated in the work of the project under the title "Standards for Equality Bodies" and other activities related to the adoption of binding Directives on standards. Members of the EQUINET were also introduced to the legislative framework and the Commissioner's work, that has been factually operating since its establishment in accordance with the standards contained in the recently adopted European directives. This year, the Commissioner was also a co-founder of the new global UNESCO Network of Anti-Racism and Anti-Discrimination Officials, together with representatives of the USA, Canada, the EU, Germany, France, Italy, Ireland, Sweden, Brazil, Peru and Ecuador.

In the past, the Commissioner underscored time and again the limited human resource capacities of this institution, coupled with the fact that the number of employees has remained unchanged for years. According to the job classification, the Commissioner's Professional Service has 60 posts in total. In 2024, the Commissioner received the approval of the National Assembly to employ two persons. At the end of the year, there were 42 civil servants and public employees employed for an indefinite period and two fixed-term employees at the Commissioner's Cabinet. The occupancy of systematised jobs in the Commissioner's Professional Service was 73.33%, meaning that continual staffing of vacancies is needed, as highlighted in the conclusions of the National Assembly. New Rules of Procedure were passed during the reporting year.

To ensure timely and adequate response to citizens' needs, primarily public services of social welfare, health care, child protection, education, free legal aid services, inspection authorities, police etc., will need both quantitative and quali-

tative capacity building, as we have pointed out on numerous occasions over the years. It can be concluded from the citizens' addresses to the Commissioner that in certain cases they cannot exercise their rights or receive services or have difficulties in that regard due to lack of understanding or even knowledge, or unprofessional treatment by employees, which in certain situations constitutes discrimination. Adequate capacities and continual education of officers, employment and advancement based on performance, knowledge and work, would contribute to an improved response to citizens' needs. In addition, citizens have been pointing to complicated procedures for the exercise of certain rights, the duration of procedures, a large number of necessary documents, waiting, unclear manners for the exercise of rights etc., which leads to a conclusion that it is necessary to further simplify the procedures, with regular control of the compliance with and application of all regulations and strengthening of inspection and/or control authorities. Although these issues have been addressed intensely in recent years, and operations are shifting from counters to eGovernment, account should be taken of the fact that not all citizens, particularly the elderly population, are not able to use services in this manner, which is why it is necessary to create such public policies that would ensure unobstructed exercise of rights.

To improve the quality of life of all citizens, it is also necessary to understand the essence of human rights, as well as mechanisms for their protection, with a high level of provision of information to citizens and citizens' awareness and creation of cultural and social discourse where discrimination is not tolerated, and equality is respected and supported with implied equality of everyone before the law. This includes full application of the anti-discrimination legislative framework by all public authorities, keeping up with international and domestic practice and policies, as well as efficient functioning of mechanisms for the protection against discrimination, the Commissioner and courts.

The Commissioner's practice and examination of relevant data show evident lack of the scope and the type of social welfare services, their availability and continuity. *The Strategy for Deinstitutionalisation and Development of Community-Based Services for the period 2022–2026 inter alia* states that certain results were achieved in practice as regards children and youth, however, as regards persons with intellectual and mental difficulties, the results are not satisfactory. However, although this Strategy was passed more than a year ago, the action plan and funds to finance its implementation and the development of community-based social welfare services are increasingly delayed, as indicated in the European Commission's *Serbia 2024 Report*, while public expenses for social welfare and budget transfers, as a share of GDP, continue to decrease. Certain examples show that persons cannot exercise certain services at all or cannot exercise them continually, cannot be integrated in the society, namely, attend schools, find employment etc., which leads to their unequal position or discrimination on the grounds of various personal

characteristics, mainly disability, age and health status. Another problem is existence of a large number of informal caregivers, mainly women, due to the lack of organised services, which burdens them additionally, prevents them from inclusion in the labour market, creates financial dependence and deepens gender inequality. These problems have been present for a longer period of time and we have been emphasizing them through various opinions and recommended measures, as well as through regular annual reports. The lack of integrated social welfare and health care services is also evident, as well as of inter-sectoral actions of these systems, and also education, employment, police and judiciary and other state authorities, local self-government units and civil society organisations, to achieve optimum results in terms of the exercise of rights and thus in terms of the improvement of citizens' position.

In view of the foregoing, it is necessary to work more intensely on the provision of all necessary social welfare services in accordance with the population needs, the review of the existing standards, standardisation of new and the development of innovative services, with promotion of cooperation between local communities, as well as inter-sectoral cooperation between various systems, which is a duty of local self-governments laid down by the law.

The year behind us was marked by numerous cases of gender-based and peer violence. The root of violence is in unequal position, patriarchal behaviour patterns, sexism, misogyny, prejudice and stereotypes against certain social groups, i.e. discrimination as a negative social phenomenon, which is why the Commissioner has been continually pointing to the link between discrimination against women and gender-based violence. The media reports are often sensationalistic, false and unprofessional, even when they report about tragedies, they violate the right to privacy of victims, witnesses and families and presumption of innocence of suspects and disregard the public interest. However, an analysis of the media content also shows evident progress in reporting on gender-based violence, which is the result of the work of female members of the Female Journalists against Violence group and the Commissioner, who have been continually pointing to the need to respect the journalists' code of ethics, as well as that violence must not be relativised in media reports nor can justification be sought for perpetrators.

Femicide is the most drastic form of gender-based violence, and 19 women were killed last year. Gender-based violence requires continuous monitoring of the situation and urgent response by appropriate measures in the protection and prevention system. Given that a national control mechanism for monitoring cases of femicide has not yet been established, although it is planned under the Strategy for Combating Violence against Women, during the reporting year we resubmitted the initiative to establish this mechanism. We have also submitted several initiatives to amend the criminal legislation regarding the definition of sexual violence based on the concept of lack of consent, as well as Articles relating to the criminal

offense of illegal termination of pregnancy, sexual intercourse with a physically or mentally helpless person, transmission of HIV infection, as well as the introduction of a separate criminal offence of abuse and publication of sexually explicit content, a separate criminal offence of femicide, and also the introduction of an obligation for the competent authorities to always and in all cases inform the victim of gender-based and domestic violence, as well as the victim of human trafficking, about the release of the convicted person or his/her escape from prison. The legal framework in this regard has not been amended.

In a survey we conducted on women's perception of gender equality, female respondents indicated insufficiently stringent sanctions for perpetrators and failure to enforce law in practice as the main problem in response to violence, which points to shortcomings in the judiciary system, as well as that civil servants are insufficiently trained to recognise and adequately respond to cases of violence. On the other hand, financial dependence and inability to manage one's property increase the risk of undergoing a form of violence. Women who own their own property and income are more independent and more ready to report violence than those women who do not have financial stability or property. Renunciation of inheritance has significant legal consequences of which women are often unaware, which is why we resubmitted the initiative to amend the Law on Social Welfare relating to the requirements for the exercise of the entitlement to financial social assistance.

As regards peer violence, the media report almost every day on physical violence among children and youth, fights, injuries, insults, etc. We are insufficiently aware of the scale of violence in the digital world through modern technologies, which is why it is necessary to review it much more and in more depth. Addressing the problem of peer violence is one of the great challenges for the coming period, regardless of whether it is physical, verbal, digital or any other form of violence, which must be addressed by all institutions of the system, particularly educational, social, health care and judicial, but also non-governmental organizations and parents. Also, considering the consequences of violence on victims, especially in case of children, it is necessary to direct special attention to mental health.

During the year, within the scope of her competences, the Commissioner, worked on the problem of violence and continued implementing activities related to the improvement of the safety of children, in cooperation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Education, the University of Criminal Investigation and Police Studies, the Road Traffic Safety Agency, the OSCE Mission to Serbia and the Caritas Serbia Association. In the first semester of the school year 2024/2025, where 222,221 pupils from the 1st, 2nd, 5th and 8th grade took part in activities aimed at raising awareness among pupils of recognizing different forms of violence and discrimination in real and virtual environments, as well as acquiring knowledge about safe behaviour in traffic and emergencies. Also, during the year, activities were initiated to implement the project "The Commissioner's Youth Panel for the

Protection of Equality – Youth for Equality”, which will be accompanied by a peer education program aimed at recognizing and responding to discrimination, as well as the establishment of a peer educator network, who will be involved in the implementation of several education programs in primary and secondary schools in Serbia.

Statistical data collected and published by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia are of great importance for the review of the situation, planning and creation of policies based on data. According to the data contained in the report *Leave No One Behind!*, the proportion of the elderly population (65+) is increasing in Serbia and in the rest of Europe, which requires adjustment of public policies so that no one is left behind the development. In 2022, Serbia was among the countries with a large proportion of elderly population, and according to the projections, this population contingent will represent 24.1% of the total population in our country until 2041. Although the functional population index is increasing, the elderly in Serbia remain in a disadvantaged position, they are at higher risk of poverty, while women are at higher risk than men (24.6% compared with 20% in men). It is thus necessary to work on the provision of services that are necessary to the elderly who increasingly live alone, ensuring long-term care, more innovative services, sufficient support institutions, the use of modern technologies in the provision of support and services to the elderly, as well as formal and informal caregivers.

To achieve equality in the exercise of rights and the use of services, it is necessary to implement various types of interventions in several domains, from population policy measures to providing infrastructure, transportation to and from remote and less densely populated areas, employment and thus retention of the youth, providing all necessary services, primarily social and health care services in accordance with the population needs. Quite large funds are allocated to the planned population policy measures, while at the same time significantly less is allocated to necessary family support services. In almost all major cities, there is an evident lack of available places for children in state child day-care centres, which is compensated for in private day-care centres, although the conditions and prices are mainly different, as is illustrated by the Commissioner’s practice. Thus, due to the lack of available places in preschool institutions in the territory of a local self-government unit, we issued recommended measures aimed at making equal position of children attending preschool institutions established by the local self-government and children attending private preschool institutions. We also pointed out the mandatory priority enrolment in preschool institutions of children with disabilities.

Property status certainly has a great impact on the quality of life of people and their position in society. Poverty is one of the main causes of inequality and social exclusion. It should be noted that people who are poor and financially vulnerable are not a homogeneous group; instead, among them are people of different sex,

age, national affiliation, marital or family status, religious and political beliefs, etc. The fact is that poor citizens are less likely to contact the Commissioner because they rarely seek protection of their rights due to financial deprivation. The reason why poor citizens file complaints less often mainly stems from the fact that in the struggle for existence they are not familiar with the protection mechanisms, they are ashamed of their situation or they blame themselves because they did not ensure a better life. In order to respond to their problems in a timely and adequate manner, it is necessary to take account of the capacities of social, health care, child protection and free legal aid services, which we have been emphasizing continually.

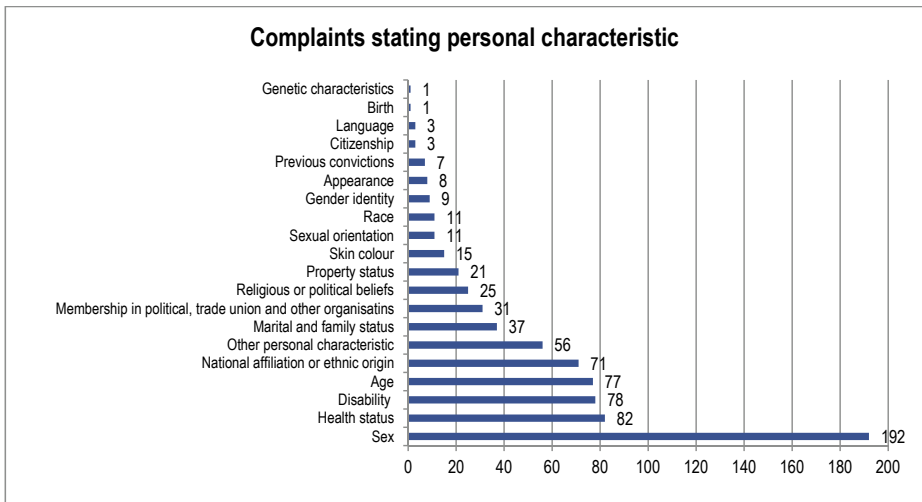
More efficient financial support for individuals and families in order to overcome social and living difficulties, well-targeted social policy measures, entry into the labour market, accessibility of education, support measures for families with children, ensuring universal child allowance, improving gender equality, work-life balance etc. would contribute to poverty reduction and more equal social inclusion of poor citizens. In that regard, it is necessary to amend the Law on Social Welfare to help reduce the number of persons living below the absolute poverty line, increase the amount and review the property census for the exercise of the right to provision of financial security to families and consider the possibilities for the introduction of social benefits for the elderly who have never worked and have not exercised the right to either pension or financial social assistance, and are socially vulnerable, as stated in the Commissioner's initiative.

Entry into the labour market, educational level and employment opportunities affect the position of each individual in society. The field of work and employment remained in this year again among the fields where the citizens most frequently contacted the Commissioner. In order to improve the position of citizens in the field of work and employment, it is also necessary to adjust labour legislation, particularly in terms of more precise regulation of the rights of workers who work outside employment, as well as intensified inspections in connection with various violations of workers' rights, which we have also been pointing out. When creating active employment policy measures and mechanisms, particularly in the local labour market, the effects of these measures should be taken into account, taking particular account of all categories of people who have difficulties in finding employment (including young people in residential care institutions, foster and guardian families; people aged over 50, especially women; the Roma; people with disabilities; former convicts; long-term unemployed persons, etc.). In addition, it is necessary to create measures that promote development and take into account the needs of the local labour market. Favourable long-term effects in terms of increased employment and improvement of the position of employees also imply more active involvement of employers in these processes.

To improve the situation through inclusive policies in the labour market, the Commissioner prepared the amended edition of the *Equality Code*, with the aim

of facilitating for the employers the process of developing internal documents for the application of the principle of equality in business, as an effective mechanism for identifying and preventing potential cases of discrimination at workplace. In parallel, educational workshops have been held for employers, and company representatives and employees in human resource services, and intensive efforts are underway to expand the network of employers who apply anti-discrimination labour policies in their business and strengthen their capacities through the signing of the *Partnership for Equality*.

In addition to these general problems, which are examined through the Commissioner's practice and other relevant sources, this Report also examines problems affecting specific social groups, taking into account the frequency of complaints filed with the Commissioner.



In the course of 2024, the trends from previous years continued in terms of frequency of citizens' complaints and contacts indicating sex as a personal characteristic (192 complaints). Also, 37 complaints were submitted to the Commissioner on the grounds of marital and family status as a personal characteristic. Having in mind that complaints on these two grounds were mainly submitted by women, and that a large number of cases involve discrimination on both grounds, the two grounds will be addressed jointly in the Report. In the field of health care, the majority of contacts and complaints were caused by inhuman and inadequate treatment in gynaecology and obstetrics clinics before, during and after childbirth. As regards discrimination on the grounds of sex and marital and family status in the field of work and employment, women still contact the Commissioner more frequently stating they were placed in a disadvantaged position after they return to work from maternity leave and absence from work for child care, in advance-

ment, professional advancement and also employment. The necessity was also emphasized to ensure conditions for improved work-life balance, the need to exercise equal rights in connection with childbirth, regardless of the fact whether women who are independent professionals or are employed with employers, to increase the capacities of pre-school institutions, higher financial empowerment of women and higher inclusion of men in care for children and other family members. It was emphasized in the course of the year that more should be done on the affirmation and recognition of women's contribution in science, culture, art and sport.

A number of complaints also referred to misogynistic, sexist statements and comments, as well as psychical, physical and digital violence. Although the causes of violence against women are very complex, one of the key reasons are the firmly rooted patriarchal stereotypes about gender roles in the family and the wider community. The risk of experiencing a form of violence is increased by financial dependence and the inability to manage one's property, which is why we continually point out the need for greater financial empowerment, primarily for women. In addition, it is necessary to emphasize the legal consequences of renouncing one's inheritance, which women more often renounce in favour of male relatives. Work on prevention, deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudice, prevention of all forms of violence, imposition of effective, proportionate and dissuasive sanctions and improvement of the legal framework in recognizing different forms of violence should constantly be a high priority of all relevant authorities, together with the improvement of the collection, monitoring and analysis of relevant data.

Persons with disabilities are one of the most vulnerable groups in all fields of social life, and the number and diversity of problems they face every day, the widespread stereotypes and prejudice, as well as their social and economic position, put them at greater risk of discrimination, and are often exposed to multiple and intersectional discrimination. This is the second grounds for discrimination based on citizens' complaints. As in previous years, in 2024, the Commissioner received a large number of complaints regarding the inaccessibility of various facilities, rights and services. Accessibility, both architectural and informational and communication, is one of the basic prerequisites for the equal participation of persons with disabilities in all fields of social life. Citizens also contacted the Commissioner because of the exercise of their rights in the field of work and employment, the right to education and the provision of various services, such as the personal aide and personal assistant service, and also other services, primarily health care and rehabilitation. All these were the reasons for the Commissioner to prepare and, as soon as possible after that, submit to the National Assembly the *Special Report on Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities*, which analysed and presented in detail the problems faced by persons with disabilities.

Health status as grounds for discrimination is a common ground stated by citizens in complaints in the Commissioner's practice, particularly after the major

health crisis caused by the coronavirus. In 2024, health status was the third most frequently stated ground in complaints, with it often being stated as the grounds for discrimination in combination with another personal characteristic, most frequently disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity and sex. Citizens pointed to problems in the provision of health services, long waiting lists for examinations and interventions, problems related to organ transplantation, the provision of emergency medical care, criteria for the coverage of certain medicinal products by the National Health Insurance Fund, particularly in case of persons with rare diseases, as well as the need for various social and health care services that are not adapted to the needs of people with autism, persons with rare diseases, etc. Patients with Alzheimer's disease, who often depend only on their close family members, also point to the lack of day centres and urgently necessary support services, while people living with HIV continue to point to stigmatization and victimization in the exercise of the right to health care, as well as problems in the work and employment process.

Discrimination on the grounds of age, as the fourth most frequent grounds stated in complaints submitted during the reporting year, in accordance with the law, covers all age groups. In case of children, these complaints are mainly submitted in the areas of education, social welfare and health care. A number of complaints were filed regarding the allocation of financial resources for free textbooks due to the fact that they were not provided in the entire territory of the country. Also, parents/adoptive parents contacted the Commissioner regarding one-off assistance that they did not receive although they meet the requirements. Persons aged between 18 and 65 mainly submit complaints in the field of work and employment. Young people also experience problems when they try to live independently, because they have difficulties accessing the labour market and resolving housing issues. Discrimination in the field of work and employment of young people, particularly women, implies a high share in fixed-term contracts or contracts for work outside employment, while "older" employees indicated that due to their age they face problems with professional training, advancement or dismissal. People aged over 65 indicated problems in exercising various rights and services due to the introduction of e-Government, pointing to the inability to contact the authorities directly, by mail and in person on the counter. Contacts by the elderly show the need for support and care services, the risk of poverty, loneliness and social isolation. The consequences of discrimination on the grounds of age are serious and far-reaching, regardless of the age group. Prolonged exposure to this form of discrimination may impact health and the quality of life and contribute to social isolation and loneliness, which by default increases the risk of all kinds of violence, as well as potential neglect and abuse, and in particular contributes to mental health deterioration.

If we observe the Commissioner's practice regarding discrimination on the grounds of national affiliation or ethnic origin, this year again the majority of complaints were filed by members of the Roma national minority (55%), while complaints

were also filed by members of the Albanian, Croatian, Romanian, Russian, Bulgarian, Vlach, Egyptian, Jewish and other national minorities. Negative attitudes and prejudice towards the Roma lead to social distancing and are also often expressed through social networks, and complaints relate to insults and belittling, etc. The risk of the formation of segregated school classes is also a problem, particularly when schools are located near settlements populated mainly by Roma. Inclusion in the labour market and employment are of great importance for the improvement of the position of the Roma. Citizens also contacted the Commissioner because of numerous problems of residents of substandard settlements. More persistent work is needed to empower and strengthen the capacity of the Roma community, deconstruct stereotypes and prejudice about the Roma, together with building of the capacities of local self-governments and educating employees in all systems, as well as other activities in certain fields. As regards other national minorities, during visits to councils, the majority expressed dissatisfaction with the allocated budget funds, while some of them stated that the identity of members of national minorities is not sufficiently respected or that national affiliation is unnecessarily emphasized in a negative context in media reporting. Representatives of councils, in most cases, stated that they have no problems, that they are well accepted in the community and that they mainly do not face discrimination. Individual cases are addressed directly in accordance with the situation or by using legal protection mechanisms. They are aware of the work of the institution and express satisfaction with the cooperation with the Commissioner.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of complaints to the institution about discrimination on the grounds of membership in political, trade union and other organizations, mainly in the field of work and employment. It has been observed that in this area complainants or witnesses often point out that they cannot find employment because they are not politically active and do not belong to any political party, or are members of a political other than the ruling party, and that because of their different attitudes or opinions they are assigned to a lower position, or their employment is even terminated. They state that they do not trust institutions, they are afraid of the consequences of reporting, that the law is not the same for everyone because individuals are “protected”, have the power to decide and “can freely break laws”, which is why they do not seek protection or withdraw from further proceedings, particularly because they cannot remain anonymous. This makes facts finding difficult, and consequently also the protection citizens against discrimination on these grounds.

In the preceding year, the trend of fewer complaints submitted on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity as personal characteristics continued, while some of the complaints referred to discrimination on both grounds. The complaints pointed to discriminatory speech, violence, as well as problems in the field of healthcare related to the availability of hormone therapy and healthcare workers with appropriate specialties. Fear of victimization is still present, which is

why a number of cases of discrimination certainly remain unreported. Members of the LGBT+ community face numerous prejudice and stereotypes, inappropriate speech in the public sphere that the media often promote through their reporting, discriminatory treatment, homophobia, transphobia, and even violence.

In the course of the year, we also received a number of complaints on the grounds of other personal characteristics, such as property status, skin colour, race, appearance and previous criminal conviction. In addition, there were several complaints on the grounds of other personal characteristics, i.e. personal characteristics that are not explicitly listed in the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, such as a permanent place of residence, a temporary place of residence, the status of an asylum seeker, a refugee or an internally displaced person.

Complaints often state multiple personal characteristics as the grounds for discrimination. These are instances of multiple or intersectional discrimination, which constitutes a grave form of discrimination, because it has far greater consequences for the victim. Discrimination against a person on the grounds of two or more personal characteristics the effects of which can be distinguished is termed multiple discrimination, while intersectional discrimination is the case if it is impossible to distinguish between the effects of individual personal characteristics in the discrimination against a person on multiple discriminatory grounds. In practice it is not uncommon for complainants to list multiple personal characteristics in situations where they are unsure which personal characteristic was the discriminatory grounds. Complainants usually refer to sex and marital and family status, age and disability, health status, national affiliation etc.

As in previous year, due to the fact that we live in an era of rapid technical and technological development, which is also characterised by the development of artificial intelligence (AI), we have separately covered discrimination in this field, noting that AI development has a huge potential to improve various aspects of human life, but is also fraught with numerous challenges and risks concerning ethical, legal, social and political issues. The Commissioner organised and supported a number of activities contributing to the capacity building of employees and the general public regarding the protection against discrimination in the development and use of AI, as well as in the digital sphere in general, to ensure AI is developed and used in such a manner as to respect human rights, dignity and democracy.

Discriminatory speech in the public sphere is still present, most frequently against the Roma, LGBT+ population, women or national minorities and in particular political opponents. The end of the year was marked by faculty blockades and students' protests due to their dissatisfaction with the actions by the relevant authorities in connection with the tragedy that occurred when the canopy of the Novi Sad Railway Station building collapsed, killing 15 people and seriously injuring several others. The society has become polarized and public discourse has become more heated, with inappropriate and offensive speech, and also endangering the safety of protest participants. Mutual

insults have become a part of everyday life. Certain public figures and those from cultural life have in some cases also been exposed to inappropriate, humiliating and offensive speech, as forms of discrimination, and journalists have also been exposed to various attacks while doing their jobs. Discriminatory attitudes, harassment and degrading treatment by public figures are particularly dangerous, because they influence public opinion to a greater extent, encouraging stereotype and prejudices, which have far-reaching consequences. In this regard, a broader social dialogue should be opened in order to find solutions to change the narrative, especially in the political sphere and against women. It is also necessary to implement as much education as possible about discrimination as an inadmissible act, and to work on involving numerous social actors in recognizing and preventing hate speech and other forms of inadmissible speech, especially among political opponents. In the public and media space, it is necessary to implement programs and encourage topics that promote a culture of tolerance, non-discrimination, respect, understanding and appreciation of diversity, gender equality and intergenerational solidarity.

The recommendations have been given on the basis of an analysis of the overall situation regarding the exercise of equality by different social groups, by all discriminatory grounds and areas of discrimination. General recommendations are listed first (those which are common for all personal characteristics and social groups), followed by recommendations grouped by certain personal characteristics against which a higher number of complaints were filed, while recommendations pertaining to personal properties which featured in fewer complaints are listed cumulatively. As noted in earlier reports, some of the recommendations can be implemented in the following year, while others will require continual or extended future efforts, which is why certain recommendations given in previous years have been repeated.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADVANCE EQUALITY AND ELIMINATE DISCRIMINATION

General recommendations to advance equality:

- When adopting regulations and public policies, it is necessary to conduct regulatory impact assessments to determine the impact of regulations or policies on socioeconomically vulnerable persons or groups and to assess their compliance with the equality principle (public authorities at all levels);
- Draft laws and proposals of other legal documents should be submitted to the Commissioner for an opinion. The ministries also should, in respect of every reporting year, submit to the Commissioner a report on the activities they have undertaken to advance the equality of the social groups at an increased risk of discrimination (all ministries).

- Amend, or supplement or pass certain regulations harmonised with the international standards in relevant fields (such as regulations on social welfare, registration with the real estate cadastre and the infrastructure, financial support to families with children, regulations in connection with legal capacity etc.), with the aim of improving the position and achieving equality of all social groups (Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography).
- Develop strategic documents and actions plans that have expired or are about to expire - such as the strategies for the development of adult education, corporate social responsibility, the Action Plan on Implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, the action plan to improve the situation of national minorities, the action plan for the implementation of the deinstitutionalisation strategy etc. (line ministries as proposers).
- Review the existing human resource norms and establish criteria based on actual needs of services, strengthen the capacities, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, of social welfare, health care, child protection, free legal aid services, strengthen inspection authorities and intensify inspections. Through programmes and projects, particularly at the local community level, provide support to civil society organisations engaged in the protection of human rights, or rights of certain groups of persons (Ministry of Finance and line ministries, local self-government units).
- Continually work towards simplifying the procedures for the exercise of certain rights (by reducing the number of required documents, expediting the procedures, more efficient provision of information etc.), provide education on the use of e-Government, especially for the elderly (ministries, local self-government and territorial autonomy authorities, Office for Information Technologies and e-Government).
- Adopt a secondary legislation document to govern the manner of keeping court records of final and enforceable judgments and decisions passed in misdemeanour, criminal and civil proceedings for violations of anti-discrimination provisions and the manner of providing these records to the Commissioner (Ministry of Justice).
- Strengthen the Commissioner's capacities, both in terms of the number of employees and in terms of financial resources required to establish records in accordance with the law (Ministry of Finance, National Assembly).
- Regulate work from home, flexible working hours, work outside of employment, seasonal work, job placement etc. in order to improve the situation of workers. Take action to ratify International Labour Organisation's Convention

No. 190 concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work. Adopt secondary legislation to implement the Law on Social Entrepreneurship (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs).

- Implement population policy measures taking account of the gender perspective, support measures for families with small children relating to work-life balance, ensuring a sufficient number and availability of child care institutions, higher participation of men in care for children and their upbringing, for employment and motivating young persons to remain in the country (Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, Ministry of Education, local self-government units).
- Continually implement education programmes to recognise and respond to discrimination, sexual harassment and introduce the audience to protection mechanisms for all actors, including employees at public authorities, educational institutions other areas of social life. Work on the recognising and the prevention of hate speech, harassing and degrading treatment, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and misogyny, as well as their adequate and timely sanctioning (National Academy of Public Administration, Judicial Academy, line ministries, prosecutor's offices, courts etc.).
- Increase the number of informational campaigns, events and content in the public sphere and the media, implement programmes and encourage topics that promote a culture of mutual respect, non-discrimination, tolerance, understanding and respecting diversity, gender equality, intergenerational solidarity (Ministry of Information and Telecommunications, Ministry of Culture, Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media, public service broadcasters and other media, local self-government units and others).
- Raise awareness of the importance of mental health with the improvement of psychosocial support services for all age groups to protect mental health and overcome traumatic experiences caused by violence and discrimination (Ministry of Health, health care institutions, Youth counselling Centres, the media).

Recommendations to advance equality by specific personal characteristics:

Sex and marital and family status:

- Establish a national control mechanism to monitor cases of femicide, improve synchronised and coordinated acting by all stakeholders to prevent violence against women and domestic violence; timely penalise the perpetrators (competent ministries and Council for Elimination of Domestic Violence).

- Amend the Criminal Code to define sexual violence on the basis of the concept of absence of consent and by penalising as a criminal offence the abuse and publishing of sexually explicit recordings; the Law on Enforcement of Criminal Sanctions by imposing a duty on the competent authorities to notify the victim *ex officio* of the release of the convicted person or his escape from prison in cases of gender based and domestic violence, as well as trafficking; the Law on Public Order and Peace in terms of amendments to the infringement laid down against female sexual workers in such a manner to lay down sanctioning only of the service user, with the development of support for women who have left and/or wish to leave prostitution and women who are victims of human trafficking (Ministry of Justice, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, local self-government units, the Centre for Protection of Victims of Trafficking).
- Review the excluding requirement under the Law on Social Welfare for the exercise of the entitlement on financial social assistance in case of renunciation of one's inheritance. Improve provision of information on the rights and consequences of renunciation of inheritance, particularly for women (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Serbian Notary Chamber, notaries public).
- Establish a special fund to provide payment of child support in case a parent fails to comply with a final and enforceable court decision after divorce (Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography, Ministry of Finance).
- Continue work on the improvement of spatial and human resource capacities of gynaecology and obstetrics clinics, ensure the respect of women's rights, adequate and human treatment in accordance with regulations and modern professional standards in health care institutions (Ministry of Health, gynaecology and obstetrics clinics).
- Revoke or reduce VAT on female hygiene products and increase the number of available contraceptives the cost of which is covered by the National Health Insurance Fund (Ministry of Finance and National Health Insurance Fund).
- Ensure the inclusion and promotion of equal representation of women and men in all spheres of social life, particularly decision-making and exercise of public functions at all levels, as well as implementation of gender-balanced human resources policy and keeping of gender sensitive statistics, in accordance with international standards. Increase participation of women in the security sector, particularly on the decision-making positions in the armed forces and the police (ministries, local self-government and territorial autonomy units).
- Afford equal rights to women who are independent professionals, women farmers and women working under contracts outside of an employment

relationship equally with employed women in terms of all allowances and benefits paid in connection with childbirth, child care and special child care and harmonise all relevant legislation in this context (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Finance and others).

- Promote: the employment of women, particularly young and those aged over 50, development of female entrepreneurship and agricultural holdings, as well as attainment of equality in access to jobs, equal pay, equal conditions for promotion, more balanced representation of women in managerial posts and in management bodies (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, Ministry of Rural Welfare, National Employment Service, local self-government and territorial autonomy units, employers).
- Plan measures relating to the development of female sport, its promotion at all levels, prevention of gender-based violence and sexual harassment, as well as higher investment in female sport (Ministry of Sport).

Disability:

- Develop a systemic, long-term plan at the national level to eliminate architectural barriers and improve accessibility in all facilities in public use and public areas (Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure and other ministries within their remit).
- Intensify efforts to implement universal design across all areas to enable unobstructed access to services, including public transportation, information, communication, media content, accessible polling stations and election material, rehabilitation health care services, emergency services, helplines etc. (competent ministries, Republic Electoral Commission, city electoral commissions, local self-government and territorial autonomy units).
- Change the medical approach in the capacity assessment of persons with disabilities, ensure preconditions for independent decision-making and promoting the abilities of persons with disabilities, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography, National Health Insurance Fund).
- Continue deinstitutionalisation process while ensuring availability and continuity of community-based services in accordance with the needs of persons with disabilities, including the services of personal aide, personal assistant, respite care, clubs, housing with support etc. (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, local self-government and territorial autonomy units).

- Increase employment of persons with disabilities, especially in the public sector, through real employment, rather than making payments to the budget, continue applying effective professional rehabilitation measures and active employment policy to achieve improved effects in employment of persons with disabilities (National Employment Service, public authorities).

Health status:

- Improve regulations relating to the work of urgent medical assistance services (Ministry of Health).
- Re-establish the full legislative framework to ensure transplantation of organs and tissues from deceased persons and increase the number of transplantations and reduce waiting time for transplantation (Ministry of Health).
- Improve accessibility and availability of health care services for all citizens by providing appropriate capacities, both in terms of facilities and in terms of equipment and medical staff, by forming regional centres and smaller medical outposts, mobile teams, visiting services etc. (Ministry of Health, Republic Health Insurance Fund, local self-government and territorial autonomy units).
- Provide necessary regular education to medical staff about antidiscrimination regulations and advancing equality in the provision of health care services (Ministry of Health, National Health Insurance Fund, local self-government and territorial autonomy units).
- Ensure missing health care services, such as palliative care, simplify procedures for the exercise of rights, reduce waiting lists for medical interventions and examinations, raise the level of citizens' awareness and knowledge of health care rights and services and the protection of patients' rights (Ministry of Health, Republic Health Insurance Fund, local self-government and territorial autonomy units).
- Continue work on the provision of more efficient modern therapies, medicinal products, materials and aids, covered by the National Health Insurance Fund (Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Health, National health Insurance Fund).
- Implement educational programmes for employers to prevent discrimination, especially on the grounds of health status and disability, as well as assignment of employees with health problems on appropriate posts (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, National Employment Service, National Academy of Public Administration, employers' associations).

Age:

- Continually improve coordinated and effective action of all institutions within the system to protect against violence, coupled with further development of support services for victims and children who witnessed violence, provide free legal aid and raise public awareness of recognition and reporting of violence. Educate children on safety, prevention and response in all cases of violence, especially sexual, peer and digital violence, with involvement of peer educators (Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Education, local self-government units).
- Improve the legislative and strategic frameworks by amending or adopting regulations on the youth, child rights, strategies on the prevention of and protection of children against violence, protocols for acting in cases of child marriages (Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography, Ministry of Tourism and Youth).
- Improve services for early development and inclusion of children, while ensuring that these are available to children across the entire territory of the Republic of Serbia; implement activities to enable the child to live in the family, in parallel with developing support services and increasing the coverage of children with such services (Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography, other competent authorities).
- Through affirmative action, improve availability of all levels of education, provide sound and continual support to children with disabilities and developmental disorders, Roma children, children in street situations and other children in need of support by improving inclusive education (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry of Tourism and Youth).
- Provide free textbooks to primary school pupils in all local self-government units from budget funds (local self-government units).
- Improve curricula relating to human rights, the Constitution and citizens' rights, increase the scope of sexual and reproductive health curricula, provide a sufficient number of accessible sport and cultural amenities in schools (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health).
- Design and implement public policies for participation of the youth in decision-making to improve their position, facilitate their access to the labour

market and ensuring housing for them (ministries and local self-government and territorial autonomy units).

- Increase the scope, type and availability of social welfare and integrated services, primarily social welfare and health care (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, social welfare institutions, local self-government units).
- Implement activities and projects that equally and in a planned manner include the elderly in various areas of social life and decision-making processes, encourage intergenerational solidarity, volunteerism, coupled with efforts to raise awareness of personal responsibility for dignified, active and healthy ageing (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry of Family welfare and Demography, social welfare institutions, local self-government units).
- Continually improve the status and developing the capacities of informal caregivers (working hours, work from home, paid leave, respite care, mutual assistance groups, education events etc.) (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography, local self-government units).

National affiliation and ethnic origin:

- Promote national, ethnic, religious, cultural and other diversity, coupled with the development of cross-cultural dialogue, mutual respect, mutual understanding and cooperation, promotion of examples of good practice and education (all public authorities).
- Undertake necessary measures to ensure the composition of state authorities, local self-government authorities and other public authorities reflects the national composition of the population in their territory by increasing the number of employed members of national minorities and their education and professional training (Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-government and others).
- Through an Action Plan to improve the position of national minorities, provide for adequate activities aimed at the prevention of discrimination, hate speech, harassing and degrading treatment (Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue).
- Work towards improving the situation of the Roma population, in particular Roma women and children, through capacity building, primarily at the local level, coupled with interdepartmental cooperation between different

stakeholders and establishment of integrated services for the obtaining of identity documents, access to adequate housing, health care, education and social welfare services and employment (competent ministries and local self-government units).

- Ensure continuity in the work of health mediators and pedagogical assistants and increase their numbers (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education).
- Implement incentives to increase participation of Roma children, reduce dropout rates and prevent segregation in the education system (Ministry of Education, local self-government units).
- Continually work on addressing of housing problems in substandard settlements, with adequate provision of access to water and electricity (local self-government units).

Other personal characteristics:

- Create conditions for reducing the number of persons living below the absolute poverty line, review the property census and other conditions to exercise the entitlement to family welfare benefits and consider the possibility of introducing of social allowance for the elderly who have never worked and have not earned the right to old-age pension, but are socially vulnerable (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry of Finance).
- Ensure the exercise of the right to identity documents, access to health care, social welfare and other services for persons in a homeless situation, together with an increased number of shelters and other services (Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry of Health, local self-government units).
- Amend the Law on Social Protection to make less stringent the conditions taken into account when deciding on the entitlement to financial social assistance, primarily the increase of landholding ceiling depending on the quality of land, particularly in elderly households. Provide child allowance for all children (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography).
- Increase control and ensure consistent application of labour legislation with regard to the prohibition of discriminating against job-seekers and employees in the public sector, in particular on the grounds of political, religious or other beliefs, as well as membership in political, trade union or other organisations (Labour Inspectorate, employers, ministries, local self-governments).
- Ensure equal treatment of graduate lawyers in registration with the directory of trainee lawyers and trainees who are volunteers, regardless of the fact whether they acquired their title on a state or a private faculty that comply

with the requirements in accordance with accreditation and a licence for work for the study programme law (bar associations).

- Undertake measures to improve the position of past convicts and their full social inclusion, without stigmatisation, especially in the employment process (local self-government units, social work centres, National Employment Service).
- Pass regulations to enable the registration of same-sex partnerships and regulate the effects, the legal consequences and the manner of their dissolution (competent ministries).
- Ensure continual availability of medicinal products for hormone therapy in the sex reassignment procedure (Ministry of Health, National Health Insurance Fund).

Note: Each recommendation indicates the authorities whose mandate predominantly covers the relevant area addressed by the recommendation, taking into account their status as proposers of legal documents and their implementation of policies, as these authorities are the drivers of the processes which need to be implemented. It is understood that the Government is, within its remit, the ultimate authority responsible for passing certain legal documents, while the National Assembly is the supreme legislative authority. With regard to compliance with the issued recommendations, the Commissioner will continue undertaking measures and activities within this institution's remit, and cooperating with all social stakeholders, aimed at advancing equality and protecting citizens against discrimination, which is why this institution is not specifically listed among the authorities responsible for implementing specific recommendations.

ABOUT THE COMMISSIONER FOR THE PROTECTION OF EQUALITY

The Commissioner is an individual state authority, established by the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination¹, autonomous and independent in performance of tasks set by the law. The Commissioner has a wide range of legal powers, which make him/her a central national authority specialised for the protection of citizens against discrimination and the promotion of equality. The independence and autonomy of the institution of the Commissioner are the basic postulates and the key prerequisites for the successful exercise of statutory competences.

Under the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, the Commissioner has the Professional Service, which has been constantly strengthening its qualitative capacities since its establishment. Under the Bylaw on Internal Organisation and Job Classification in the Commissioner's Professional Service, a total of 60 civil servants and public employees are systematised. The National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia endorsed this Bylaw. As at 1 January 2024, the Commissioner's Professional Service had 40 civil servants and public employees employed for an indefinite period. At the end of 2024, there were 42 civil servants and public employees employed for an indefinite period and two fixed-term employees at the Commissioner's Professional Service, meaning that the occupancy of systematised jobs was 73.33%.



Professional Service of the Commissioner, 2024

¹ *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* Nos. 22/09 and 52/21

For years now, the Commissioner has underscored the pressing need for increased human resource capacity, which was supported by the conclusions of the National Assembly from its sessions that addressed the regular reports, the Action Plan on Chapter 23 and other relevant documents. It should be noted in particular that the Law amending and supplementing the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination of 2021 introduced a whole new competence of the Commissioner, concerning the establishment and maintenance of records on protection against discrimination, which is impossible to exercise without increasing the human resource capacity of the Professional Service. To further increase the human resource capacities, it is necessary to fill the vacancies continually.

Employees at the Commissioner's Professional Service regularly attend online trainings organised by the National Academy for Public Administration on various topics, including: Personal Data Protection; Generative Artificial Intelligence and Chat GPT for Public Administration of the Republic of Serbia; Agile Internet Searches; How to be Creative; Preparation for work at the e-Registry Office; State Protocol with Elements of the Business Protocol; The Path to Happiness – Self-motivation Techniques; the English Language; and Performance Evaluation.

The employees also attended the following workshops and trainings: Improving Mentoring Skills (Mentoring Programme and the Role of Mentors), organised by the OSCE Mission; Antidiscrimination for Teaching and Non-teaching Staff in Serbian Schools – Compass Methodology (Youth Education on Human Rights), organised by the Council of Europe; Collecting Data on National Affiliation of Civil Servants, organised by the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue; Reforms in the Field of Antidiscrimination Normative Framework, focusing on the Rights of the LGBTI Community; National Training on Inclusion of Sexual and Gender-based Violence in the Scope of Monitoring Activities carried out at Prison and Detention Units, organised by OSCE/ODIHR; Social Inclusion of Foreigners in the Western Balkans – Access to Economic and Social Rights, organised by the Belgrade Human Rights Centre and Group 484; Discrimination on the Grounds of Gender Identity, the Rights and Status of Transgendered Persons, Medical and Legal Transition, organised by the Commissioner; Reasonable Adjustment and Intersectional Discrimination, organised by UN Women, UNFPA and UNDP; Professional Practice Programme – Induction Training, organised by the OSCE Mission; Training of Personal Data Protection Officers, organised by the Office for IT and e-Government.

The Commissioner took part in the Fair “Student Professional Practice in Public Administration 2024/2025”, organised by the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-government, with support from the EU project PAR Communication and Visibility. As part of the implementation of the Agreement on Cooperation and Provision of Public Administration Support to Higher Education

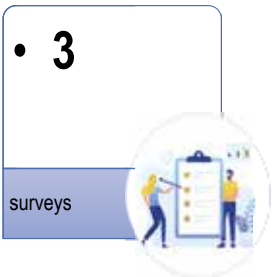
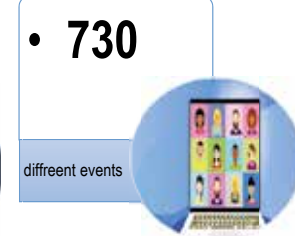
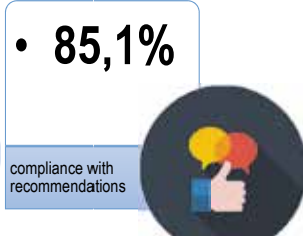
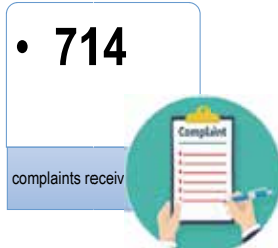
Institutions in the Education Process 2023/2024, students were in work placement arrangements at the institution.

Owing to full membership in the European Network of Equality Bodies (EQUINET), employees are actively involved in the work of all working groups of this network, which ensures exchange of experiences and learning about anti-discrimination practices and work standards of other equality institutions in Europe.

The level of knowledge, expertise and experience reached by some of the Commissioner's Professional Service staff provided this institution with the full capacity to organise courses and trainings in the field of anti-discrimination law and recognising and responding to discrimination, for different professional groups and the general public.

During the course of 2024, the Commissioner amended the Rules of Procedure in accordance with the Law amending the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, i.e. The new Rules of Procedure were passed that regulate in detail the work and actions of the Commissioner and other issues of relevance for the work of this authority.

COMMISSIONER'S WORK IN 2024 IN NUMBERS



ACTED UPON
recommendations
81,5%



NOT ACTED UPON
recommendations
14,9%

COMMISSIONER'S ACTIONS RELATED TO PROTECTION AGAINST DISCRIMINATION IN 2024

During the reporting year, several thousand citizens contacted the Commissioner pointing to certain violations of rights or asking for assistance and information regarding the exercise of various rights and services. The Commissioner provides all citizens who contact this institution with detailed information about whether it is possible to initiate a procedure before the Commissioner, or a court proceeding or another procedure before the competent authorities. By telephone alone, and talking in the Commissioner's registry office, on average dozens of citizens receive information on a daily basis. In addition to such information, in order to facilitate citizens' contacting the Commissioner, a complaint form is available on the Commissioner's website (in Cyrillic and Latin scripts, as well as in English), that is also made in languages of national minorities and a child-friendly format.

In the course of 2024, the Commissioner acted in 3,733 cases. Compared with the previous reporting year, a higher number of complaints were filed and more certificates of no past discriminatory conduct were issued to persons who apply for employment or are employed in the education system. Namely, the Law on Fundamentals of the Education System and the Law on the Living Standard of Pupils and Students provide that persons hired into employment at education institutions and institutions providing the living standard for pupils and students must meet certain conditions, including the condition that the person must not have been found guilty in accordance with the law of engaging in discriminatory conduct. Compliance with this condition can also be verified in the course of employment, and, apart from employees, headmasters, founders and members of managerial bodies of education institutions are also required to demonstrate compliance with this condition. On request of a person or an education institution, after reviewing

each specific request and examining the record this institution keeps, the Commissioner issues the said certificate if statutory requirements are complied with.

Commissioner's acting in 2024



* Cases in connection with complaints

The Commissioner acted on 714 complaints related to the protection against discrimination pursuant to which cases were formed. Public authorities and other persons received 421 recommended measures for achieving equality, 16 initiatives were issued for amendments to regulations, 26 opinions were provided on draft laws and other general legal documents, one proposal for review of constitutionality and legality was provided, while four strategic litigations are pending. One was initiated in 2024, while three were initiated in the preceding years, and in one of them the Commissioner intervenes as a third party. Three criminal charges were filed, 12 public warnings were issued and 38 announcements were provided.

In the procedures pursuant to complaints, 42 opinions were issued. Pursuant to 26 complaints this institution passed opinions which found breaches of the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination and recommended measures. In 14 no breaches were found. In two cases no breaches were found, but recommended measures for

the promotion of equality and the protection against discrimination were issued to public authorities.

In 14 cases, complainants confirmed that consequences of discriminatory actions had been rectified after initiation of the procedure before the Commissioner, but before issuing of an opinion, or they notified the Commissioner that they will withdraw their complaints for these reasons, and consequently the Commissioner terminated the procedure in accordance with the law. These cases show that discrimination is often not intentional; instead, discriminatory acting stems from a lack of awareness or understanding of regulations, which, however, must not be an excuse for discrimination.

It is likewise not uncommon for complainants to withdraw their complaint because the discriminatory action was rectified and the issue was resolved after the complaint had been submitted to the respondent for a response. For example, an employee was reinstated and assigned to an appropriate post in accordance with his capacity; a female employee was promoted or sent for training after returning from her maternity leave or child care leave etc. This situation is most commonly seen in the field of labour and employment. In addition, some of the procedures were terminated for other reasons provided for by the law, including e.g. because of an incomplete complaint that was not supplemented even after a repeated demand from the Commissioner, if it was obvious that there had been no violation of rights, if the Commissioner was not competent to conduct the procedure or had already acted in the specific case and no new evidence was presented, or legal proceedings had been initiated or completed, or the complainant had withdrawn the complaint etc.

The Commissioner's recommendations contained in the opinions were complied with in 71.4% of the cases, while in 28.6% of the cases they were not complied with, and in 12 cases the deadline for compliance with recommendations has not expired.

As regards compliance with recommended measures to improve equality issued by the Commissioner to public authorities and other persons, they were complied with in 98.4%, of the cases, which constitutes an average of 85.1% together with compliance with recommendations issued together with opinions. The trend of complying with the Commissioner's recommendations continued.

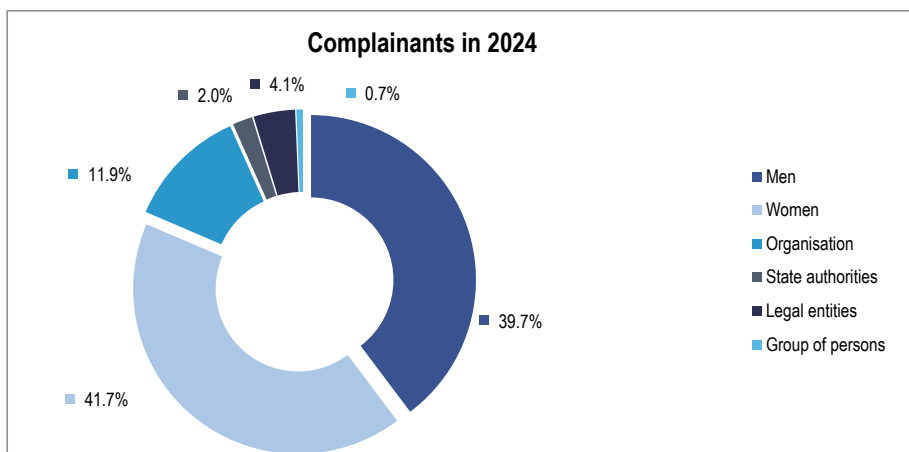
The total number of Commissioner's cases and the number of complaints received annually also depends on a number of other factors, such as passing or amendment of certain regulations which directly affect the position of individuals; media coverage of certain current topics; activities of civil society organisations engaged in the protection of human rights; the number of implemented situation testing etc. Civil society organisations reported few situation tests in the reporting year, i.e. only one

situation test was reported which related to accessibility of a building used by centres for social work in Belgrade for persons with disabilities who use wheelchairs to move, which will be addressed in more detail further in this Report. In addition, after media reporting, a number of women contacted the Commissioner reporting their negative experiences in healthcare institutions during childbirth.

Citizens' Complaints

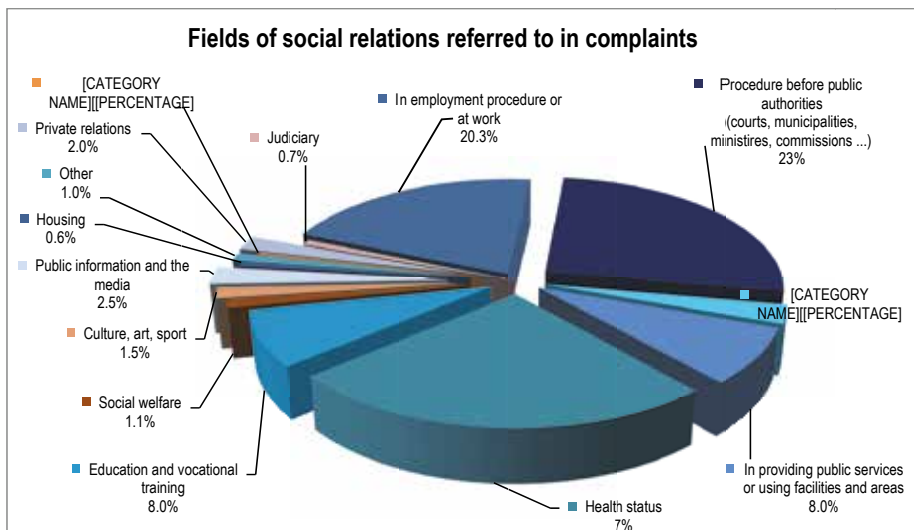
Filing of complaints by citizens, civil society organisations and other persons initiates the procedure for protection against discrimination in accordance with the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination. However, the Commissioner receives a significantly higher number of communications from citizens who often do not wish to initiate a formal procedure, but want to draw attention to a particular issue or ask for assistance or support in the exercise of other rights.

As regards complaints for the protection against discrimination, 714 cases were formed pursuant to complaints, out of which natural persons filed 600. Women contacted the Commissioner more frequently than men. In 2024, civil society organisations filed 73 complaints, which was slightly more than in 2023, while the remaining complaints were filed by legal entities, inspectorates and other authorities.



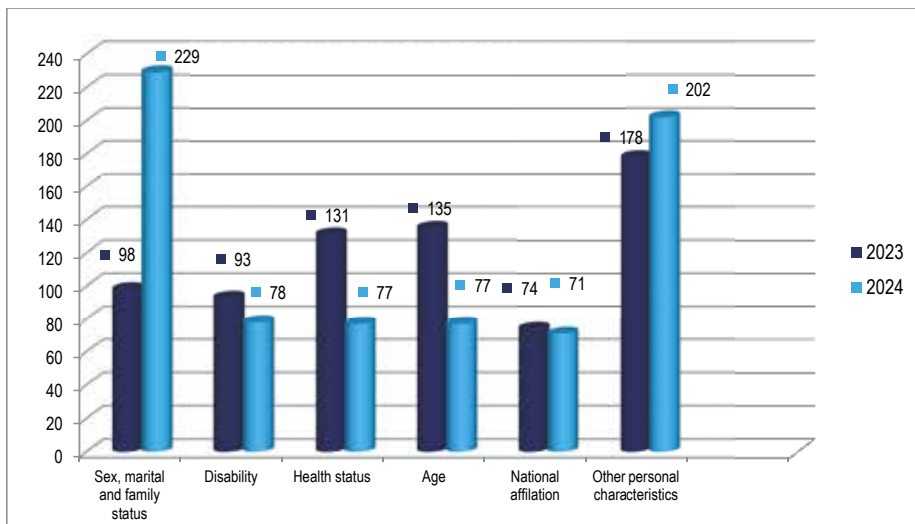
As regards areas of social relations, the majority of complaints concerned procedures before public authorities, followed by complaints concerning health care, work and employment, education and vocational training, provision of public services or use of facilities or areas, public sphere, public information and the media, private relations, social welfare, the judiciary, culture, arts and sports, housing. In other fields complaints were filed in lower percentages. As regards citizens' addressing the Commissioner in connection with acting by public authorities, we

will indicate several examples of complaints relating to acting of these authorities that resulted in an increased addressing by citizens. A number of complaints were filed against the Republic Geodetic Authority in which citizens complained that they were discriminated because of the introduced prohibition of direct contacting of the Real Estate Cadastre Service in person on their counters or by mail. Further, a number of citizens' addressing related to problems in the exercise of social welfare rights and services due to insufficient capacities of service providers and a lack of local self-government funds allocated for these purposes (e.g. several complaints were filed against the city of Niš against failure to provide personal aide services to children with disabilities). Several complaints were also filed against the allocation of funds for school textbooks only in certain local self-government units instead in the entire territory of the country, as well as against the provision of one-off assistance, where parents complained that they did not receive these funds although they comply with the requirements. Also, a number of complaints were filed against shortage of a medicinal product "Testosteron Depo" included in the list of medicinal products provided by the National Health Insurance Fund, which is necessary in hormone therapy that must not be suspended in various health conditions, as well as after sex reassignment surgery. The institution was also contacted by a number of women who complained about unfavourable treatment before, during and after childbirth in gynaecology and obstetrics clinics. In that regard, the Commissioner issued recommended measures to the Ministry of Health and health care institutions that provide gynaecology and obstetrics services for the achievement equality and the protection against discrimination, which will be addressed in more detail further in this Report.



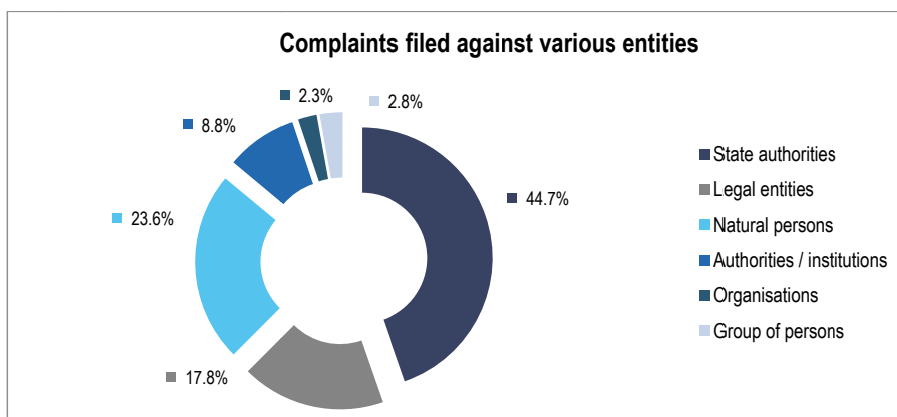
Having in mind these citizens' communications, the number of complaints based on the sex as the grounds of discrimination also increased. This ground is followed by disability, health status and age, which have been among top grounds for discrimination by the number of complaint filed for years. In 2024, a slightly lower number of complaints were filed on the grounds of national affiliation or ethnic origin than in 2023, followed by, as in previous years, complaints stating other personal characteristics, marital and family status, membership in political, trade union and other organisations, religious and political beliefs, property status, skin colour, sexual orientation, race, gender identity and other grounds with fewer number of complaints filed.

It was observed in direct contact with citizens and representatives of organisations engaged in the protection of human rights that fear of the consequences of reporting and of secondary victimisation are in particular frequent obstacles for formal addressing the Commissioner and the initiation of the procedure for the protection against discrimination, mainly for the following personal characteristics: health status - because of the need for further treatment, fear that one's health status would be revealed in certain cases, such as the HIV status, the diagnosis of a mental disorder, infectious diseases etc.; sexual orientation and gender identity – because of fear that the public would know one's sexual orientation or because of condemnation of one's environment; sex, membership in political, trade union or other organisations, previous criminal conviction – because of fear of consequences of reporting, when potential complainants believe that reporting discrimination would cause, for example, negative response by the employer or further aggravate their situation. Also, witnesses of discrimination do not want to testify or withdraw from testifying during the procedure because of fear of victimisation. Such attitudes virtually disable the protection against discrimination. Citizens also emphasize that they are discouraged, scared and they lose trust in institutions for the protection of human rights in cases when discrimination is identified and an employer, an authority or other person fails to comply with the provided recommendation to rectify the consequences of discriminatory acting. Such is the case of failure to act of the Pre-School Institution "Vlada Obradović Kameni" from the town of Pećinci in case of discrimination of three children who were not enrolled in this pre-school institution because of personal characteristics of their parents or the procedure pursuant to a complaint by the Association of Free and Independent Trade Unions on behalf of an employee against the City Administration of the city of Kragujevac against discrimination on the grounds of membership in political, trade union or other organisations.



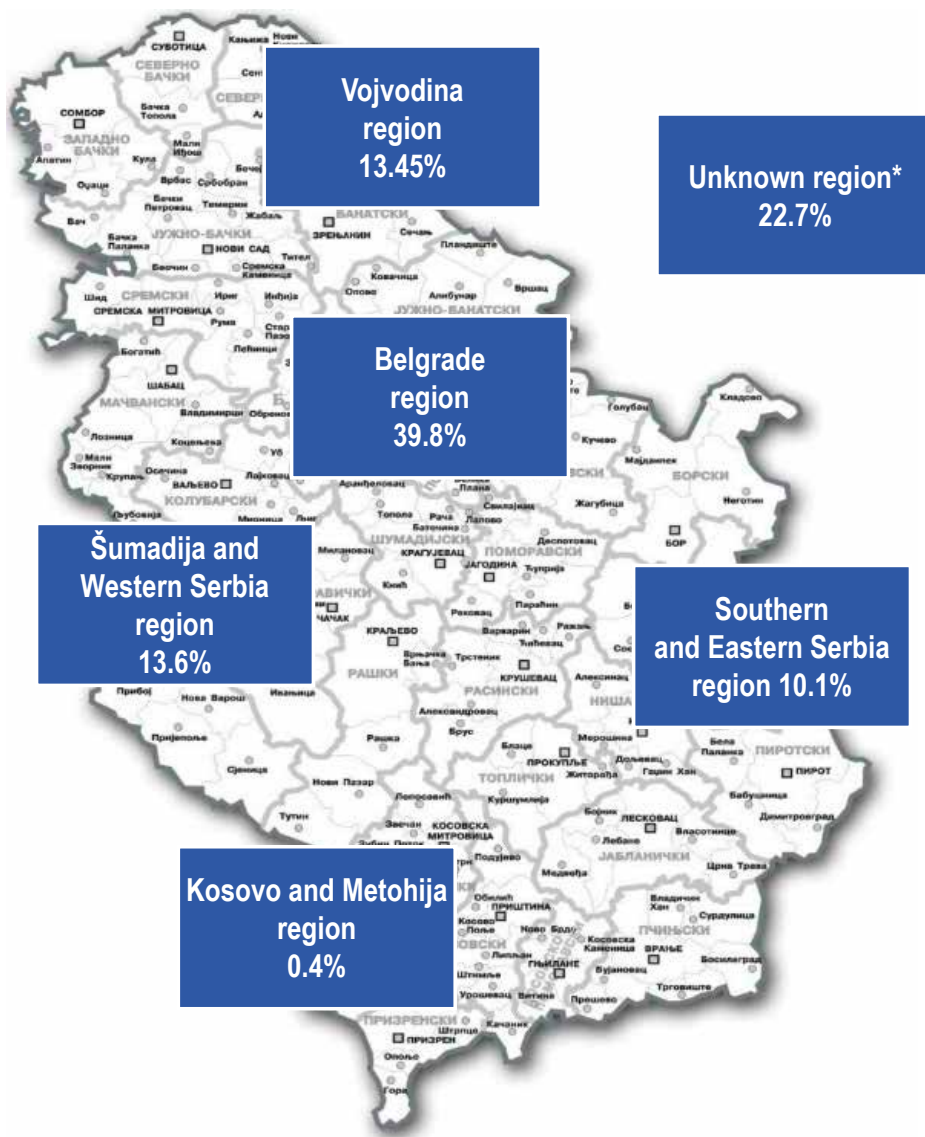
The most frequent grounds for discrimination in complaints filed in 2024 compared with 2023

Sex and marital and family status as grounds for discrimination in the field of work and employment remained linked with pregnancy and motherhood in the majority of cases (multiple or intersectional discrimination) and are therefore presented jointly further in the Report.



As in previous years, the majority of citizens' complaint based on which cases were formed in the procedures pursuant to those complaints were filed against public authorities, followed by complaints against natural persons, legal entities (mainly employers), organisations and groups of persons.

Number of complaints by regions



* Region is unknown when a complaint is filed by e-mail and when the complainant does not specify the municipality of his/her residence

As the graph above shows, the distribution of complaints across regions was relatively even, with the exception of the region of Kosovo and Metohija region.

Recommended Measures

In 2024, the Commissioner issued a total of 422 recommended measures for achieving equality and protection against discrimination. Although recommended measures will be addressed in more detail in the part of this Report discussing discrimination on the individual grounds, here we will specify only those that include a number of persons and are relevant for improving the position of certain social groups.

Thus, when new Government was being formed, a recommendation was issued to the prime minister-designate relating to the balanced representation of women and men in the future Government. The recommendation emphasized that balanced participation of men and women in decision-making and public policy-making was one of the preconditions for the development of the society, ensuring a fairer distribution of power, the use of the potential of all members of the society and provision of sustainable development. Having in mind that balanced representation of sexes exists when the share of one sex is 40-50% compared to the other sex, it is preferable that such ratio between sexes is achieved in the composition of the Government.

It was pointed out that the report of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of 28 February 2024 provided recommendations aimed at further improvement of the elections process, which *inter alia* emphasize the need to introduce additional mechanisms and stimulations to increase women's visibility and improve their role in politics, in addition to encouraging increased participation of women in political life. The need was emphasized to introduce additional mechanisms and stimulations to motivate political parties to promote women's participation in political life, increase their visibility during electoral campaigns and improve their role in politics, as well as that entrusting more portfolios to the underrepresented sex would demonstrate the Government's commitment to achieving gender equality in the field of political acting and public tasks, in addition to strategic commitment of the Republic of Serbia and compliance with recommendations.

Recommended measures were issued to the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts stating that women's achievements in scientific and artistic work should also reflect on the membership in the main scientific and artistic institution in the Republic of Serbia. It was recommended to this institution to undertake relevant measures to achieve the gender equality principles during next elections for membership, as well as to put additional efforts in the promotion of women's scientific and artistic contribution.

To protect women as regards motherhood, recommended measures were also issued to health care institutions that provide gynaecology and obstetrics services, which have been recommended to:

- Ensure capacity strengthening of health care institutions, both spatial conditions and regular check of the quality of health care services provided aimed at continual improvement of the quality of health care provided in health care institutions;
- Ensure continual professional advancement of health professionals, both on the application and importance of health care regulations and from the aspect of the exercise of all human rights, without discrimination, as well as training on the manner of communication with female patients;
- Ensure that family members or other persons can be present or accompany women during child birth, if women wish so;
- Ensure that family members can be present while women undergo induced miscarriage, if women wish so, during the procedure itself if medical and spatial conditions allow so;
- Ensure that women that undergo the induced miscarriage procedure are placed in separate rooms, and in case that they share a room with other female patients, to ensure that as low as possible number of female patients are placed in such rooms and that there are no mothers with children among them;
- Adopt procedures for induced miscarriage and regularly monitor and check their application, with the aim of improving the adopted procedure;
- Organise psychological support to women undergoing the induced miscarriage procedure in health care institutions;
- Ensure appropriate conditions and necessary personal hygiene products for women (soap, toilet paper, sleeping gowns etc.) (this initiative can be improved through cooperation with companies that would donate these resources to maternity units where necessary, as well as during emergencies when regular supply is suspended);
- Ensure timely provision of information to women about the childbirth process, recommended position for childbirth, the use of stimulation, anaesthesia etc.;
- Ensure easily accessible and precise information on the legal protection mechanisms for women who are dissatisfied with treatment by institutions/employees during childbirth/induced miscarriage;
- Introduce evaluation system for all health professionals involved in the provision of care before, during and after childbirth/induced miscarriage procedure;

- Ensure that their health care institution has the “Information Booklet on Pregnancy/Pregnancy Termination and Childbirth” developed in a clear, understandable and easily accessible manner.

It has been recommended that the Ministry of Health should, in accordance with its competences:

- Publish, or make publicly available in another suitable manner, a list of health care institutions providing gynaecology and obstetrics services on the official website of the Ministry or of the Institute for Public Health of Serbia “Dr. Milan Jovanović Batut”;
- Develop new or revise and modernise the existing good clinical practice guides to make them fully compliant with the most recent recommendations and international standards of the World Health Organisation and leading professional associations (e.g. a pregnancy maintenance guide, a physiological childbirth guide, a safe pregnancy termination guide etc.);
- Revise and modernise the existing procedures for induced miscarriage in gynaecology and obstetrics institutions;
- Organise the development of special communication procedures intended for health professionals involved in the provision of care during childbirth and during induced miscarriage procedures, which would promote communication and treatment without discrimination on the grounds of any personal characteristic, based on respect, appreciation, empathy, support and trust;
- Organise the development of an information booklet or a guide that would inform women on their rights and protection mechanisms in case of violation of rights;
- Conduct, through health inspectors, intensified supervision of the work of gynaecology and obstetrics institutions in Serbia, including checking their capacities and the quality of medical treatment applied in them.

It has been recommended to medical centres as primary health care institutions to undertake all necessary measures and activities aimed at ensuring accessibility of healthcare institutions and healthcare services for persons with disabilities, including:

- Physical accessibility of buildings used by medical centres for persons with disabilities who use wheelchairs to move or move with difficulties. In case only one entrance is accessible, it is recommended to medical centres to undertake activities to ensure accessibility of as many as possible entrances, as well as to place adequate and visible notification or a signpost to an accessible entrance;

- Information and communication accessibility of healthcare services for persons with sensory disabilities, primarily by ensuring accessibility of information both in medical centres and on official websites, to ensure full timely information for these persons regarding the exercise of the right to health care and the use of health care services.

To ensure accessibility of spas and spa sanatoriums, it has been recommended that all health care institutions specialised for rehabilitation should:

- Undertake all necessary measures and activities aimed at ensuring accessibility of buildings they use and services they provide in these buildings to ensure that persons with disabilities, particularly those who use wheelchair, can stay in those institutions independently and use therapy services equally with other users.

It has been recommended that all local self-government units should:

- Undertake all measures within their competences to ensure consistent application of regulations and norms when issuing building and exploitation permits, which regulations and norms include technical standards of planning, design and construction of buildings that ensure unobstructed movement and access for persons with disabilities who use wheelchairs to move or move with difficulties due to their health condition, age or for other reasons.

Recommended measures have been issued to all media outlets with national coverage, including: Radio Television of Serbia, Radio Television of Vojvodina, TV Pink, National Television Happy, TV B92 and Prva Television, which have been advised to:

- Ensure to the highest extent possible broadcasting of the content in formats accessible for persons with auditory or visual impairment, by using Serbian sign language, open and closed subtitles and audio description and the manner of reporting, to ensure their unobstructed exercise of the right to full and timely public information.

It has been recommended to all banks to:

- Ensure access to banking products and services to refugees (such as opening and use of basic payment accounts) without discrimination on any real or assumed personal characteristic, taking into account the specific features of the refugee status in accordance with the regulations regarding stay, the right to work, the design of a personal identity card and documents issued in the asylum procedure.

Recommended measures have also been issued at various ministries to undertake measures within their competences on the improvement of equality of certain social groups.

Thus, to popularise and improve female sports, achieve gender equality and prevent gender-based violence in sport, the Ministry of Sport has been recommended:

- To prepare a proposal of a strategic sport development document that specifically defines the field and/or the objective relating to the development of female sports and its promotion at all levels, taking account of various persona characteristics of women in sports (such as age, health status, disability etc.);
- When developing measures and activities for the achievement of this objective, to take account of the need to increase investment in female sports and to provide and distribute funds for these purposes.

It has been recommended to the Ministry of the Interior not to enter a description of the basis for residence permit in personal documents in case of victims of trafficking in accordance with the Law on Foreigners.

It has been recommended to the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs to issue an instruction on acting of local self-government units in the provision of the personal aide or personal assistant service for persons with disabilities who have their permanent place of residence in the territory of one local self-government unit, but because of schooling or work they stay in the territory of another local self-government unit where the service should be provided to them.

It has also been recommended to this Ministry to amend the provisions of the bylaw governing payment of benefits based on the entitlements under the law governing veteran and disability protection. It has been recommended that payment of these benefits should be made on the account of a persons who exercised this entitlement, and if such person does not have a current account with any bank, on an account with a bank with which the Ministry concluded a contract in accordance with the law.

It has been recommended to the Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography to expand the possibilities for the use of vouchers the state ensured for rehabilitation and recreation of patients with rare diseases so that these vouchers can, in certain cases, due to the nature of a specific rare disease be also used in other existing rehabilitation and recreation facilities in addition to those already envisaged for the use of vouchers, in order to respond more adequately to the needs of persons with these diseases.

Other recommendations of measures have also been issued, including those given to the General Secretariat of the Government aimed at full implementation of the Government's Decision passed in 2022 and employment of all 44 male and female members of the Roma national minority who successfully completed the Vocational Training Programme for the Roma for 2021; to the National Health Insurance Fund regarding the continual supply of a hormone medicinal product

which is necessary after sex reassignment surgery; to the Centre for Social Work Žitište in connection with the empowerment a poor family to prevent and/or eliminate circumstances due to which children could be displaced from their family again; to the Public Enterprise “Pošta Srbije” (Serbia Postal Service) to make communication with citizens on any platform accessible for citizens with sensory or other disabilities, as well as for all citizens who cannot use online applications for various reasons; to certain schools and one school administration aimed at the prevention of segregation of Roma children and the development of a comprehensive desegregation plan; to the city of Novi Sad in connection with making equal the position of children that attend preschool institutions founded by the city and children who are forced to attend private preschool institutions because preschool institutions founded by the city were full; to the City Electoral Commission aimed at the organisation of elections for councillors for the City Council of Belgrade in such a manner as to ensure to blind and visually impaired persons to vote on accessible ballot papers or in an accessible manner; to the Medical Centre Preševo, after it obtains approval for the expansion of the human resources plan and filling of vacancies and new employment in that institution, to announce a public call also in the language of the Albanian national minority which is officially used in that municipality, as well as to take into account the national structure in the territory of the municipality when selecting candidates; to the Municipality of Bujanovac and the Medical Centre in Bujanovac regarding the removal of a discriminatory graffiti; to the Municipality of Ub to initiate works on the rehabilitation and recultivation of non-sanitary landfill in Bogdanovica, primarily the part of the landfill that has expanded towards a settlement populated mainly by members of the Roma national minority; to the City Municipality of Savski venac and the City Municipality of Zvezdara to refrain from forced eviction of several Roma families until they previously ensure alternative accommodation for them, compliant with the adequate housing criteria in accordance with domestic and international standards; to the City Centre for Social Work – Novi Beograd Unit to evaluate the needs of families with small children whose entire possessions were burned in a recent fire.

Opinion on Draft Laws and Other Legal Documents and Submitted Initiatives

In 2024, the Commissioner provided 26 opinions on drafts of laws and other legal documents and issued 16 initiatives for passing of or amendments to regulations. In the opinions on draft laws and other legal documents, the Commissioner also emphasised the necessity to amend certain provisions of the applicable regulations not included in the proposed amendments, with the aim of harmonising them with the anti-discrimination legislation. Contrary to the legal duty, certain authorities do not submit draft regulations and other legal document to the Commissioner to provide her opinion or they fail to include in their drafts an assessment of the

impact of regulations to the exercise of right of socially and financially vulnerable persons in accordance with Article 14 of the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination. Thus, for example, the Ministry of Justice failed to submit the Draft Amendments to the Criminal Code, although the Commissioner emphasized several remarks during a public hearing and issued several initiatives for amendments to the law.

Opinions were provided on the following: the Draft Law amending the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children, the Draft Law on Postal Services, the Draft Law on Military Education, as well as to the amended text of the Draft Law on Military Education where the Commissioner's remarks were adopted, the Draft Law on Health Care and Health Insurance for Persons Covered by Military Health Insurance, the Draft Law on Information Security, the Draft Law amending the Law on Tax Procedure and Tax Administration, the Draft Law on the Budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2025, the Draft Law amending the Law on the Budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2024, the Proposal of the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Public Information System Development Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2020 to 2025, in the period from 2024 to 2025, the Proposal of the Strategy for the Improvement of the Position of Persons with Disabilities in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2025 to 2030, and the accompanying Action Plan for the period from 2025 to 2027, the Draft Artificial Intelligence Development Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2020 and 2025, the Proposal of the National Action Plan for the Preparation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2024 to 2027, with the proposal of the Government's Decision, the Proposal of the Action Plan for the period from 2024 to 2026 for the Implementation of the Strategy to Create Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2022 to 2030, the Proposal of the Decision on the Formation of the Council to Monitor the Application of the United Nations Recommendations for Human Rights, the Action Plan for the period from 2024 to 2025 for the Implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy for the period from 2021 to 2030, the Model Femicide Monitoring Body, the Plan for the Preparation of the New NPAA with the implementation period from the third quarter of 2024 to the fourth quarter of 2027, the Action Plan for the period from 2024 to 2025 for the Implementation of the Strategy for the Prevention of and Protection against Discrimination for the period from 2022 to 2030, the Addendum to the Memorandum of Cooperation in the process of the implementation of the Agreement on Formation of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) etc.

The Commissioner issued remarks to draft regulations at the public hearing stage, such as in case of the Draft Law amending the Criminal Code. The Commissioner also provided her opinion to this Draft Law after completion of the public hearing. In these opinions, the Commissioner also pointed to the fact that the

competent ministry has not reviewed any initiative to amend the Criminal Code submitted by this authority in recent years, pointing to the necessity to harmonise the Law with ratified conventions, as well as with the anti-discrimination regulations. In addition, the initiatives and the opinion on the Draft Law pointed to the Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence (2022/0066(COD) PE-CONS 33/24) passed in 2024. The Ministry was requested to review Articles relating to the criminal offence of inadmissible pregnancy termination referred to in Article 120 of the Criminal Code; rape referred to in Article 178 of the Criminal Code; sexual intercourse with a physically or mentally helpless person referred to in Article 179 of the Criminal Code; spreading HIV virus infection referred to in Article 250 of the Criminal Code, as well as amendments in Chapter 14 of the Criminal Code regarding the introduction of a new criminal offence that would incriminate abuse and publishing of sexually explicit content. We also pointed out that, as part of amendments to the Criminal Code, it should be considered whether the introduction of femicide as a separate criminal offence would result in an improved response to this kind of violence, since femicide has certain characteristics and special features that makes it different from the criminal offence of homicide, as well as that the number of femicides remains the same. The introduction of this criminal offence would convey a clear message on the importance of the said burning social problem, while at the same time, in addition to the above, this would also ensure adequate and centralised data collection, which would *inter alia* contribute to the improved planning of preventative activities and other adequate measures. However, the adopted Law amending the Criminal Code did not contain these amendments. In its reply to the Commissioner's communication, the Ministry of Justice indicated that additional, more comprehensive amendments to the Criminal Code are planned, which would "include the best legal arrangement either by the introduction of a new criminal offence of unauthorised sharing and abuse of recordings with intimate content or by the expansion of the commission of an existing criminal offence", all based on the initiative by the Commissioner for the introduction of this criminal offence.

In 2024, the Commissioner also issued a significant of initiatives to pass or amend the applicable regulations to competent authorities. Amendments to the Law on Social Welfare were initiated regarding the relaxation of the requirements taken into account when exercising the entitlement to financial social assistance, primarily the landholding ceiling depending on the land quality, particularly in elderly households; the introduction of social and health care services and the provision of services to the category of users who need both social care and constant health care or supervision due to their specific social and health status; unified provision of services in the entire territory with an analysis of the existing and the development of missing services. The Commissioner emphasized that it is necessary to determine the actual possibility to generate income from land in one's ownership in situations when it exceeds the property census laid down by the law, because ownership over

neglected land in remote areas, particularly in modern conditions of agricultural production, does not mean that such land can provide adequate income for normal and decent life. It is necessary to analyse whether the excluding requirement regarding the exercise of the right to financial social assistance is justified, under which requirement an individual or a family cannot exercise the right to financial social assistance if the individual or his/her family member sold or gifted immovable property or renounced the right to inherit immovable property. This is particularly important having in mind the still deeply rooted prejudice and beliefs and behaviour patterns where tradition prevails over the law in the inheritance procedure and where expectation is still deeply rooted that that women would renounce their right to inheritance in favour of their male relatives when inherited property is divided. Further, it was pointed to the necessity to regulate cases of renewal of licences for female experts who were absent from work while their licences were valid due to pregnancy, maternity, child care or serious health problems and were thus not able to meet the requirements for licence renewal in the statutory deadline.

The Commissioner also initiated amendments to the Law on Public Order and Peace to ensure adequate legal protection of persons exploited in prostitution and to harmonise national legislation with the international standards in the field of gender equality, the prevention of gender-based violence and the prevention of trafficking. It was pointed out that prostitution is almost never the result of a “free choice”; instead, it is the result of various negative factors. The initiative also pointed to the Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

Amendments to the Law on the Procedure of Registration with Real Estate Cadastre and Infrastructure Cadastre were also initiated, and a proposal for review of constitutionality and legality was also submitted, which will be discussed in more detail further in this Report. An initiative was also submitted to amend the Law on Human Organs Transplantation and the Law on Human Cells and Tissues to re-establish full legislative framework as soon as possible and regulate transplantation of organs and tissues from deceased persons. The following was also requested: amendments to the provisions of Articles 66 to 73 of the Law on Rights of Veterans, Disabled Veterans, Civilian Invalids of War and Members of Their Families; amendments to the Law on Enforcement of Criminal Sanctions to consider the introduction of the a duty on the competent authorities to notify the victim *ex officio* of the release of the convicted person or his escape from prison in cases of gender based and domestic violence and trafficking, regardless of the risk assessment made by the correctional facility in the specific case; amendments to the Law on Health Care or passing of a separate regulation which would regulate in detail the work of Urgent Medical Assistance services, as well as amendments to the Law on Health Care to precisely list criminal offences or groups of criminal offences that constitute a basis for withdrawal of health professionals’ licences. In 2024, the Commissioner also

requested amendments to the Bylaw on the List of Medicinal Products Covered by Compulsory Health Insurance in connection with the medicinal product “Callcept” which is not equally available for everyone; instead, its price or availability free of charge depend on a disease for the treatment of which it is used. Amendments were also requested to the Bylaw on Detailed Requirements and Standards for Provision of Social Welfare Services to consider adjustment of the existing social welfare services or standardising of new directed services which would better target persons with autism, as well as persons with various rare diseases, as well as amendments to the Bylaw on the Code of Conduct and Personal Appearance of Police Officers and Other Employees in the Ministry of the Interior. The Commissioner submitted the Initiative to exempt from VAT products used for women’s personal hygiene, as well as the Initiative to establish a national control mechanism to monitor cases of femicide; the Initiative to pass secondary legislation which would regulate the manner of keeping the records of final and enforceable judgements and decisions passed in misdemeanour proceedings because of violation of the provisions prohibiting discrimination, and of final and enforceable judgements and decisions passed in criminal proceedings against criminal offences relating to discrimination and the violation of the equality principle, which is the duty of the minister competent for the judiciary in accordance with the law.

Certain opinions and initiatives will be addressed in more detail in parts of this Report relating to discrimination on the grounds of various personal characteristics. These opinions and initiatives are available on the Commissioner’s official website at <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/misljenja-i-preporuke/zakonodavne-inicijative-i-misljenje-o-propisima/>

Other Outcomes of Proceedings

Under the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, the Commissioner does not act on complaints when it is found that the Commissioner is not competent to decide on the matter; if the complainant failed to rectify shortcomings in his/her complaint within the set time limit; when a judicial proceeding is initiated in respect of the same matter or if such court proceeding is closed by a final and enforceable judgment; in case of death of the complainant or expungement from the register of legal entities; when it is obvious that the discrimination which the complainant is alleging did not take place; when the Commissioner has already acted on the same matter in accordance with the powers, and no new evidence has been provided; in cases when it is impossible to achieve the purpose of acting due to the passage of time since the violation of rights; if a settlement was successfully reached; if the complainant withdrew the complaint; and in other cases laid down by the law. A statistical overview of the Commissioner’s acting is provided in Annex 1 to this Report.

Court Proceedings

Civil Proceedings

During the course of 2024, the Commissioner initiated one strategic lawsuit, while three more strategic lawsuits are ongoing which were initiated in previous years. In one of these lawsuits the Commissioner intervenes as a third party.

Strategic lawsuit against the Bar Association



The Commissioner received a complaint in which the complainant claimed he felt discriminated against on the grounds of age as a personal characteristic, since he was older than 65 years and because of that was unable to complete his bar internship and become eligible to take the bar examination and be admitted to the bar. Acting pursuant to the Application for Registration in the Directory of Volunteer Legal Interns, the Bar Association of Niš passed a Decision by which it rejected the complainant's application for registration with the Directory of Volunteer Legal Interns, stating the following explanation:

"...the legal profession must grow through rejuvenation, and the only way for this growth to positively manifest itself is for the bar to rejuvenate itself and increase its numbers by admitting young persons, capable and qualified to apply the specific knowledge required in the age of technological revolution, which they most certainly have, unlike those who belong to the older generations, and in particular those who chose the most noble of legal professions since the very beginning, as both a career choice and a personal one.

In this context... everything he had and everything he could have contributed through his professional efforts, he had already contributed by employing his mental and physical faculties on a different job, one that is governed by completely different rules and principles..."

The complaint stated that, undeniably, every bar association is authorised under the law to independently decide on bar admission applications; however, in their work they must adhere to all positive legislation, including the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination.

The importance of this lawsuit goes beyond the individual case, and the Commissioner intends to use this case to send a clear message that discrimination against older persons in the field of labour, employment, education and training is prohibited by the law. The Commissioner's practice has shown that age as the grounds for discrimination has been among the most common personal characteristics since the establishment of this institution, with the number of complaints with the highest frequency, particularly in the field of labour and employment.

Strategic lawsuit against a municipality and a Social Work Centre



In 2024, the Commissioner received a Decision of the Court of Appeal of Belgrade which reversed the judgment of the Higher Court of Belgrade and returned the case for a repeated proceeding.

As a reminder, the Commissioner received a communication from a mother concerning discrimination against her underaged child on the grounds of disability and health status, after which the Commissioner filed a lawsuit for protection against discrimination in 2021 against the Municipality and the Social Work Centre, because the defendants had denied an underaged child the right to use the personal aide service in accordance with the law, which he needed because of his health status and disability, thus impeding his exercise of the right to education and full inclusion in the education system. In 2023, the Higher Court of Belgrade passed a judgment rejecting the Commissioner's claim as unfounded. Acting pursuant to the Commissioner's appeal, the Court of Appeal took the view that the position of the court of first instance could not be accepted as correct, because it had failed to provide clear reasoning for important facts, which constituted a major breach of the provisions on litigious proceedings.

The proceeding is pending.

In addition, a strategic lawsuit is currently pending against a physician, which was filed by the Commissioner. As a reminder, the Commissioner filed a lawsuit against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, because the respondent physician had said in his appearance in a TV show which addresses the forthcoming EuroPride “that homosexuality was and is a disease and it can be treated”. The defendant had voiced his disagreement with the official scientific position, although he is a physician, which gives added weight to his words, as the World Health Organisation removed homosexuality from the list of diseases as early as in 1990, while the Serbian Medical Society did the same in 2008. The defendant said this at a time of increased social tensions, when walks and protests against EuroPride were organised on the streets of Belgrade, thus contributing to deepening of the gap and intolerance against LGBT+ persons and reinforcing the deeply rooted societal prejudice. In this procedure, the defendant brought a counterclaim against the Commissioner because this institution exercised its powers under the law. Such lawsuits constitute an abuse of rights, as well as a specific form of pressure on the work of the court with the aim of stalling the procedure.

Furthermore, a lawsuit is pending in which the Commissioner petitioned the court to be granted the capacity of an intervenor. The lawsuit had been filed by a mother against a private preschool institution over discrimination against her underaged son with autism. There are multiple reasons underlying the Commissioner's decision to petition for being granted the capacity of an intervenor for the

first time, not least the significance of inclusion of children with health difficulties in the education process and the importance of enabling them to stay at preschool institutions without discrimination.

Misdemeanour Proceedings

In 2023 the Commissioner filed a motion to institute misdemeanour proceedings against a Culture Centre for preventing the junior categories of female teams of a basketball club from playing championship matches at a primary school gymnasium, which is used for various sport events and is managed by the said institution, on the grounds of their personal characteristic, namely their sex. The Magistrates' Court of Smederevska Palanka passed a decision in July 2023 dismissing the motion to institute misdemeanour proceedings. The Commissioner appealed this decision and the Magistrates' Court of Appeal of Belgrade passed a decision pursuant to the appeal in late 2023, which upheld the appeal, reversed the decision of the Magistrates' Court of Smederevo and returned the case for a repeated first-instance proceeding. In 2024, the Magistrates' Court of Smederevo passed a judgment exonerating the local Cultural Centre based on witnesses' statements that were different than those originally provided in the proceedings pursuant to the complaint.

Criminal Proceedings

During the course of 2024, three criminal charges were filed with the competent prosecutor's office. Two criminal charges were filed because of discrimination against persons on the grounds of their Roma national affiliation and one because of discrimination on the grounds of sex.

The first criminal charges were filed because of reasonable suspicion that two persons committed the criminal offence of violent behaviour. Namely, two persons addressed the Commissioner, starting that they were beaten up and forcibly thrown out of a coffee shop, with the words said in front of other guests: *"We do not want to serve Gypsies"* and *"Don't come to this coffee shop again, I don't let Gypsies come into my coffee shop, you are bad for the image of my coffee shop"*. The Commissioner pointed out that the committed offence was motivated by hatred towards members of the Roma national minority, which constitutes aggravating circumstances according to the provision of Article 54a of the Criminal Code. The Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Vršac notified the Commissioner that evidentiary proceedings are underway – questioning suspects, examining injured parties and witnesses.

The second criminal charges were filed with the Special Department for the Fight against Cybercrime of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade against unknown perpetrators: authors of an Instagram page and persons who are authors of the profile because of reasonable suspicion that they committed the criminal offence of inciting national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance. Namely, a text was published on the Instagram page that links the commitment of the criminal offence to the Roma national affiliation, and which caused a number

of offensive and threatening comments directed at spreading of hatred and calls for violence against the Roma, which the administrator of the page did not remove.

The third criminal charges were filed because of a reasonable suspicion that the criminal offence of sexual abuse under Article 182a paragraph 2 of the Criminal Code was committed, and the criminal offence of *publishing, obtaining and possession of pornography material and exploiting minors for pornography* under Article 185 paragraph 1 of this Code. The Commissioner received a complaint stating that a sports coach has been sending textual, audio and visual messages with explicit content (photos of his genitals, indecent and disturbing messages with sexual implications) for two years continually to a then-underage female complainant through the Facebook social network and other software and networks for electronic communication (Instagram, Viber etc.). The Third Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade notified the Commissioner that they forwarded the criminal charges to the Special Department for Fight against Cybercrime of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, because of the manner in which the criminal offence was committed.

In late 2024, the Plenum of students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts addressed the Commissioner, in connection with the identification and criminal prosecution of persons who physically attacked students at the gathering held on 22 November 2024. Students pointed out that, according to their knowledge, no actions were taken in connection with criminal charges filed by the Faculty of Dramatic Arts of the University of Belgrade on 2 December 2024 to the Third Basic Public Prosecutor's Office, unlike other cases that were initiated against students. They believe that they were exposed to unequal treatment in terms of criminal prosecution of perpetrators, as well as that they contacted the Commissioner because they could not establish communication with enforcement authorities. In that regard, they contacted the Third Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, and after that the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office and the Ministry of the Interior, pointing to the necessity of urgent and equal treatment.

The Higher Public Prosecutor's Office submitted a communication stating that the case was taken from the Third Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, while the case was transferred to the register of perpetrators of criminal offences of age, as well as that the proceedings are underway. The Ministry of the Interior also notified the Commissioner that police officers of the Police Administration for the City of Belgrade submitted a report to the public prosecutor's office on the facts found and undertaken measures and actions within their competences and that they will continue their acting as instructed by the prosecutor's office.

Situation Testing

Situation testing have a significant potential to strengthen evidence of discriminatory acting in individual cases, and are also used to raise public awareness and point to discriminatory practices or occurrences.

In 2024, an informal student group carried out situation testing of architectural accessibility of social work centres in 17 municipalities in Belgrade. According to the report on the situation testing, three facilities where units of the City Centre for Social Work are located, namely Palilula, Stari Grad and Surčin, are inaccessible for persons with disabilities who use wheelchair. The report stated that complaints will be filed with enclosed evidence in the coming period.

Proposals for Review of Constitutionality and Legality

In the course of 2024, the Commissioner filed a proposal for review of constitutionality and legality of the Law on the Procedure of Registration with Real Estate Cadastre and Infrastructure Cadastre to the Constitutional Court.



A proposal for review of constitutionality and legality of the provisions of Article 18 and Article 25 paragraph 1 of the Law on the Procedure of Registration with Real Estate Cadastre and Infrastructure Cadastre was filed to the Constitutional Court of Serbia because they put in a less favourable position persons with lower property status and lower income without justification.

The Commissioner particularly emphasized in the proposal for review of constitutionality and legality that the said provisions deny a possibility for citizens to directly contact the Real Estate Cadastre Service in person on their counters or by mail; instead, they have to contact this authority exclusively through the e-Counter, where the correctness of enclosed documentation must previously be verified by professional users (lawyers and geodetic organisations). It is certain that such manner of submitting requests, in addition to the exclusion of a large number of citizens, would also lead to their additional financial burden, because in addition to republic administrative charges they would also have to pay for the services of lawyers and geodetic organisations, which amount is also significant. The seemingly neutral provision indirectly discriminates and may without justification put in a less favourable position certain members of other vulnerable groups who are already at higher risk of discrimination and poverty, such as persons with disabilities, elderly, citizens living in less developed and rural areas, the Roma etc., and it also excludes persons who do not have technical means and do not possess digital skills. One of the main principles of the Constitution, as well as the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, is that everyone must be equal before the law and that discrimination on any grounds is prohibited, including the property status. In addition, such provision violates the main principles of the procedure, such as the principle of protecting the rights of clients and pursuing the public interest, provision of assistance to clients, as well as the principle of efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the procedure.

The proposal stated that when a certain requirement is being introduced which is applicable to everyone, it must be taken into account that certain groups of persons, due to their personal characteristics, are in a different position or situation, and if such situation is not recognised, it can lead to unequal treatment. To prevent this, it is very important to request opinions of all relevant authorities in the preparation of laws and other general legal documents, which was not done in this specific case.

The procedure is underway.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/332-24-predlog-za-ocenu-ustavnosti-zakona-o-upisu-u-katastar/>

In late 2024, the Constitutional Court, deciding on the Commissioner's proposal of 7 March 2023, Article 40 paragraph 1 item 1) Code of Conduct in the Hospitality and Tourism School in Belgrade because of discrimination on the grounds of sex, dismissed the proposal because the school amended the disputable provision. Namely, on its session held on 27 March 2023, the School Board passed the new code of conduct that does not contain this provision². The above constitutes another manner of rectifying discriminatory acts by those who passed it after the Commissioner's intervention.

2 Number IYo-37/2023 of 24 October 2024

COMMISSIONER'S ACTIONS IN 2024 CONCERNING THE PROMOTION OF EQUALITY

In addition to other tasks in connection with the protection against discrimination in the widest sense, the Commissioner's powers, laid down by the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, also include activities that improve the exercise of the right to equality, particularly of social groups at an increased risk of discrimination, in various segments of social life. Thus, the Commissioner: submits annual and special reports on the situation in the protection of equality to the National Assembly; establishes and maintains cooperation with public authorities and organisations in the territory of the Republic of Serbia, regional and international and other bodies, authorities and organisations responsible for the exercise of equality and the protection against discrimination; cooperates with associations that have interest in participation in the fight against discrimination; organises and conducts independent surveys in the field of improvement of equality and protection against discrimination and publishes expert publications, notifications and information in the field of improvement of equality and protection against discrimination and performs other tasks in accordance with the law. The following text of this report provides a summary of those activities during 2024.

REPORTS, SURVEYS AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS

In accordance with the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, the Commissioner submits regularly to the National Assembly annual reports on the situation in the field of equality protection, which contain an overview of the work of public authorities, service providers and other persons, identified omissions and recommendations for their elimination. In addition, Commissioner's regular reports contain the Commissioner's practice in all acting, both pursuant to citizens' complaints in the procedure of protection against discrimination, and in terms of the promotion of equality, reviewed reports and surveys by national and international bodies, authorities and organisations, case law of the European Court of Human Rights, based on which were identified the key problems in the protection of equality. The previous Report for 2023 was not reviewed by the National Assembly during the reporting year.

The Commissioner produced the following publications during the reporting year: *Analysis of the Legal Framework Relevant for the Field of Inheritance*, the analysis "Prevalence of Hate Speech in Serbian Media"; the analysis "Legal Framework Relevant for Marginalised Groups of Women in the Republic of Serbia"; the *Equality Code - Guidelines on Developing a Code of Antidiscrimination Policies for Employers in Serbia*; and *Guidance on Implementing Activities Concerning Reasonable Adaptation of Workplaces/Jobs to Persons with Disabilities* and conducted three

surveys: “Perception of the Roma Community on Discrimination”, the Survey on Inheritance Rights and Attitudes towards Inheritance in Serbia and the Survey on Perception of Women at Increased Risk of Discrimination on Gender Equality.



An overview of key results of these surveys and analyses and a summary of the publications are provided below, together with links and a QR code for easy access to publications available on the Commissioner’s website.

Survey “Perception of the Roma Community on Discrimination”



*Perception of the Roma Community on Discrimination*³ is the second survey conducted by the Commissioner as part of the joint programme of the European Commission and the Council of Europe Roma Integration III. This survey is recognised as an activity in the Action Plan for 2022–2024 aimed at implementing the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma Men

and Women in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2022–2030. It was conducted through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including polling of representatives of Roma men and women and focus groups with representatives of Roma organisations, civil society organisations addressing the issues of discrimination and social inclusion of Roma men and women, Roma coordinators, pedagogical assistants, health mediators and representatives of the National Council of the Roma National Minority in the Republic of Serbia.

The survey results reveal that 89% of the respondents were familiar with the term “discrimination”, while 11% of them were not sure of its exact meaning. An overwhelming majority (55%) consider that the Roma are not treated differently than other citizens, while 34% believe they are treated differently, and 11% are unsure. Perception of discrimination among the Roma varies, with the majority of them believing that Roma children are the most exposed discrimination (29%), followed by elderly Roma (22%), Roma women (19%) and persons with disabilities (13%). In addition, 64% of the respondents are of the opinion that Roma children are frequently bullied because of their ethnic origin, 15% think it happens occasionally, while 21% believe such bullying does not happen.

According to the opinions stated by the respondents, 47% of them believe that Roma face more difficulties finding employment because employers do not want Roma in their companies, while as many as two thirds of the respondents (66%)

³ Survey “Perception of the Roma Community on Discrimination”, available at: <https://ravno-pravnost.gov.rs/percepromzajodiskr/>

believe it is much more difficult for Roma to advance in the workplace compared to other employees. Also, as many as 60% of the respondents believe the police do not treat Roma the same way as other citizens and do not afford them sufficient protection, while 38% of the respondents believe the police are especially quick to blame Roma persons whenever a theft or any other criminal offence is committed, which leads to an increased perception of discrimination in this segment of life. Unfortunately, the majority of the respondents (79%) also believe that there is hate speech against Roma in the media and on social networks.

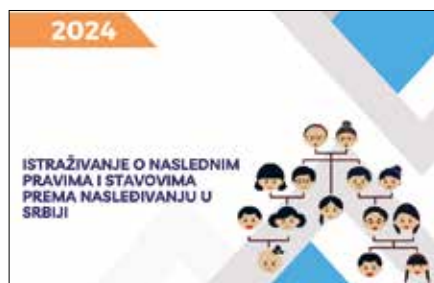
As regards personal experiences of discrimination, slightly more than a quarter of the respondents (28%) confirm they themselves or a member of their family have experienced discrimination. One in five respondents do not have an opinion on this matter. As many as 63% of the respondents point out public institutions and local self-governments as places where they or their family members experienced discrimination when exercising a right because of their ethnic/Roma affiliation. About 61% of the respondents believe that Roma have more difficulties finding employment and face obstacles in the labour market, while 15% of them have experienced discrimination in the workplace. Social work centres are the next public institution which many of the respondents (59%) identify as places where they face issues.

As regards protection against discrimination, 33% of the respondents believe that Roma do not report discrimination because they do not know where to report it, 29% believe they do not report it because they do not trust institutions, while 25% believe that institutions would not react appropriately and would not be able to change the situation.

Regarding measures to improve the situation of Roma persons and prevent discrimination, 85% of the respondents agree that education of the Roma is crucial for their equal status within the society. As many as 89% of them believe that Roma should have preferential treatment in the education process, when enrolling in secondary schools and universities. In addition, 77% of them believe that support for Roma children in the education system is appropriate, while 9% believe it is not. As regards the labour market, 90% of the respondents agree that special preferential measures should apply to Roma to make it easier for them to find employment, while 72% believe that regular salary and a safe job are the crucial aspect for equal status of the Roma in the society.

Survey on Inheritance Rights and Attitudes towards Inheritance in Serbia

The primary goal of this *survey*⁴, conducted with support from the German agency for development cooperation (GIZ) within the framework of the project “Support to Social Inclusion in Serbia”, was to identify the perception and attitudes on the enjoyment of equal inheritance rights, as well as to identify the measures and activities required to close the gap in the exercise of inheritance rights between women and men. The survey involved the application of quantitative and qualitative approaches, conducted through seven focus groups, with an equal representation of women and men, from rural and urban areas of Serbia and with different education levels.



The results of the survey have highlighted the complexity and the deep social dynamics that impact the attitudes and practice in the field of inheritance, and also the significant differences among the respondents depending on their sex, age, education and type of settlement. The survey overwhelmingly suggests that traditional values and customs remain prevalent, especially in rural areas.

Most of the respondents support gender equality with regard to inheritance. Nevertheless, it is worrying that nearly half of the respondents believe that men should have preferential treatment in inheritance matters, while one third of them support equality to some extent or are undecided on the issue. A breakdown of the analysis by sex provides further insight, as the percentage of women (66%) in favour of full equality in inheritance matters is much higher than the percentage of men who share this opinion (39%).

A generation gap is also apparent; while the younger population is more interested in issues of equality, their support for full equality is not as high as one would expect (43%), which can in part be attributed to traditional upbringing and the social setting, as well as the low level of awareness of this issue.

Respondents with a higher level of education are also more supportive of equality, and there are also significant differences depending on the respondents' professions. The most supportive of full equality in inheritance matters are highly qualified workers, but even in this group the support stands at just 64%. Interestingly, the unemployed, despite their economic situation, demonstrate a higher level of support to full equality (59%) compared to other respondents.

4 *Survey on Inheritance Rights and Attitudes towards Inheritance in Serbia*, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/istrazivanje-o-naslednim-pravima-i-stavovima-prema-nasledjivanju-u-srbiji/>

The results of the survey broken down by types of settlements are also telling with regard to attitudes towards gender equality. Thus, in the rural population as many as 37% believe that men should be favoured in inheritance matters, while in large cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants only 10% of the respondents support the preferential treatment of men.

As regards regional differences, the population of the Belgrade region is the most supportive of full equality in inheritance matters (70%), while the support for full equality is lowest in the Šumadija and Western Serbia region (43%), as well as in Vojvodina (42%).

Survey on Perception of Women at Increased Risk of Discrimination on Gender Equality

The survey⁵ provides a comprehensive insight into the attitudes and experiences of women with regard to gender equality in Serbia. It was conducted in October and November 2024, through the application of quantitative and qualitative methods on a representative sample of 1207 women, while the qualitative survey was ensured through four focus groups organised in different Serbian cities.



The results provide an insight into the deeply-rooted inequalities that shape the everyday lives of women, with polarisation of attitudes emerging as a key finding of the survey, which requires additional analysis and policy-making in that regard. While 41.7% of the respondents believe that gender equality has been achieved in Serbia, 45.9% believe the opposite is true, which suggests that women have had different experiences and perceptions. In this context, a mere 4.6% of the respondents believe gender equality has been fully achieved in Serbia. Attitudes on gender roles further illustrate this polarisation – nearly 40% of the respondents believe women should primarily seek self-fulfilment as wives and mothers. Similarly, one third of the respondents believe that the man's primary role is to be the breadwinner, while 40.4% reject this idea. This divide is indicative of deeply rooted norms and stereotypes that shape the perception of gender roles, which is also present among women themselves. Particularly worrying is the fact that as many as one half of the respondents believe women tend to be more emotionally driven when making decisions, which feeds into the stereotypes of women being less suited to leadership positions.

The highest inequalities have been identified in the fields of raising children and caring for the family, distribution of property and income and leadership posi-

5 *Survey on Perception of Women at Increased Risk of Discrimination on Gender Equality*, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Izvestaj-rodna-ravnopravnost-24.12.2024..pdf>

tions. Although a majority of the respondents (70.5%) support equal division of household chores, 76.6% of them note that women still shoulder a disproportionately higher share of the burden in the household. The survey has also identified several key areas where the challenges of discrimination are the most prominent: protection from violence and economic rights, such as economic security and equal pay for work of equal value, have been identified as the key issues for achieving gender equality.

In education, discrimination is most frequently associated with poverty and life in rural areas, while the stereotypes regarding “male” and “female” professions have been identified as a substantial obstacle for girls and young women and a key reason for the limited interest of girls in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). These stereotypes frequently shape girls’ education and career choices, thus restricting their opportunities for development in sectors with a high potential for advancement and stability.

As regards political participation, the stereotypes of women being less capable of making decisions or leading political processes have had a significant effect on their presence and influence in this sphere. A majority of the respondents support quotas that would increase women’s political participation, which suggests there is an awareness of the need for institutional mechanisms to achieve equality in politics. On the other hand, just 2.1% of the respondents consider political participation to be a key right for achieving gender equality, which is indicative of their lack of awareness of the importance of women’s participation in political life.

Access to justice is another area with significant barriers, where the problems manifest themselves through financial, institutional and social factors. High legal costs, which half of the respondents identified as the key issue, are the largest barrier to women, especially those from a lower socioeconomic background. While a free legal aid system does exist, 35.2% of the respondents consider it ineffective, which suggests there is a need to improve this system to make it more functional and more accessible.

Apart from institutional barriers, social factors also play an important role in obstructing access to justice. A quarter of the respondents stated they feared stigmatisation, which is indicative of deeply rooted prejudice in the community which discourages women from seeking legal aid. Gender stereotypes among judicial actors were also identified by a quarter of the respondents, which further reinforces the need for educating and sensitising judicial workers to ensure equality in legal proceedings. The fact that 16.3% of the respondents stated their mistrust of the legal system highlights the broader issue of corruption and inefficiency of the judiciary, which further deepens the feeling of helplessness in women.

The survey shows it is necessary to apply a comprehensive, holistic approach to achieve gender equality in Serbia. To achieve this, the survey concludes with

recommendations by specific areas and identifies next steps and measures that could contribute to advancement of gender equality.

The survey was conducted with support from the German agency for development cooperation (GIZ) within the framework of the project “Support to Social Inclusion in Serbia”.

Analysis “Prevalence of Hate Speech in Serbian Media”



The analysis “Prevalence of Hate Speech in Serbian Media”⁶ prepared by the Commissioner with support from the European Union and the Council of Europe, contains an analysis of the international – primarily European – standards regarding the prohibition of hate speech. The publication covers the national legal and strategic framework, as well as the relevant case

law of the European Court of Human Rights and the Commissioner’s practice. It provides an overview of national and international surveys which illustrate the frequency and manifestations of hate speech in Serbia, as well as citizens’ perceptions regarding this issue.

The analysis also includes quantitative and qualitative surveys of the media, which were monitored over a four-week period, from 6 May to 2 June 2024. This period was marked by several events that largely shaped the public opinion: voting on the Resolution on the Srebrenica genocide, voting on Kosovo’s admission to the Council of Europe, the Eurosong contest and the general election.

Daily newspapers covered by the monitoring included: “Blic”, “Kurir”, “Informer”, “Srpski Telegraf”, and “Alo”. This part of the report is divided according to the minority groups which received the highest share of media coverage. Thus, for example, in the media reporting relating to ethnic groups, many of the daily newspaper articles reporting on Croats, Albanians and Montenegrins were written in a sensationalist manner. Such articles perpetuate negative attitudes towards those nations and encourage hate speech. Reporting on femicide, domestic violence and other forms of violence against women has also been highly sensationalistic, with details of cases under investigation, displaying of disturbing photographs of crime scenes and provision of potentially identifying information about victims. As regards reporting on women, there have also been articles which focused pri-

6 *Prevalence of Hate Speech in Serbian Media*, available at: https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/PRISUTNOST-GOVORA-MRZNJE-U-MEDIJIMA-U-SRBIJI_2024_print.pdf

marily on the physical appearance of famous female athletes and on promoting beauty standards which revolve around expensive clothes and “fake” appearance.

The survey also covered three weeklies: “Nedeljnik”, “Ekspres” and “Pečat”. The report notes, among other things, that “Nedeljnik” writes critical texts, while “Ekspres” is rather biased and publishes articles that contribute to irrational attitudes towards the neighbouring nations and their relationship with Serbs. “Pečat” is made up of articles that glorify Serbs. According to the findings of this survey, none of the weeklies contain texts on marginalised groups aimed at affirming their culture and identity.

Finally, the exercise also included an analysis of online portals. It has been observed that journalists tend to quote the opinions of others, including public figures in particular, without condemning them as inappropriate speech, which constitutes a breach of the code of ethics and is contrary to the opinions stated in the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. Among the most extreme examples are the highly negative comments on non-binary persons, family violence and abuse of the reporting system by women, as well as negative comments on Montenegrins. Such comments were neither generated nor subsequently deleted and can be qualified as hate speech.

Analysis of the Legal Framework Relevant for the Field of Inheritance



To comprehensively assess the situation regarding gender equality in property inheritance, the Commissioner, with support from the German agency for development cooperation (GIZ) within the framework of the project “Support to Social Inclusion in Serbia”, prepared the *Analysis of the Legal Framework Relevant for the Field of Inheritance*⁷ which covers the

most important international and national legal acts governing this field and provides recommendations for possible amendments or supplements to relevant laws, in order to rectify unclarities or incompleteness of provisions, which might lead to discrimination in practice.

This analysis shows that the Serbian legal framework governing property and inheritance relations treats women and men equally; however, patriarchal norms and patterns of inheritance are usually biased against women and favour their male relatives.

⁷ *Analysis of the Legal Framework Relevant for the Field of Inheritance*, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Analiza-pravnog-okvira-nasledjivanje.pdf>

Analysis “Legal Framework for Marginalised Groups of Women in the Republic of Serbia”



This *analysis*⁸ comprises five areas. The first part presents the relevant international framework, divided into universal and European standards, with the aim of identifying the sources that embrace the intersectional approach and analysing the practice of the relevant bodies charged with applying those sources.

The second part covers the national legal framework, based on which specific groups of women are identified who can be considered marginalised and who should be subject to special measures and activities. The third part analyses specific areas in which the law explicitly provides that care should be taken of vulnerable groups of women. The fourth part analyses the relevant strategic framework applicable to specific categories of persons.

The second part covers the national legal framework, based on which specific

Finally, the last part provides concrete recommendations for consistent inclusion of the intersectional approach and its implementation in the legal and strategic framework of the Republic of Serbia.

Equality Code - Guidelines on Developing a Code of Antidiscrimination Policies for Employers in Serbia



The Commissioner prepared the revised and supplemented edition of the “Guidelines on Developing a Code of Antidiscrimination Policies for Employers in Serbia – the Equality Code”⁹ within the framework of the project “Improving Equality in the Field of Work and Employment – A Joint Initiative for Workplace

8 *Legal Framework for Marginalised Groups of Women in the Republic of Serbia*, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Pravni-okvir-za-zene-i-devojke-18.12.2024.pdf>

9 *Equality Code - Guidelines on Developing a Code of Antidiscrimination Policies for Employers in Serbia*, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/kodeks-ravnopravnosti-smernice-3a-izradu-kodeksa-antidiskriminacione-politike-poslodavaca-u-srbiji/>

Equality”, as part of the Initiative for Global Solidarity implemented by the German agency for development cooperation (GIZ).

From the years of the Commissioner’s practice it is clear that the number of complaints of discrimination is the highest in the field of labour and employment, with citizens asking for protection due to unequal treatment at various stages of employment and work. The Equality Code aims to help employers with preparing their internal documents governing the application of inclusive policies and the principles of equality in their operations, as an effective mechanism for recognising and preventing potential cases of discrimination in the work setting. The guidelines also incorporate a questionnaire which can be used for self-evaluation of the state of the antidiscrimination framework by employers, with outcomes that suggest whether such framework should be innovated, established or supplemented; a summary of the relevant legal framework; an overview of the main terms relevant for this field; methodological instructions for specific procedures as part of the process of developing internal antidiscrimination policy codes; and a model equality code.

The publication provides a number of practical examples of discrimination in the field of labour and employment, an overview of key aspects in which it is similar to and different from workplace mobbing, as well as the available mechanisms of protection against discrimination.

Guidance on Implementing Activities Concerning Reasonable Adaptation of Workplaces/Jobs to Persons with Disabilities



The Commissioner developed this *Guidance*¹⁰ for employers, to introduce and clarify the duty, provided for by the law, to make reasonable adjustments to workplaces/jobs for persons with disabilities in the Republic of Serbia.

Reasonable adjustments must be targeted, optimised and effective in the sense that the barriers faced by workers with disabilities must be fully eliminated or minimised. The publication exam-

ines the obligations imposed on employers and provides examples of the types of reasonable adjustments that can be made, with specifically described steps.

10 *Guidance on Implementing Activities Concerning Reasonable Adaptation of Workplaces/Jobs to Persons with Disabilities*, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/uputstvo-za-sprovodjenje-aktivnosti-u-vezi-sa-razumnim-prilagodjavanjem-radnih-mesta-poslova-za-osobe-sa-invaliditetom/>

TRAININGS AND EXPERT MEETINGS

Trainings

Education on human rights is one of the Commissioner's top priorities, because the practice of the institution and relevant surveys suggest that many citizens do not have access to sufficient information on fundamental human rights or ways in which they are protected. In this context, in 2024, the Commissioner included more than 1200 participants in education on human rights and raising the capacities of different target groups and professionals in various fields.



To improve the knowledge of the staff of the Ministry of Defence and the Serbian Armed Forces on protection against discrimination and gender equality, the Commissioner and the Office for Gender Equality of the Human Resources Department of the Ministry of Defence, with support from the OSCE Mission to Serbia, began implementing the training programme “Recognising and Reacting to Discrimination” in 2024. These trainings are among the activities scheduled for implementation under the draft Third National Action Plan on Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. The first, “pilot” training ahead of implementation of the NAP was held at the end of the year. The attendees were the staff of the Ministry of Defence and the Serbian Armed Forces, who are also “trusted persons”, a mechanism established under the First National Action Plan on Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

The training was exceptionally well received by the attendees, as evident from the evaluation results. The rate of recognition of cases of discrimination increased from 20% at the start of the training to 77% at its end. The knowledge of the Commissioner's powers under the law has also increased significantly, from 53% at the start of the training to 77% at the end.

The long-term cooperation with the OSCE Mission to Serbia to implement trainings continued through 2024. The training programme for policemen and policewomen “Recognising and Reacting to Discrimination” covered 71 attendees¹¹, and the evaluations have shown that the highest increase in knowledge was achieved in recognising cases of discrimination, which only 13% of the seminar participants were able to recognise in the initial questionnaires, while the rate of correct answers in the closing questionnaires was 54%. In reply to the question on personal char-

¹¹ Together with the trainings held in 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022 and 2023, the total number of policemen and policewomen covered by the programme is 834.

acteristics which can be the grounds for discrimination, the rate of correct answers was 30% at the start of the training, while at completion it increased to 58%.



The Commissioner, with support from the OSCE Mission to Serbia, continued providing trainings to build the capacities of members of national councils of national minorities. The trainings held in Subotica, Pančevo and Kopaonik were attended by representatives of 21 out of the total of 24 national councils of national minorities, as well as representatives of one national minority who were not members of a national council. The average number of correct answers at the start of the seminar was

5.9, and at the end it was 7.9. The rate of recognition of the term “discrimination” stood at 79% at the beginning and increased to 95% by the end. The term “personal characteristic as the grounds for discrimination” was recognised by 21% of the participants at the start of the training and 47% at its end.

Within the framework of the project “Combating Discrimination and Promoting Diversity in Serbia”, which is part of the third phase of the EU and Council of Europe joint programme “Horizontal Facility for Western Balkans and Turkey”, in 2024 the Commissioner held education workshops for a total of 264 teachers, non-teaching staff and representatives of pupils’ parliaments at 16 primary and secondary schools across Serbia. In addition to an introduction to the concept of discrimination and the Commissioner’s powers, the attendees were provided with guidelines on implementation of the Compass Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People¹². The Manual is intended for young people and contains, among other things, a number of interactive games that encourage the forming of opinions, development of attitudes and understanding of human rights.

Under the same EU/CoE programme, two trainings were organised for media workers on human rights, discrimination and hate speech. In the course of her session, the Commissioner presented the normative antidiscrimination framework, the Commissioner’s competences and this institution’s activities in combating hate speech, supported by examples from the institution’s practice.

Upon invitation from the AFA, which coordinates the Erasmus+ project Women Empowerment in Wages Equality Rights, a training was held to build capacities for achieving gender equality in salaries. Representatives of the Commissioner presented the legal framework governing gender equality and the right to equal pay for work of equal value, without discrimination, and introduced the Commissioner’s

12 Available at: <https://www.coe.int/sr/web/compass/home>

activities in this field. The aim of the project is to empower civil, private and public sectors with regard to the legislation governing equal pay for work of equal value and the mechanisms and tools available for achieving this human/social right.

“SHE KNOWS – Education Programme for Companies: Empowering Women in the work setting” has been designed to provide representatives of companies with a deeper understanding and concrete solutions for advancing gender equality and inclusivity. Upon invitation from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Commissioner took part in the programme of education sessions on the protection against discrimination based on prejudice and the established social norms which create gender barriers and hamper women’s inclusion and advancement in the workplace. The incumbent Commissioner held a lecture for representatives of companies, including AmCham members, startups and companies from the Pčinja-Jablanica region which participate in the programme. Among other issues, the incumbent Commissioner underscored the importance of gender equality and a corporate culture that acknowledges diversity, equality and inclusivity.

In 2024, the joint project with the International Labour Organisation “Ensuring adequate grieving mechanisms for workers in the automotive, electrical and textile industries”, supported by the German organisation for international cooperation GIZ, was continued. Two training events were held during the year, one in Kragujevac and one in Niš, for more than 200 members of trade unions in the automotive, electrical and textile industries.

The Commissioner held two education workshops on the subject “How to achieve equality in the workplace”, designed for employers and representatives of human resource departments of companies. The workshops were held in Belgrade and Novi Sad. In addition to lectures on prohibition of discrimination and protection mechanisms, the participants were also introduced to the Equality Code, the publication developed by the Commissioner to improve equality in the in the work setting.



Workshop for employers and company representatives, Belgrade, 2024

In cooperation with the Council of Europe and the Roma Centre of Vojvodina, as part of the EC programme “Roma Integration – Phase III”, nine public debates were held in Roma settlements in Obrenovac, Kraljevo, Ripanj, Zvezdara, Novi Sad, Kostolac, Preševo, Bečej and Ub. More than 200 inhabitants of those settlements attended lectures on recognising discrimination and the available mechanisms of protection before the Commissioner, aimed at encouraging members of the Roma national protection and the non-governmental organisations protecting human rights to report cases of discrimination.

Upon invitation of the Roma Education Federation, as part of the project “Increasing the Employment of Young Roma Men and Women”, representatives of the Commissioner held a lecture and a workshop for 20 young Roma men and women.

The project “Commissioner’s Youth Panel on Equality Protection – Youth for Equality” aims to raise the awareness of young secondary and primary school pupils on recognising and reacting to discrimination. The project is implemented in partnership with the Croatian Ombudsperson for Gender Equality, with support from the EU’s Erasmus+ programme. In late 2024, two trainings were held for the panellists: “Recognising and Responding to Discrimination and Protection Mechanisms” and “Public Appearance”. These trainings increased the capacity of young persons to promote equality and human rights and to actively participate in creating an equal opportunities society for all.

The Youth Initiative for Human Rights in Serbia held a training for young persons on human rights, hate speech and discrimination as part of the project “From Memory to Action: Peace and Human Rights in a Post-conflict Society”. For young persons from Preševo, Bujanovac and Novi Pazar, a representative of the Commissioner held a lecture on this institution’s competences and practice in antidiscrimination cases, as part of the session “Human Rights Breaches in Practice”.

Representatives of the Commissioner held a training for graduates and finishing year students from Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa. The training, attended by 12 participants, addressed the subject of the Commissioner’s competences and the procedure for protection against discrimination. After the training, two students who were interested in improving their knowledge of antidiscrimination matters stated they would like to complete a four-month internship at the Commissioner’s institution. The training and the subsequent internship were organised in cooperation with Civic Initiatives.

The Commissioner held two sessions within the Summer School on the Right to Equality and Protection against Discrimination of the Faculty of Law of the University of Niš upon invitation from OSCE Mission to Serbia. The first one addressed the status and competences of the Commission and the procedure conducted before this institution, while the second one provided the attendees with an opportunity to take part in a workshop where they could learn how to complete

and submit a complaint with this independent institution, based on examples from the Commissioner's practice, adapted for the purposes of the workshop.

Students of the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Belgrade, members of the European Students' Forum, visited the Commissioner's institution and attended a lecture on the concept and forms of discrimination and the Commissioner's competences.

As part of the project "Promoting Social Inclusion in Serbia" implemented by GIZ, trainings were held in 2024 on the subject of prevention of intersectional discrimination at local self-government units in Serbia, aimed at building the capacities of local self-government representatives to consistently apply antidiscrimination legislation. The Commissioner took part in the trainings held in Užice, Valjevo, Šabac, Novi Pazar and Leskovac. The attendees were introduced to the concept and forms of discrimination and the competences and practice of the Commissioner.

The programme "PRO – Local Governance for People and Nature" is implemented jointly by United Nations agencies in Serbia – UNOPS, UNICEF, UNFPA and UNEP – in cooperation with the Serbian Government and with financial support from the Swiss Government. Upon invitation from UNOPS, the Commissioner held two lectures, in Aranđelovac and Šabac, for employees of the local self-governments of Babušnica, Bela Palanka, Vrnjačka Banja, Šabac, Dimitrovgrad Zaječar, Knić, Kragujevac, Kraljevo, Kruševac, Ljubovija, Nova Varoš, Pirot, Raška, Sokobanja, Topola and Čuprija.

Upon invitation from the National Assembly, the Commissioner held a lecture as part of a seminar for members of parliament who are also members of the Committee on Human and Minority Rights and Gender Equality of the National Assembly. The seminars were held with support from the OSCE Mission to Serbia, in Vršac and Šabac, and one of the aims was to introduce members of parliament to the mechanisms of protection before the Commissioner.

Within the framework of the multi-year program "Implementation of anti-discrimination regulations for employees of the National Employment Service", implemented continually by the Commissioner since 2019, four trainings for 150 attendees were held in 2024.

Expert meetings, conferences and other activities

The Commissioner's regular activities in the field of promoting equality and cooperation with all social actors include the organisation of expert meetings and other events, as well as participation in expert meetings - conferences, round tables, workshops, debates, working groups etc. - organised by other state authorities, civil society organisations, regional and international organisations and their representatives.

In addition to the conferences and expert meetings organised by the Commissioner, during the year representatives of the institution participated in over 730 various expert meetings, where they contributed to understanding and the exercise of human rights in various fields of social life by their active participation and by pointing to the issues regarding inequality of certain social groups at higher risk of discrimination, by explaining possible manners of protection, and by presenting examples of good practice and specific manners to improve the situation. Below are presented expert meetings and other activities organised by the Commissioner, followed by some of the meetings where the Commissioner participated.

Expert meetings organised by the Commissioner

This year again, the Commissioner held the large annual conference dedicated to the promotion of equality and tolerance to mark the International Tolerance Day. Held under the title “**Everyone Should Know What Equality Means**”, this year’s conference was organised in cooperation with the United Kingdom Embassy to Serbia and the British Council, with the aim of raising awareness on the importance of education of children and the youth on the concept of discrimination and its elimination through the promotion of tolerance and equality, including gender equality.



Performance by of the children’s choir “Kolibri” at the Commissioner’s annual conference 2024

The working part of the conference took part through panel discussions, where young men and women presented the opinions and attitudes of the youth about equality, while on the other side teachers and psychologists presented their positions.



Presentation of the annual media award for tolerance, 2024

At the conference, the annual media awards for tolerance, jointly awarded by the Commissioner, the OSCE Mission in Serbia and the Delegation of the European Union to Serbia to the authors of the best media texts and contributions on the topic of fighting against discrimination, promoting equality and tolerance were traditionally presented. In the TV/radio category Amela Bajrović (Freemedia.rs), Tamara Stojanović (TV N1), Jovana Urhin (TV Una) and Tanja Komarica (TV Blic) were awarded. In the online media/portals category Aleksandar Đokić (“Vreme” portal), Slađana Dimirtijević (UNS portal), Dragana Prica (021.rs) and Ganja Nikolić (“Niške vesti“ portal) were awarded, while in the print media category, prizes were awarded to Olivera Milošević (Politika) and Stefan Slavković (Lice ulice).

The conference was also an opportunity to present the plaque for the “Municipality/City of Equal Opportunities” for 2024. This year’s award winner was the municipality of Vrnjačka Banja, while awards for the exceptional contribution to the promotion of equality were presented to the city of Sombor and the municipality of Trstenik.

The exhibition „Great Women of Serbian Culture” was also promoted at the conference, which was opened one day earlier at the House of Jevrem Grujić in Belgrade, and which presented significant women in Serbian history who contributed to the development of Serbian thought, culture, science and society by their actions and courage.

Demographic changes and ageing are among the main topics for the future of all of us. It is necessary to adjust to new conditions in the provision of various types of services, to use innovation and continually meet the needs of the elderly, using scientific and technical achievements for good purposes, said the Commissioner at the opening of the international conference under the title “**My Future – Who Should Take Care of It? For Greater Inclusion of Older Persons**” dedicated to innovations in the care for older persons, promotion of active and healthy aging, digital literacy, as well as achievements and challenges faced by the elderly and their caregivers.

The conference was jointly organized by the Commissioner, the Office of the Attaché for Social Protection, Health and Consumer Protection of the Republic of Austria, the UN Population Fund in Serbia, the Serbian Red Cross and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia, with participation of a number of experts in this field.



Regional conference “My Future – Who Should Take Care of It? For Greater Inclusion of Older Persons”, 2024

The results of the survey under the title “Roma Community Perception of Discrimination” were presented at the conference under the title “**Light and Shadow – the Roma in the Education System**” organised by the Commissioner in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, the Council of Europe Office in Belgrade and the European Roma Rights Centre. An analysis of the results of the second such survey implemented by the Commissioner to provide important data that could be the basis for further work on the improvement of policies and practices showed that the majority of respondents (85%) agrees that the education of the Roma is the most important for their equal position in the society. Representatives of state authorities, numerous non-governmental organisations and schools participated in thematic panel discussions on experiences and challenges in practice.

To celebrate the International Women’s Day, 8 March, the Commissioner, in cooperation with the UNDP Office in Serbia, organised the panel discussion under the title “**Gender Equality – from Priority to Identity Crisis**”. The position of women and gender equality and the role of the media in its achievement were discussed by journalists as part of two panel discussions under the title “Law and Practice – What Has Our Struggle Given Us” and “Gender Equality – an Apple of Discord?”.

The laws are clear – women and men have equal right to inheritance, and it has been like that for 80 years. However, there is a widespread belief in life, even among young people, that men should have an advantage, which is why many women still

renounce their inheritance in order not to be condemned by their family and the environment, said the Commissioner at the opening of the conference under the title **“Fair Inheritance – a Step Towards Women’s Empowerment”** jointly organized by the Commissioner and the German Development Cooperation implemented by GIZ, with the aim of raising awareness of this important topic. The results of a survey implemented as part of the project under the title “Support to Social Inclusion in Serbia” on the influence of social norms on attitudes and decisions regarding property inheritance were presented at the conference, which included women and men of different age categories from rural and urban areas across Serbia.

The conference under the title **“Between Law and Reality: Women’s Perspectives on Gender Equality in Serbia”** was also held within the same project and cooperation with GIZ, where the results were presented of the Commissioner’s survey of the perception of gender equality from the perspective of women in Serbia, as well as an analysis of the legal framework relating to discrimination against women from vulnerable social groups, with the aim of contributing to a comprehensive overview of the situation in the field of gender equality and the shaping of public policies that meet the real needs of women. On that occasion, the Commissioner emphasized that gender equality was primarily a matter of the rule of law, justice and the exercise of fundamental human rights, but also the key prerequisite for social, economic, and political progress. However, gender equality is still considered a “women’s topic”, which is why it is necessary to involve men more intensively and educate them about the importance of liberation from traditional gender roles.

During the year, a conference was also held where the main results were presented of surveys under the title **“Attitude of Citizens on Discrimination in Serbia”** and **“Attitude of Representatives of Public Authorities Towards Discrimination”** conducted by the Commissioner in late 2023 with the support from the joint project of the European Union and the Council of Europe under the title “Combating Discrimination and Promoting Diversity in Serbia” as part of the programme “Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Turkey”.

To mark the International Day for Countering Hate Speech, as part of the same project supported by the European Union and the Council of Europe, the conference under the title **“Countering Hate Speech – Through the Promotion of Dialogue and Tolerance Towards the Elimination of the Cause”** was organised. Hate speech, humiliating and degrading treatment and other forms of ill-treatment, as well as aggression in communication constitute a kind of threat and open or covert denial of rights to others, and often also incite violence, said the Commissioner. Findings of an analysis of the (ab)use of sensitive terms in the media were also presented at the conference, followed by a panel discussion on the topic “Do the Media “Love” Hate Speech?”.

The World Children's Day was solemnly marked by the award of prizes and exhibition of the best children's work from the Commissioner's competition "**Bridge of Understanding – Intergenerational Solidarity**". More than 700 pupils sent their works on the topic of intergenerational cooperation this year, which was the highest number in seven years during which this competition has been jointly organised by the Commissioner, the Ministry of Education and the UNFPA Office in Serbia. In the category of photography, the first prize was won by Nikolina Ergelašev (Primary School "Vuk Karadžić", class VIII/2, Srbobran), the second prize was won by Đurđa Nikolić (Primary School "Vuk Karadžić", class VIII/3, Belgrade), while the third prize was won by Viola Čemere (Primary School "Feješ Klara", class VIII/2, Kikinda). In the category of artwork, the first prize went to Jana Dimitrijević (Primary School "Branko Radičević", 4th grade, Trgovište), the second prize was won by Lena Filipović (Primary School "Grabovac", class VI/2, Grabovac), while the third prize was won by Hana Hukić (Primary School "Čamil Sijarić", 7th grade, Novi Pazar). The first prize in the category literary works was won by Aleksandra Jović (Primary School "Branko Radičević", class VIII/2, Vranje), while the second and the third prizes were won by Nina Domanović (Primary School "Nada Matić", class VIII/4, Užice) and Janko Vučinić (Primary School "Branko Ćopić", class VII/2, Belgrade).

The most interesting works were displayed at the exhibition, while the music part of the event included performance by young members of the Roma rap band GRUBB (Gypsy Roma Urban Balkan Beats) from the Foundation bearing the same name, which brings together education and art to support children in achieving their full potential and social integration.



Presentation of prizes and exhibition "Bridge of Understanding – Intergenerational Solidarity", 2024

The Commissioner implemented again in 2024 the programme “**Moot Court in the Field of Protection against Discrimination**”, to build capacities of future lawyers, students at faculties of law in the Republic of Serbia, for the protection against discrimination, through learning about legal mechanisms and acquiring skills of presenting legal arguments. Teams from the Faculty of Law of the University in Novi Sad won the first and the second places at the competition, female student Jovana Radak from the same University was awarded as the best speaker, while the team from the Faculty of Law in Niš won the prize in the category of the best written petition. This year’s competition was the 11th such competition, organised with support from the Commissioner’s traditional partner, namely the National Internet Domain Registry of Serbia (RINDS), and the case focused on discrimination based on national affiliation in the digital sphere.



Presentation of prizes at the moot court competition in the field of the protection against discrimination, 2024

As part of the programme under the title “**Don’t Judge a Book by Its Covers – Living Library in Serbia**”, implemented by the Commissioner since 2012, three Living Libraries were held during the reporting year, including in Indija, Bečej and Ripanj. In this library, the “books” are people from groups at greater risk of discrimination, who through direct interaction with the “reader” convey their experiences and problems caused by discrimination in everyday life. The aim is to promote equality and tolerance, as well as to overcome negative prejudices and stereotype.

The traditional action “**Equally to the Finnish Line**” was held at the 37th Belgrade Marathon, organised by the Commissioner and the Sports Association of Persons with Disabilities of Belgrade, with the support of the Belgrade Marathon. The action has been taking place for 13 years within the Belgrade Marathon. A large number of citizens gathered at the Commissioner’s stand, where they had the opportunity to learn more about the problems faced by people with disabilities when using public spaces, facilities, public transportation, and in other areas, while many of them used this occasion to hear personal stories of present athletes, some of whom won medals at the most important European and world competitions for

para-athletes. After they completed a test under the title “Recognise Discrimination”, they received symbolic gifts, and the action was successfully completed by gathering at the starting line of the “Fun Run”.

Activities of the **Commissioner’s Youth Advisory Panel** continued in 2024 through close collaboration on matters related to combating and protecting against discrimination of children and youth, through consultations, regular meetings and thematic activities, in the implementation and promotion of which it actively participates.



Six educational workshops for members of the Panel with the aim of empowering the youth to recognise the examples of human rights human rights violation in their environment, as well as to convey a strong message of the importance of the respect of equality for every individual and the society as a whole through creatively designed activities and actions. The topics covered by education included the development of skills to recognize and respond to discrimination; public speaking skills; gender equality topics; acquis communautaire; mental health, prevention and breaking the stigma; training for peer educators in the field of the prevention of technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

In addition, young panellists, together with representatives of the Commissioner’s Professional Office, attended a training by the Council of Europe on the use of Compasito methodology, with the aim of strengthening the capacities of schools for education of children and the youth on human rights. After completion of the training, members of the Panel had an opportunity to take part as educators in eight workshops for teachers, non-teaching staff and representatives of students’ parliaments in primary and secondary schools in Belgrade, Kragujevac, Novi Sad, Indija, Niš, Leskovac and Kovačica.



Training for peer educators on the topic of the protection against discrimination, 2024

Expert Meetings Organised by Other Actors

The Commissioner participates in numerous dialogues, expert meetings, conferences etc. organised by various social actors to throw light on and point to numerous social phenomena and tendencies which can deepen the existing and create new inequalities, injustice and discrimination. As an illustration, below are presented only a few of these meetings and other events where the Commissioner pointed to discrimination as a phenomenon, the manners to overcome certain problems and mechanisms to improve equality, primarily based on the practice of the institution, and also of other relevant sources.

The project “Together Safely Through Childhood”, implemented jointly by the Commissioner and the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Education, was continued in the school year 2024/25, through various educational activities with the aim of raising awareness of primary school pupils of the consequences of violent behaviour in real and virtual environments. The topics of educational workshops with pupils relate to the recognition of various forms of violence and discrimination, the adoption of strategies to help others in need and skills of non-violent resolution of conflicts, the development of empathy and provision of information on the manners of assistance, support and protection. A meeting was held at the complex of the University of Criminal Investigation and Police Studies to mark the beginning of the schoolyear and continuation of the project, where representatives of the Commissioner’s Professional Service and the Ministry of the Interior, firefighters, traffic officers, gendarmerie, divers and rescuers explained to children through socializing, fun and game the concepts of discrimination, equality and tolerance and talked about the importance of fostering mutual respect and understanding. As part of the project, 17,023 workshops were implemented in the

first semester of the school year 2024/2025, where 222,221 pupils from the 1st, 2nd, 5th and 8th grade took part.

The promotion of the BodyRight campaign “Your Body is Yours! Both on the Internet and in the Real World!” continued, which has been organised by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in cooperation with the Commissioner since November 2022. The BodyRight campaign was presented at the Gallery of Matica Srpska in Novi Sad to diplomats and partners supporting the initiative to ensure improved protection of privacy and bodily autonomy in digital space. The campaign was also presented at the EXIT festival, where visitors could obtain additional information and provide their personal contribution to the visibility of the campaign.



The Law on Prohibition of Discrimination marked a turning point towards the building of a fairer and more inclusive society, while the introduction of the Commissioner as a specialised independent state authority provided an efficient anti-discrimination mechanism which is free of charge for citizens. Although numerous challenges still exist, inclusion of civil society organisations, the media and public institutions in the promotion of tolerance and diversity shows that we are on the right path, concluded the Commissioner at the opening of the conference “15 Years of the Application of the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination – Practice and Challenges” organised by YUCOM Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights.

The rule of law and progress of the society are not possible without gender equality. Law must keep up with life, and it is necessary to have relevant experts specialized in providing answers about gender roles and discrimination in a scientifically based and clear manner, emphasized the Commissioner at the presentation of a new master’s study programme under the title “Law and Gender”, which had the first generation enrolled in 2024 at the Faculty of Law of the University in Belgrade. The Commissioner has been participating as a partner from the beginning in the preparation of this mater’s study programme which will be held in the English language, while lecturers will be professors of Belgarde and European universities.

At an expert meeting held to mark the tenth anniversary of the application of the Istanbul Convention held at the Faculty of Law of the University in Belgrade, the Commissioner reminded the audience the Republic of Serbia was among the first countries to ratify this Convention, that it clearly recognised the problem of violence against women and defined it as the grossest violation of human rights and a form of discrimination. Gender-based violence results from gender prejudice on gender roles that affect not only behaviour of women who are victims of

violence and their environment, but also the work of employees in authorities responsible for the protection and enforcement of the law. The more aware we are of that influence, the less scope we provide for such attitudes and assumptions to affect the process of the preparation and implementation of laws and passing of legal decisions and the work with victims of violence.

Femicide is one of the main global and also national social problems that require coordinated, permanent response and actions by all competent authorities in the system, emphasized the Commissioner at the second Regional Forum on the Prevention of Femicide, jointly organised by civil society organisation FemPlatz, the OSCE Mission to Serbia and the UN Women. According to the Commissioner, inadequate institutional and procedural treatment of victims after reporting violence, uncertain responsibility and punishment, unequal case law, the lack of condemnation by the entire society, in particular immediate environment, are some of the reasons for the increase of femicides.

As part of the global campaign “16 Days of Activism to combat Violence against Women” the Commissioner took part in an expert meeting organised by the Judicial Academy which was under the title “Life in a Cage Without Bars - an Institutional Response to the Phenomenon of Coercive Control in Family-Partner Relationships”, where representatives of the judiciary, prosecutor’s offices, centres for social work and the police addressed the phenomenon of coercive control, emphasizing that it often has far-reaching consequences for victims and constitutes a risk for the escalation of violence.



Having in mind the importance of equal participation of women in the security sector, the Commissioner participated in the 3rd regional conference organised by the Network of Women in Police of the Republic of Serbia under the title “From Challenges to Strength – Say NO to Violence in All Fields

of Life”, with the aim of exchanging experiences, best practices, and challenges at regional and European levels, as well as acquiring new knowledge, networking opportunities, and strengthen cooperation through mutual support and joint initiatives.

The mechanisms for the protection against discrimination and examples of good practice of the Commissioner, as well as the progress made in terms of gender equality were presented at the international conference under the title “Female Leaders in Security and Defence: Results and Next Steps”.

The increasing number of female engineers overcome the framework of social patterns conditioned by history and culture by their knowledge, work and per-

sistence, and we must ensure a stimulating business environment for them and provide them full support, said the Commissioner at the opening of the Chevening project conference under the title “Empowering Women in Engineering” which was held at the Science and Technology Park in Niš.

At the Korčula School, the Commissioner talked about the importance of the support system, a stimulating business environment, the preservation and improvement of women’s sexual and reproductive rights, discrimination against women and the youth and its prevention, particularly on the labour market. This year’s topic was “Transforming Politics Through a Gender Lens”. The School is traditionally organised by the CEE Gender Network, and this year it marked the 30th anniversary of this gender equality network.



The Commissioner continued her participation in the the Kopaonik Business Forum, where she was an introductory speaker on the panel under the title “Gender Equality as a Precondition for Social and Economic Development”. The participants reviewed the impact of policies aimed at achieving gender equality in all fields of life from the aspect of their professions and from

their personal aspect. They also reviewed obstacles and motivation for increased inclusion of women and their occupation of the key positions for a society.

The Commissioner talked about the position of women on the labour market at the panel discussion under the title “Diversity, Inclusion, Respect of Human Rights, Equality and Position of Women in Moder Society” held as part of the first ESG Festival organised by company Hemofarm STADA, as well as at the first regional Forbes Adria Power Women’s Summit held in Belgrade.

Intergenerational connections must be nurtured, developed and improved, because the elderly are not some other people, it is us, we will all be old soon, said



the Commissioner at the ceremonial opening of an exhibition on the beauty of ageing and intergenerational solidarity, which was held at the Đura Jakšić’s House to mark the International Day of Older People. Setting up of an exhibition of photographs under the title “Beauty of Ageing” and of artworks of primary school pupils under the title “Bridge of Understanding – Intergenera-

tional Solidarity” was organised by the civic association “Strength of Friendship – Amity” in partnership with the Commissioner and the Photo Association of Serbia.

Discrimination on the grounds of age was one of the topics of this year’s “Mikser” festival. At the panel discussion under the title “Prohibited Ageing”, the Commissioner said that intergenerational cooperation had a large importance in breaking the prejudice against the elderly, and that it was also important to recognise the needs of the elderly depending on their sex, health condition, permanent place of residence and other factors to adequately respond to them through various activities at the local, national and regional levels.

The topic of this year’s “Youth Policy Forum”, which has been organised by the National Youth Council of Serbia since 2017, included economic and housing independence of the youth. At the introductory part of the Forum, the Commissioner’s practice and the data relating to discrimination against the youth were presented, emphasizing the importance of encouraging talks about the topics of interest for the youth, with the participation of all relevant stakeholders.

At the conference under the title “Private Sector Engagement – from Refugees’ Perspective”, organised by the UNHCR Serbia, Commissariat for Refugees and Migrations of the Republic of Serbia and the UN International Organisation for Migration in Serbia, the Commissioner emphasized that business and human rights go hand in hand, which was a vision we should share. Only initiatives like this can ensure a dignified life for everyone, particularly for those who were forced to leave their homes and build new lives. She said that the institution of the Commissioner held in previous years a training for refugees and asylum-seekers on the protection against discrimination, and that as early as in 2017 it prepared the Equality Code for Employers containing guidelines for anti-discriminatory business operations by employers, which has been innovated recently. The Commissioner talked about the importance of inclusion of migrants and refugees at the expert meeting under the title “University Talks with KAICIID: Migration in the Western Balkans – Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue for an Inclusive Region” organised by the International Dialogue Centre - KAICIID in partnership with the Faculty of Geography of the University in Belgrade.

The equal position of persons with rare diseases included constant improvement of the legislative framework and the development of the support system, as well as elimination of various barriers and prejudices against persons with such diseases, said the Commissioner at the opening of the fifth regional “Caring for Rare” conference. The meeting organised by the National Organisation for Rare Diseases of Serbia – NORBS gathered experts in the region and the world with the aim of raising awareness of the challenges faced by persons with rare diseases and their families. Talking about the practice in the work of the institution, the Commissioner emphasized that discrimination on the grounds of health status is on the top of personal characteristics because of which citizens file complaints every year, but this ground is often combined with another personal characteristic, such

as disability, age, gender identity or sex, which is why those persons are at risk of multiple discrimination.

There is plenty of scope for the improvement in the social welfare system as regards long-term care for the elderly and persons with disabilities, said the Commissioner at the panel discussion under the title “Future of Long-Term Care for the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities – Application of Innovative Solutions” organised by the Red Cross of Serbia. She said that it was necessary to put in place as soon as possible combined social welfare and health care services and to use more inter-local and inter-municipal services, and that cooperation between the public and the private sector was necessary.

As every year, the Commissioner participated in numerous activities and events organised as part of the Pride Week, while representatives of the Commissioner also took part in the Pride Parade.

Also, during the year, the Centre for Democracy Foundation organised a number of debates and a series of thematic round tables on the key issues for the achievement of equality and the protection of human rights where the Commissioner took part, such as debates on the following topics: “Discrimination at Work and Protection Mechanisms”, “Long-Term Effects of Gender-Based Discrimination on the Labour Market”, “Initiative to Adopt the National Social Welfare Strategy”, “(Un)equal Access to Health Care Services and Waiting Lists”, “Mobbing in Serbia: a Personal or a Social Problem?” etc.

Given that the right to privacy falls into the category of basic, fundamental rights, the Commissioner regularly participates in expert meetings that deal with the topic of privacy protection in times of social media expansion and rapid development of artificial intelligence, such as the annual conference “Privacy Week” organised by the organisation Partners Serbia every year to mark the International Data Privacy Day. The Commissioner always particularly emphasises the link between privacy rights violations, personal data protection and discrimination.

In addition, the Commissioner took part in the Serbian Internet Governance Forum (IGF Serbia 2024), where experts, representatives of the Government, businesses and the civil society talked about the influence of the Global Digital Compact initiative, together with other directives and laws in this field, on the future of the digital world and economy. A special focus was on the freedom of data governance, online human rights and the development of artificial intelligence. At the panel discussion under the title “Digital Rights and Freedoms. Individual’s Dignity in Digital Age”, the Commissioner presented the activities and practice of the institution of the Commissioner in this field.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND IMPLEMENTED PROJECTS

During 2024, the Commissioner continued cooperation with international partners both within the country and abroad, primarily various United Nations agencies, the Council of Europe, OSCE, ODIHR, GIZ etc., non-governmental organisations, European and regional equality bodies, and with the European Network of Equality Bodies (EQUINET), through bilateral meetings and active participation in their work. Within this cooperation, one of the Commissioner's responsibilities related to creating and implementing independent projects or participating in the creation and implementation of partnership projects is realized.

In July 2024, the Commissioner initiated the implementation of the project **“Improving Equality in the Field of Work and Employment – A Joint Initiative for Workplace Equality”**, as part of the “Initiative for Global Solidarity” of the German Development Cooperation, aimed at raising awareness and strengthening employers' capacity to adopt an Equality Code, prevent discriminatory practices, and promote responsible business conduct.

Activities of the project are aimed at expanding the network of companies that apply inclusive employment policies in their business operations and strengthening their capacities through the *Partnership for Equality* with the Commissioner. Innovated guidelines for the development of the employers' anti-discrimination policy code in Serbia, namely the Equality Code, were presented at regional meetings and workshops with employers in Novi Sad and Belgrade, and in addition to representatives of companies, the Partnership for Equality charter was also signed by GIZ, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia, the German-Serbian Chamber of Commerce, the Union of Employers of Vojvodina, the Association of Companies for Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities of the Republic of Serbia etc.



Ceremonial initiation of the project with GIZ in the field of improvement of workplace equality, 2024

The Commissioner implements the project “**The Commissioner’s Youth Panel for the Protection of Equality – Youth for Equality**”, supported by the European Union Erasmus+ programme, in partnership with the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality of Croatia. The aim of the project is to improve equality of children and the youth in Serbia and Croatia through a number of activities that will empower the youth, raise their awareness of discrimination and improve communication with equality institutions. A peer education programme is being developed as part of this project, which is intended for the recognition and response to discrimination, as well as the establishment of a peer educators’ network. During the course of 2024, two trainings for trainers were implemented, which will be dealt with in more details in other chapters of this Report.

During the reporting year, activities were initiated within the “**MILAGRO**” project, implemented by the Commissioner together with the University Library “Svetozar Marković” and partners from Italy and the Netherlands. The objective of the project is to initiate the activities, create the tools and ensure the possibilities to build an inter-cultural dialogue between local population and migrants, as well as to develop competences for positive and long-term relations, based on mutual understanding, respect and solidarity.

Activities within the International Labour Organisation project “**Ensuring Adequate Grieving Mechanisms for Workers in the Automotive, Electrical and Textile Industries in the Republic of Serbia**” were successfully continued, with support from GIZ, in the implementation of which the Commissioner has been involved since February 2023. Competences of the Commissioner in terms of the protection against discrimination in the field of work and employment were presented at educational workshops in Kragujevac and Niš, which were attended by more than 200 representatives of trade unions and employees in automotive, electrical and textile industries.

Presenting the experiences from the Republic of Serbia in the field of protection and promotion of equality, the Commissioner participated in several international meetings and forums on human rights.



The Commissioner took part on the 57th session of the UN Commission on Population and Development, held at the UN head office in New York, as a member of the official delegation of the Republic of Serbia. During her addressing at the plenary part, she emphasized that institution of the Commissioner undertakes various activities in accordance with key messages contained in the UN Secretary General report on the progress in the implementation of the ICPD, as well

as that the Republic of Serbia is dedicated to the protection of fundamental human rights, particularly of those at higher risk of discrimination, through actions of the institution. She said that, after the Commissioner's special reports on discrimination against the elderly and discrimination against children were submitted to the National Assembly, the issues of the rights of these social groups were placed at the focus of public policies. She also reminded the audience about the regional Call for Action to combat discrimination on the grounds of age, which was submitted three years ago from Belgrade at the regional conference. Supporting events of the session provided opportunities to present examples of good practice relating to the improvement of intergenerational cooperation and the importance of exchange of knowledge, experiences and emotions for the stability of societies and demographic resilience in the current global demographic changes.

The annual ECRI seminar for representatives of national equality bodies in Strasbourg, which was dedicated to practices and strategies to eliminate racism in health care and structural discrimination, marked the 30th anniversary of this independent supervisory body for the protection against discrimination consisting of unbiased experts for the protection of human rights appointed by Council of Europe member states. The meeting was preceded by a meeting with the new Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Mr. Michael O'Flaherty dedicated to the priorities in the fields of the protection of human rights, the fight against discrimination and the improvement of cooperation with national equality bodies. On that occasion, the Commissioner emphasized that the institution puts efforts to keep all important topics in the focus and to be the voice of those who do not have equal access to resources, information, health care, social and other services, such as the Roma, the elderly, persons with disabilities, refugees, migrants, women, particularly rural women, convicts and other groups at higher risk of discrimination, with a proactive approach and frequent field visits to informal settlements, local self-governments, rural areas and vulnerable individuals.



Representatives of national equality institutions at the annual ECRI seminar, 2024

The Commissioner took part in the Fundamental Rights Forum organised in Vienna by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights - FRA. It is of key importance to ensure higher trust of European citizens, primarily the youth, in institutions, democracy and the importance of preservation of human rights, primarily through the formation and implementation of clear policies on the key issues, the fight against fake news and misinformation, as well as through strengthening the role of the civil society, independent media and ombudspersons – these were some of the main messages provided during the Forum attended by representatives of the highest European bodies, EU Member States and the civil sector.

At the ceremony to mark the 30th anniversary of the UNESCO “Routes of Enslaved Peoples” programme in Paris, dedicated to joint fight of countries against racism and inequality, the Commissioner emphasized that bodies for equality and the fight against discrimination have the key role in this transformation and they should be provided with the support from the society in the work on elimination of discrimination and promotion of equality.



On the International Human Rights Day, the Commissioner took part in the 4th UNESCO Global Forum against Racism and Discrimination in Barcelona, as one of the founders of the UNESCO Network of Anti-Racism and Anti-Discrimination Officials, together with representatives of the USA, Canada, the EU, Germany, France, Italy, Ireland, Sweden, Brazil, Peru and Ecuador. On this important Forum, the Commissioner emphasized that Serbia does not have a particular problem with racism, but the emphasis is on protection, prevention and

education, with adequate response to individual cases of reported discrimination. On that occasion, she also presented examples of good practice of the institution.

At the regional conference in Tirana, organised by the UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, which was under the title “Charting the Future 30 Years after Beijing: Effective Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment”, the Commissioner talked about the importance of institutional protection against discrimination and the importance of partnerships with the civil society, the academic and business sectors, the media and policy makers for the achievement of the objectives of the Beijing Declaration.

During the reporting year, the Commissioner took part in the parliamentary symposium under the title “Open and Inclusive Society. The Role and Mission of Equality Bodies” organised by the National Council of the Parliament of Austria to mark the application of the EU directives on equality bodies standards, which strengthen the role and the position of these bodies through the expansion of their

competences and powers, provision of additional resources and a higher level of independence. At the panel discussion, the Commissioner emphasized that the domestic framework had already been harmonised to a high extent with the most recent standards laid down by the EU, but also pointed to aspects where the situation could be improved, primarily in connection with ensuring the access to the Commissioner to information necessary to identify discrimination, as well as laying down a higher independence in the provision and management of financial and human resources.



The Commissioner maintains a highly successful long-standing cooperation with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). On invitation of the OSCE Chairperson, Malta, the Commissioner participated in a meeting between representatives of OSCE participating States in Vienna, pending the presentation of a report by the Chairperson for Serbia before the OSCE Standing Committee. On that occasion, she presented numerous results of years-long cooperation between the Commissioner and the Mission established in the fields recognised as the key challenges in the achievement of equality, particularly for social groups at risk of discrimination.

During the course of the year, the institution of the Commissioner was visited by the delegation of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, who learned on that occasion about the main measures and activities implemented in the institution to improve the position of members of national minorities, and participants also exchanged observations on global challenges in the field of the protection of human rights and equality. High Commissioner Mr. Kairat Abdrakhmanov expressed his support to the work of the Commissioner and emphasized the importance of the commitment of this independent institution to the improvement of the position of members of national minorities, as well as to the elimination of all forms of discrimination.



A visit by the delegation of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, 2024

At the ODIHR Warsaw Human Dimension Conference, within the thematic session under the title “Tolerance and Non-Discrimination I”, the situation in the achievement of equality and examples of good practice in the Republic of Serbia were presented, as well as the Commissioner’s practice in the field of protection against discrimination and the improvement of the position of various social groups, with a special focus on national minorities.

During the course of the year, the Commissioner held a meeting with Ms Ivana Živković, UN Assistant Secretary-General, Assistant Administrator and Director of



the Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (RBEC) of the UN Development Programme, which addressed cooperation and continuation of joint fight on the improvement of human rights. The participants agreed that human rights and the position of women must constantly be among top priorities, while all public policies should pass the gender marker if we are to build a better and fairer society.

At a meeting with the newly appointed United Nations Resident Coordinator in Serbia Ms Matilde Mordt, the Commissioner talked about challenges in the

exercise of human rights and the protection against discrimination, including the fight against gender-based violence. She presented the role and competences of the Commissioner, the situation in the field of the protection of equality, and some of the main activities implemented by the institution in this field. The meeting addressed the possibilities for future cooperation, with a focus on activities aimed at overcoming of patriarchal prejudice and widespread narrative.

During 2024, the institution of the Commissioner was visited by the Director of the Ombud for Equal Treatment of the Republic of Austria. The meeting addressed joint challenges in the protection of rights of citizens at higher risk of discrimination, as well as the need for higher inclusion of the elderly in various fields of social life, as well as the use of modern technology to improve and develop various services intended for this population.

Cooperation with the European Network of Equality Bodies (EQUINET)

During the course of 2024, the Commissioner continued cooperation within the European Network of Equality Bodies (EQUINET) through regular participation of representatives of the institution in the work of working groups: for communication strategies and practices; making of practical policies; gender equality; anti-discrimination law; artificial intelligence; research and data collection. In addition, representatives of the Commissioner are actively included in the project “Standards for Equality Bodies”, as well as the work of clusters for the promotion of equality, for disability issues, a cluster for economy and social rights, a cluster for same-sex families on the move and a cluster for age.

In addition to activities organised as part of working groups and clusters, the main event that marked activities of EQUINET in 2024 was certainly the adoption of two Directives establishing a set of minimum standards for equality bodies (*Directive 2024/1500*¹³ and *Directive 2024/1499*¹⁴). After several years of commitment by EQUINET and all members of the network, the Council of the European

13 *Directive (EU) 2024/1500 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on standards for equality bodies in the field of equal treatment and equal opportunities between women and men in matters of employment and occupation, and amending Directives 2006/54/EC and 2010/41/EU, PE/92/2023/REV/1, OJ L, 2024/1500, 29.5.2024, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1500/oj>*

14 *Council Directive (EU) 2024/1499 of 7 May 2024 on standards for equality bodies in the field of equal treatment between persons irrespective of their racial or ethnic origin, equal treatment in matters of employment and occupation between persons irrespective of their religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, equal treatment between women and men in matters of social security and in the access to and supply of goods and services, and amending Directives 2000/43/EC and 2004/113/EC, ST/10788/2023/REV/1, OJ L, 2024/1499, 29.5.2024, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1499/oj>*

Union finally adopted Directives on 7 May 2024, and they entered into force on 19 June 2024. The deadline for their transposition into domestic legislations of Member States is 19 June 2026.

A high level of discretion provided to countries in transposition of EU equality Directives¹⁵ (requiring that all EU Member States, countries in the process of accession and countries included in the European Economic Area establish their equality bodies to affirm equal treatment) resulted in unequal levels of protection against discrimination and significant disparities in the competences and the position of equality bodies in the institutional architecture of states. This diversity soon showed that minimum standards must be in place for equality bodies to be able to operate. Standards have been prepared since 2016. They were presented and published for the first time at the Regional Conference of the Commissioner in 2016 in Belgrade, as a working document of the EQUINET under the title “Development of Standards for Equality Bodies”. After that, in 2017, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) provided the Recommendation to States on the Respect of Standards for Equality Bodies. In 2018, standards were translated into legally non-binding recommendation by the European Commission.

However, the practice showed that a set of minimum standards must be guaranteed to equality bodies in terms of an adequate mandate, sufficient resources, powers and independence. This is why the adoption of legally binding Directives on the standards for equality bodies constitutes an important turning point in joint efforts by the EQUINET and all members of the network for the creation of more equal societies across Europe. European Commissioner for Equality Ms Helena Dalli welcomed the adoption of Directives and said that independent and strong equality bodies constitute an efficient legal remedy in cases of discrimination, while Mr. Patrick Charlier, Chair of EQUINET Executive Board, said that the adoption of Directives was a historical achievement that would ensure a more equal access to justice for all those who still face discrimination in Europe.

To help members and equality bodies to better understand the application and transposition of Directives, the EQUINET published the document under the

15 Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin, *Official Journal L 180, 19/07/2000*, p. 22 –26, *Council Directive 2004/113/EC of 13 December 2004 implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services*, *Official Journal L 373, 21/12/2004*, p. 37–43, *Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (recast)*, *Official Journal L 204, 26/7/2006*, p. 23-36 and *Directive 2010/41/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2010 on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity and repealing Council Directive 86/613/EEC*, *Official Journal L 180, 15/7/2010*, p. 1–6

title “*Understanding the New EU Directives on Standards for Equality Bodies: Legal Digest on Standards for Equality Bodies*”¹⁶.



The Commissioner actively participated in the work of the project under the title “Standards for Equality Bodies” and other activities related to the adoption of binding Directives on standards. Experiences from the aspect of the institution that has been factually operating since its establishment in accordance with the law which contains almost all standards,

which will become a part of the legal system and characteristics of equality bodies in the European Union after adoption of Directives, were presented to members of the network. The Commissioner talked about this in Berlin, at the first meeting of the Leadership for Equality Hub, the establishment of which was initiated by the EQUINET in 2024 and which is intended for heads of equality bodies, with the aim of opening new communication channels, building a support network, learning and reviewing issues faced by heads of equality bodies in everyday work. The meeting was organised by EQUINET and the Federal antidiscrimination Agency of Germany (FADA).



The eighth Regional Conference of Equality Bodies of South-Eastern Europe under the title “Duties Related to Directives on Strengthening Equality Bodies” was held in November at the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo. The Conference was attended by representatives of equality bodies of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Slovenia, the Republic of

16 *Understanding the New EU Directives on Standards for Equality Bodies: Legal Digest on Standards for Equality Bodies*, EQUINET, available at: <https://equineteurope.org/publications/understanding-the-new-eu-directives-on-standards-for-equality-bodies-legal-digest-on-standards-for-equality-bodies/>

Serbia, the Republic of Croatia and Montenegro, which are also members of the EQUINET. Within the panel discussion under the title “Challenges, Requirements and Needs of Equality Bodies in the Light of European Standards / The Role of Equality Bodies in Candidate Countries in Advocating the Application of Directives”, the Assistant Commissioner presented an analysis of Directive and positive legislation in the Republic of Serbia from the aspect of their harmonisation, emphasizing a high level of harmonisation of the domestic legal framework with the standards contained in Directives, and that there is also scope for improvement.



was on the role of sport in the prevention of discrimination against children and the youth in schools, as well as inclusion of influential social actors and managerial structures in the change of the paradigm on the role of sport in the society, having in mind its visibility and influence. The Commissioner took part in the panel discussion under the title “Jointly for Inclusive Sport: Equality Bodies in Action“, where she presented the role and good practice of the Commissioner in the field of sport, primarily the action “Equally to the Finishing Line” which has been implemented by this institution for 13 years in cooperation with the Sports Association of Persons with Disabilities and the Belgrade Marathon. The Conference was opened by the Italian Minister for Family, Natality and Equal Opportunities Ms Eugenia Roccella and the European Commissioner for Equality Ms Helena Dalli.

In 2024, a representative of the Commissioner was re-elected, for the third mandate, as a moderator of the Working Group for Research and Data Collection. The work of this Working Group resulted in publishing of the document entitled “*Minimal Guidelines on Improving Complaints Data Collection by Equality Bodies*”¹⁷ at the beginning of the year, which is a guide that provides to equality bodies instructions for a standardised approach to collection of data on cases of discrimination.

17 *Minimal Guidelines on Improving Complaints Data Collection by Equality Bodies*, available at: <https://equineteurope.org/minimal-guidelines-on-improving-complaints-data-collection-by-equality-bodies/>

Dr. Eleanor Drage of the University of Cambridge Centre for Gender Studies made an address at a joint meeting of the Working Group for Artificial Intelligence and the Working Group for Gender Equality, who talked about the impact of artificial intelligence on gender equality, as well as current trends in that regard. The *Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law*¹⁸ was presented at the second meeting of the Working Group for Artificial Intelligence. The objective of the Convention is to create a balanced framework that promotes technological advancement, while at the same time protecting fundamental rights and democratic values. By adopting clear guidelines, the Convention aims to prevent artificial intelligence from jeopardising democratic institutions and to ensure that artificial intelligence systems are used in an ethical manner. The Convention has been opened for access since 5 September 2024.

In addition to the above, a representative of the Commissioner took part in an EQUINET online seminar on climate change and disproportionate impact of climate change on groups at a higher risk of discrimination, although they contributed least to its causes. Data contained in the *Climate Inequality Report 2023*¹⁹ were presented at the seminar: 50% of the world population contributes to 12% global emissions, but 75% are exposed to loss of income due to climate change. In contrast, 10% of the world population is responsible for almost one half of all emissions, but faces only 3% of income loss. These 10% of the world population owns about three quarters of the total personal wealth worldwide, while 50% of the poorest population owns only 2% of it. In other words, those who pollute the least face far higher losses.

18 *Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law*, Council of Europe Treaty Series - No. 225, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/1680afae3c>

19 *Climate Inequality Report 2023*, World Inequality Lab Study, 2023, available at: <https://wid.world/www-site/uploads/2023/01/CBV2023-ClimateInequalityReport1.pdf>

DESCRIPTION OF THE SITUATION AND KEY PROBLEMS IN THE FIELD OF EQUALITY PROTECTION

The situation regarding the exercise and protection of various social groups is reviewed both at the European Union level, by numerous international organisations and treaty bodies, and by national institutions and organisations. These sources provide a more complete insight into the application of the equality principles globally and in the European Union, as well as in our country, especially through comparisons of the situation and examination of specific parameters, as well as the achieved annual progress. Some of the publications contain international examples of good practice, analyses of different ways in which specific rights are exercised, as well as an overview of the future courses of action through existing instruments or recommended measures and activities. The Commissioner has been using all these publications for a comprehensive review of the situation and trends in the field of human rights protection. The Commissioner creates activities and directs the work based on the situation reviewed in such a manner and an analysis of all types of citizens' addressing due to the problems they face and the need to improve the situation in certain fields.

The following sections provide a summary of specific reports and publications, some of which are listed as the sources for discrimination grounds addressed in this Report, in accordance with the Commissioner's practice (for a list of all reviewed reports and surveys, see Annex 3 to this Report).

REPORTS AND OTHER INSTRUMENTS OF THE EU, INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND TREATY BODIES

Just as in every year's regular annual report, this section opens with a summary and assessment of the current situation in the Republic of Serbia through the European Commission's latest *Serbia 2024 Report*²⁰, which states inter alia that, in mid-2024, the National Assembly held a parliamentary debate on some independent bodies' annual reports, but no debate took place yet on the annual reports for 2022 and 2023 by the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality and the Protector of Citizens, and that the Professional Service of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality has still not been provided with adequate human resources by the Government, in line with the staff systematisation decision. It is

²⁰ *Serbia 2024 Report*, European Commission, 2024, available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2024_en

also stated that further work is required to align the law with the EU acquis and European standards, the Criminal Code relating to prohibition and punishment of criminal racial acts has yet to be aligned with the EU acquis, while the adoption of 2024-2025 anti-discrimination strategy action plan is pending. Hate speech, threats and violence continued to target human rights defenders, the Roma community, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ), and migrants. The Law on Gender Equality and the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination were aligned with the EU acquis in 2021 but need to be further aligned. The Report also highlights the decision of the Constitutional Court to suspend the adoption of certain acts deriving from the Law on Gender Equality, notably on gender-sensitive language, until the completion of the constitutionality assessment process. It is also noted that there were no developments on the draft law on same-sex partnerships, nor on regulation of legal gender recognition.

The Report stated that the delay in adopting the action plan and related funding for the strategy on deinstitutionalisation is of increasing concern. In the field of non-discrimination in employment and social policy, most complaints received by the Commissioner are related to the area of employment.

In the field of fundamental rights, relevant recommendations are given and it is underscored that most of the Commission's recommendations from last year have not yet been implemented and remain valid. Serbia should in particular: 1) strengthen human rights institutions by allocating the necessary financial and human resources, ensuring they exercise their mandates to the full, and by putting in place procedures to ensure compliance with measures, including interim measures of the European Court of Human Rights; 2) adopt and allocate appropriate financial and human resources for the pending action plans on violence against women, deinstitutionalisation, anti-discrimination – including the rights of LGBTIQ persons – and violence against children, and ensure timely reporting on their implementation; actively counter hate crimes and establish a track record of investigations and convictions; 3) demonstrate, through better data collection, real improvements in the effective exercise of the rights of individuals belonging to national minorities, including reference to the targets set by the Poznan Declaration on Roma Inclusion and by the future action plan on national minorities 3.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee reviewed the Fourth Periodic Report of the Republic of Serbia on implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and, in this context, issued its **Concluding Observations**²¹, which state *inter alia* that Serbia should expedite the establishment of a specific mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the Views issued by United Nations treaty bodies and ensure that the Committee's Views are system-

21 *Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Serbia* CCPR/C/SRB/CO/4, 2024, available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2FC%2FSRB%2FCO%2F4&Lang=en

atically disseminated and implemented. While welcoming measures taken by the State party to strengthen its legislative and strategic framework with regard to discrimination, including the amendments adopted in May 2021 to the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination and the adoption of the National Strategy for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination for the period 2022–2030, the Committee states that Serbia should take appropriate measures to strengthen the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of its anti-discrimination legal and policy framework, including by ensuring the collection of fully disaggregated data on discrimination complaints received and their outcomes. Further recommendations concern, *inter alia*: combating stereotypes about, and negative attitudes towards, persons on the basis of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, including through public information campaigns and sex education programmes in schools, adoption of legislation on same-sex couples and on changing legal gender; allocating sufficient resources to poverty reduction measures targeting the Roma community, and designing such measures so as to ensure that they effectively reach all Roma persons living in poverty, coupled with expanding the provision of education for Roma children and the teaching of Roma language and culture in schools, as well as strengthening and expanding special measures to increase the participation of the Roma community in public and political life; strengthening the strategy to combat gender biases and stereotypes held in society about the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society, and taking all measures necessary to address persistent labour market inequalities, and ensuring a more comprehensive response to misogynistic and discriminatory statements against women, combating domestic violence and violence against women.

The UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated that *the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024*²² highlights the urgent need for stronger and more effective international cooperation to maximize progress highlights an urgent need for stronger and more effective international cooperation in achieving the sustainable development goals, as there are only six years left to end poverty, protect the planet and leave no one behind by 2030. It is stated that strong efforts to use renewable energy have paved a clear path to just energy transition, that girls have achieved parity and even pulled ahead of boys in completing schooling at all levels in most regions of the world, internet access has increased by about 70% in just eight years, while decades of progress in the fight against HIV/AIDS have created a blueprint for overcoming other pandemics through global solidarity and scientific discoveries.

The Report identifies the following priorities as urgent: 1) Development financing (developing countries urgently require more financial resources and fiscal space); 2) Peace and security through dialogue and diplomacy (with an unprecedented

22 *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024*, United Nations, 2024, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/d8621d46-8a7c-4a93-bd5c-5d30f9690f8e/The%20Sustainable%20Development%20Goals%20Report%202024.pdf>

120 million forcibly displaced people worldwide by May 2024, civilian casualties in armed conflicts rising by 72 per cent between 2022 and 2023, while 4 in 10 civilians killed in conflicts were women and 3 in 10 were children); 3) Implementation (through transitions across food, energy, social welfare digital connectivity and more).

The Report's key findings are as follows: in 2022, almost 60 per cent of countries worldwide faced high food prices; 55% of countries lack laws that prohibit direct and indirect discrimination against women (out of the 120 countries covered by the Report); increased access to life-saving treatment has averted 20.8 million AIDS-related deaths in the past three decades; only 58 percent of students worldwide achieved a minimum proficiency in reading upon leaving primary school; global unemployment hit a historic low of 5 per cent in 2023, yet persistent road-blocks remain in achieving decent work; the level of foreign debt remains high in developing countries etc.

Following the visit to Serbia by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan, the ***Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression***²³ was published, in which she recognizes the strong legal framework for freedom of expression in Serbia but expresses concern that it is being undermined by certain policies and practices, including widespread threats, attacks, hate speech and smear campaigns, online and offline, against journalists, human rights defenders and political opponents, continued impunity for past crimes, slow, ineffective prosecutions and a weak media regulatory body, which is unable to carry out its responsibilities in an independent, effective and competent manner. Irene Khan urges the Government of Serbia to carry out legal, policy and institutional reforms and demonstrate a stronger, unequivocal political commitment to upholding freedom of expression online and offline.

The International Labour Organisation published the ***Application of International Labour Standards 2024 Report of the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations***²⁴, which provides a number of recommendations regarding the application of ILO conventions in Serbia, including that the Government is requested to provide detailed updated information on the nature, scope and impact of the measures undertaken to promote full, productive and sustainable employability in general, and in particular the measures designed to improve the employability of older persons, persons in rural areas, the fight

23 *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan, 2024*, available at: <https://minjmpdd.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/A.HRC-.56.53.Add-.2-SRB.docx>

24 *Application of International Labour Standards 2024 Report III (Part A) Report of the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations*, ILO, 2024: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_norm/%40relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_911183.pdf

against unreported work, as well as long-term unemployment, to ensure access to decent and permanent employment.

In the ILO publication *Integrating Trade and Decent Work*²⁵, international trade is seen as a driver of growth, with implications for the hundreds of millions of workers, as it has generated employment opportunities, including for young persons and women, as a way to lift people out of poverty. This trend has become so pronounced that women now constitute a large part of the workforce in export-oriented manufacturing industries across numerous countries. This entry of women into the formal labour market has boosted not only their income but also their engagement in society at large. However, the benefits of trade have not been distributed evenly, either across countries or across sectors, firms or workers, and this publication therefore aims to improve knowledge on how to better align trade and labour market policies to achieve decent work outcomes.

The *Disability and Development Report 2024: Accelerating the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with persons with disabilities*²⁶ states that progress for persons with disabilities has been insufficient across all areas, including access to financial resources, health care, water and ICT, as well as building resilience of persons with disabilities during disasters and other emergencies. A mere 5 indicators are on track, i.e., with progress consistent with achieving their respective targets for persons with disabilities by 2030 – these include remarkable progress in education laws on equal access, disaster early warnings in accessible formats, online services for persons with disabilities, government ministries accessible for persons with disabilities and monitoring of bilateral aid dedicated to disability inclusion.

Compared to the Disability and Development Report 2018, data availability is at its highest level since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Despite these advancements, only 50 per cent of targets have indicators with enough data to assess progress. For 40 per cent of targets, there is only data to provide a one point in time snapshot. For 10 per cent of targets, there is not enough data for a one point in time snapshot – these include targets on extreme poverty, child mortality, health impact of pollution, early childhood development, child labour and the impact of corruption and bribery. The way things are going, the world will not achieve the SDGs by, for and with persons with disabilities by 2030. Depending on the target, progress needs to accelerate to 2 to 65 times faster. Accelerations are particularly needed in making physical and virtual environments accessible for persons with disabilities, in adopting anti-discrimination legislation, in

25 *Integrating Trade and Decent Work*, ILO, 2024, available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms_903191.pdf

26 *Disability and Development Report 2024: Accelerating the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with persons with disabilities*, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/6608f12e-573f-4d2b-a732-e51677e52df4/ee4caf1158756fff6474ad07e8bb9f06.pdf>

expanding social protection and in implementing measures to guarantee the safety and protection of all persons with disabilities during disasters and emergencies.

The European External Action Service published the *EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World*²⁷, which provides an overview of the current situation in certain countries. As regards the Republic of Serbia, the Report states that the legislative and institutional framework for upholding fundamental rights is broadly in place; the Ombudsman was re-elected in April 2023 without cross-party support; implementation of the new strategies and action plans on gender equality, anti-discrimination and the Roma inclusion started, although monitoring bodies were not in place for most of the reporting period; the action plans and related funding as regards combating violence against women and deinstitutionalisation are significantly delayed; and Serbia continued drafting and conducting consultations on the new Action Plan for the Realisation of the Rights of National Minorities. It is also noted that Serbia continued its dialogue and cooperation with European and international human rights organisations and monitoring bodies.

Regarding freedom of expression, the Report notes limited progress was made. The police and the prosecution services reacted swiftly to several cases of attacks and threats, working with the standing working group on the safety of journalists. However, cases of threats, intimidation, hate speech and violence against journalists remain a concern, as is the increase of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), notably launched by members of national and local authorities.

*Our Rights, Our Future*²⁸ is a report of the Secretariat General of the Council of Europe which, in the words of Secretary General Marija Pejčinović Burić, states that the entire continent must renew their commitment to abide by the European values and standards set out in the *Reykjavik Declaration* and addressing the democratic backsliding in many areas. The Reykjavik Declaration made clear what should be done to ensure the long-term success of our system of the European Convention on Human Rights, including the need for member states to execute fully the final judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and implement the European Convention on Human Rights at the national level. The Report underscores the need to expand the range and availability of the online Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals programme courses to raise awareness and understanding of the Convention and case law from the Court. This Report covers almost all spheres of social life.

27 *EU ANNUAL REPORT ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD 2023 COUNTRY UPDATES*, European External Action Service, 2024, available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/2023-human-rights-and-democracy-world-country-reports_en

28 *OUR RIGHTS, OUR FUTURE, Annual report of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe*, 2024, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/secretary-general-report-2024/1680af82bc>

*The ECRI Report on Serbia*²⁹ relates to the sixth monitoring cycle and focuses on three topics common to all member States: effective equality and access to rights, hate speech and hate-motivated violence, and integration and inclusion. The Report states that, since the adoption of ECRI's fifth-cycle report on Serbia in 2017, progress has been made, and good practices have been developed in a number of fields. Thus, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality was tasked with keeping records of judgments and other legally binding decisions pertaining to discrimination or violation of the principle of equality; the authorities reviewed content of textbooks and teaching material and removed discriminatory content; and in the field of combating hate speech, there are a few examples of political leaders and representatives of public institutions condemning hate speech. In addition to that, in 2020 the National Assembly introduced a Code of Conduct for Members of the Parliament.

As regards integration and inclusion of Roma, progress has overall been made in securing better preschool and school attendance of Roma pupils, the good practice of supporting the enrolment of Roma children in schools and monitoring school attendance has been introduced and visible progress has been noted in the support for the enrolment of Roma students in secondary schools through special measures and scholarships. Significant progress has been achieved towards resolving the problem of lack of personal identity documents for Roma, and special measures have been taken to diversify the police force by employing persons belonging to minority populations. The housing situation of Roma remains very tense, and forced evictions from settlements continued to take place without consultations or possibilities for alternative suitable accommodation. The Social Card Law has raised serious questions over its implications for the right to social assistance and its impact on the most vulnerable categories of the population.

However, despite the progress achieved, some issues give rise to concern, such as the persisting hate speech in public discourse, in particular online, and targets various groups, such as Roma and other ethnic minorities, LGBTI communities and refugees/migrants.

The Report provides a number of recommendations, including: to harmonise criminal, civil and administrative law with ECRI General Policy Recommendation No. 7, to grant the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality the prerogatives to take up discrimination cases *ex officio*, to allocate financial and human resources for implementation of the Strategy for Improving the Position of Roma, to enable the registration of same-sex partnerships, to regulate the change of name and sex markers for transgendered persons, to create a safe environment for LGBTI persons etc. Out of the 15 recommendations, two are to be implemented as a matter of priority and will be monitored by the ECRI within two years, namely the recom-

29 *Report on Serbia (sixth monitoring cycle)*, ECRI, 2024, available at: <https://www.ombudsman.rs/index.php/izvestaji/n-ci-n-lni-izv-s-il-c-u-bl-s-i-rg-vin-ljudi>

mentation concerning the progress of elaboration of the Draft Law on Same-sex Partnerships and the recommendation concerning the commissioning of a comprehensive study on the different forms of hate speech in Serbia, their sources and impact on target groups with the aim of developing and implementing measures to prevent and eliminate these phenomena.

The *ECRI Fundamental Rights Report 2024* examines the level of exercise of fundamental rights in 27 European countries, including North Macedonia, Serbia and Albania³⁰. This Report focuses on the developments and deficiencies in the protection of fundamental rights in 2023 and covers: rising poverty (1 in 5 persons across the EU face poverty, with children and single-parent, Roma and migrant families most at risk); new migration rules (more than 4000 persons died or disappeared at sea in 2023, the highest number in the last five years); threats to democracy (excessive government intervention, especially against the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, narrowing the civil society space); growing antisemitism (fuelled by the Hamas terrorist attack and Israel's military response); increasing intolerance (especially against Muslims, persons of African descent, Roma and migrants); widening of the digital divide (the use of artificial intelligence and digitalisation of public services create the risk of vulnerable groups, such as older people, persons with disabilities, the homeless and Roma, being left behind. New laws, including the EU Artificial Intelligence Act and the Digital Services Act, as well as the Council of Europe Convention on Artificial Intelligence, aim to respond to some of these challenges).

The findings of the FRA report *LGBTI Equality at a Crossroads: Progress and Challenges*³¹ reflect signs of slow but gradual progress (based on the responses of more than 100,000 respondents from all 27 EU Member States, Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia). Although discrimination against LGBTIQ persons remains high, there has been a gradual downward trend, schools address LGBTI issues more positively and proactively, and young people experience greater support from their teachers and peers. Nevertheless, bullying, harassment and violence have reached a new high. Some of the key findings of this survey include: although more than half of the respondents in EU Member States speak openly about their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, most still avoid holding hands with their partner in public because they fear they might be attacked (in Serbia, 80% of persons in this community frequently or always avoid holding hands with their partner). In the EU, more than one third of the respondents face discrimination in their daily life because of their identity, but discrimination remains invisible, as only 10% of the respondents report such incidents (Serbia is close to the EU average in terms of reporting attacks to the police and to equality bodies and other organisations).

30 *Fundamental Rights Report 2024*, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/fundamental-rights-report-2024>

31 *LGBTIQ equality at a crossroads - Progress and challenges*, FRA, 2024, available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/lgbtiq-crossroads-progress-and-challenges>

In the EU countries, more than 10% of the respondents experienced violence in the past 5 years, which is slightly higher than in the previous survey conducted in 2019 (in the past five years, the incidence of violence has been stagnating in Serbia at 17%). Across all EU countries, more than one third of the respondents have contemplated suicide. In the EU countries, one quarter (26%) of the respondents believe their governments fight prejudice and intolerance against LGBTI persons (in Serbia this view is held by just 6% of the respondents, while as many as 40% of the Serbian respondents believe prejudice and intolerance have increased in the past five years).

In the *Global Gender Gap Report*³² of the World Economic Forum, Serbia is ranked 26th of the 146 countries, with an index of 0,779. The highest-ranking countries are Ireland, Finland and Norway. Also, Serbia is one of the few countries that have had negative changes in the Health and Survival subindex, together with Spain and Malta.

According to the *State of the World's Human Rights Report*³³, Serbia is a country that has continued to balance its commitment to EU membership with long-standing political and economic ties with Russia. It is also stated that independent and investigative journalists and activists faced threats, vilification and punitive civil proceedings, while the proposed Law on Internal Affairs further threatened the right to freedom of assembly. Charges of corruption in public office persisted at all levels. In connection with crimes against humanity and war crimes, the report notes that the glorification of convicted war criminals continued and fostered a culture of impunity. During the year, at least 27 women were victims of femicide. Social welfare centres often lacked social workers or psychologists trained in domestic violence, and the 24 NGO-run shelters providing counselling, shelter and legal aid lacked secure funding. The report also states that the criminal code's definition of rape, based on use of force rather than lack of consent, was inconsistent with international and regional standards.

The *Freedom in the World 2024 Report*³⁴ shows that global freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year. According to the evaluation, out of all 195 countries analysed in 2023, only 20% were rated as free countries, another 42% were partly free, while 38% of the countries were not free.

As regards European countries (42 rated countries), 81% were free, 17% were partly free, while 2% were not free. In the table of largest one-year gains and declines

32 *Global Gender Gap Report 2024*, World Economic Forum, 2024, available at: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2024.pdf

33 *The state of the world's human rights Serbia 2023*, Amnesty international, 2024, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/western-central-and-south-eastern-europe/serbia/report-serbia/>

34 *Freedom in the World 2024 Report: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict*, Freedom House, 2024, available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/FIW_2024_DigitalBooklet.pdf

in conditions for political rights and civil liberties, Serbia is rated as partly free, with a three-point decline. According to the criterion of the largest decline in freedom in the past 10 years, a dramatic decline in freedom is evident in all regions of the world, including Serbia as a partly free country, with a score of -21, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, also a partly free country, with a score of -10.

PRACTICE OF THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE AREA OF PROTECTION AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

During 2024, as in previous years, the Commissioner monitored the practice of the European Court of Human Rights in the area of discrimination and violations of Article 14 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights.

The **2024 Annual Report of the European Court of Human Rights**³⁵ states that the total number of applications lodged with the court during the year was 17% lower, down from 34,650 in 2023 to 28,800 in 2024. The Court passed 1,102 judgments in 2024, versus 1,014 in 2023. In 2024, the Court received 1,118 new applications against Serbia, as opposed to 1,522 in 2023 and 3,289 in 2022. Relative to Serbia's population, this means the Court received 1.69 new judgments per 10,000 inhabitants, which was lower than in 2023, when the ratio was 2.29 cases per 10,000 inhabitants.

Below is the summary of a decision of the Court in a case against Serbia which concerns a breach of the principle of equality.

In the case *British Airways against Serbia* (application No. 76581/16), the applicant stated that, in 1976, an aircraft operated by the applicant company (British Airways) had collided mid-air with another aircraft, operated by Adria Airways. All 176 people on board the two aircraft were killed. It was later established that the collision was the result of an error on the part of air traffic controllers in Zagreb (Republic of Croatia), then part of the SFRY. In 1979, the applicant company lodged claims for compensation with the then District Commercial Court of Belgrade. At the same time, an insurance company, Dunav Insurance (Dunav Osiguranje), lodged compensation claims on behalf of Adria Airways. The court adjourned the hearing of the applicant company's case on several occasions pending the resolution of succession issues resulting from dissolution of the SFRY and the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. In 2000 the Belgrade Commercial Court granted Dunav Insurance's claim for damages with interest and costs. The relevant judgment was upheld by the Commercial Court

35 *Annual Report 2023*, European Court of Human Rights, 2025, available at: <https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/annual-report-2024-eng>

of Appeal and the Supreme Court of Serbia in 2001 and 2003 respectively. The respondent party was the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, as the sole legal successor to the SFRY. In 2011 the Belgrade Commercial Court granted the applicant company's claims, awarding damages, interest as of 1979 (the date of lodging of the compensation claim) and costs to be paid by Serbia, which the court considered to be the legal successor to the SFRY. In October 2011 the Commercial Court of Appeal upheld the judgment of 16 June 2011 regarding the principal debt, but it recalculated the interest as of the date of the judgment given by the court at first level of jurisdiction. In 2012, the Supreme Court of Cassation of the Republic of Serbia declared inadmissible *ratione valoris* the appeal on points of law lodged by the applicant company, while partially upholding the appeal on points of law by the respondent State and reducing the amount of the compensation awarded. The Supreme Court of Cassation held that the Republic of Serbia could only be held liable for a 35.77% share of the total debt, as per the Agreement on Succession Issues that entered into force on 2 June 2004.

In its application, British Airways alleged a breach of the right to fair trial provided for in Article 6 and the prohibition of discrimination provided for in Article 14 of the Convention, the protection of property provided for in Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 to the Convention and the general prohibition of discrimination provided for in Article 1 of Protocol No. 12 to the Convention. The Government submitted that the applicant company could not have a legitimate expectation that its compensation claim would be granted in full, because the State responsible for the damage incurred by the applicant company (SFRY) had ceased to exist and the Republic of Serbia was not the only successor State to have emerged after its dissolution. The Court held that the expectation of the applicant company that the Republic of Serbia would pay the full amount of the compensation was unjustified. In the Court's view, it should have been known to the applicant company that Serbian courts were competent to decide its case only in so far as Serbia's liability was concerned. Accordingly, the Court concludes that the applicant company could have no "legitimate expectation" of recovering full compensation for damage in its civil dispute against the Republic of Serbia and that its claim, in the part concerning the amount of the compensation it was allegedly entitled to, did not constitute a "possession" within the meaning of Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 to the Convention. Accordingly, the Court ruled that the applicant company's claim was incompatible *ratione materiae* with the provisions of the Convention and the Protocols thereto within the meaning of Article 35 § 3 (a) and Article 4 of the Convention.

For more information, see: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22sort%22:%20Descending%22,%22docname%22:%20british%20airways%20plc%22,%22documentcollectionid%22:%20JUDGMENTS%22,%22DECISIONS%22,%22itemid%22:%2022001-237308%22%7D>

Judgments of the Court passed in 2024 in cases against other countries concerning breaches of Article 14 of the European Convention are available at the links provided in the footnote.³⁶

REPORTS AND SURVEYS BY NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANISATIONS

The report by the State Audit Institution entitled *Implementing Gender-responsive Budgeting in the Republic of Serbia* states that more effective implementation of the gender perspective in the budgeting process is needed, although international organisations have identified Serbia as one of the seven countries that have successfully implemented gender-responsive budgeting. The report recommends that the Ministry of Finance should: pass a Guidance on Programme Budgeting to identify which programme activities/projects do not need to have gender-responsive objectives and indicators developed; define the concept of departmental or sectoral gender analysis in the Plan on Implementation of Gender-responsive Budgeting and the Guidance on Implementation of Gender-responsive Budgeting; define cooperation with UN Women in the field of preparation and publishing of reports on the effects of gender-responsive budgeting. The report further recommends that the Ministry Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue should, when adopting the Action Plan on Improving the Position of Women, arrange for an estimate of the funding required to implement each of the measures and identify the sources from which such funding is to be ensured, the programme activity or project in the programme budget under which funding is provided or the relevant donor project which is not covered by the programme budget.

36 Allouche v. France, application No. 81249/17 of 11 April 2024 [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{"itemid":\["001-232010"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{); Karter v. Ukraine, application No. 18179/17 [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{"tabview":\["document"\],"itemid":\["001-232020"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{); Zăicescu and Fălticaneanu v. Romania, application No. 42917/16 [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{"itemid":\["001-233212"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{); A.K. v. Russia, application No. 49014/16 [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{"tabview":\["document"\],"itemid":\["001-233410"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{); Spišák v. The Czech Republic, application No. 13968/22 [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{"itemid":\["001-234271"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{); Hanovs v. Latvia, application No. 40861/22 [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{"tabview":\["document"\],"itemid":\["001-235016"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{); Bakradze v. Georgia, application No. 20592/21 [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{"tabview":\["document"\],"itemid":\["001-237811"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{); E.T. v. The Republic of Moldova, application No. 25373/16 [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{"tabview":\["document"\],"itemid":\["001-237947"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{); Vieru v. The Republic of Moldova, application No. 17106/18 [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{"itemid":\["001-238017"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{); Clipea and Grosu v. The Republic of Moldova, application No. 39468/17 [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{"itemid":\["001-238014"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{); F.M. and others vs Russia, applications Nos. 71671/16 and 40190/18 [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{"tabview":\["document"\],"itemid":\["001-238319"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{); Yevstifeyev and Others v. Russia, applications Nos. 226/18, 236/18, 2027/18 and 22327/22 [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{"tabview":\["document"\],"itemid":\["001-238262"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{)

According to the data presented in the publication *Women and Men in the Republic of Serbia*³⁷ for 2024, published by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, women in Serbia live on average five years longer than men, they are better educated, but less paid, they have lower pensions, there are much fewer of them among public officials and managers, but they are much more commonly the victims of domestic violence.

Among women aged 15 and over, the share of those with advanced secondary or higher education is 24%, while the share of highly educated men in the same age group is lower, at 20.7%. There are more women enrolled in and graduating from colleges, academies and universities; thus, according to the 2022 figures, the share of women among enrolled students was 59%, while their share among university graduates was 61%. In 2022, there were more women among doctoral study graduates (59%) than men (41%). Although the statistics show women outnumber men in this field, membership of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences is dominated by men (in 2023, more than 90% of all members were men). At the same time, there are far more illiterate women than men (71% versus 29%), and more than half of all illiterate women are aged 65 and over.

Among the users of social welfare institutions, there is a higher share of men across all types of institutions except users of residential facilities for persons aged over 65, where the share of women is significantly higher (65%). In 2022, 93.7% of women worked shorter than full working hours because they had to care for children and incapacitated adults, versus just 6.3% of men. The risk poverty rate, by age and sex, in 2022 was 24.6% for women and 20.0% for men, while the rate of extreme financial and social deprivation in that year was 15.2% for women and 12.9% for men.

The employment rate for women is 43.2%, which is 14.7% lower than the employment rate for men (57.9%), while women were 8.8% less paid than men. This figure puts Serbia among the countries with the lowest wage gap in Europe. However, if wage figures are broken down by education levels or professions, the wage differences between women and men are significantly higher than the average wage gap, mostly in favour of men. Women also on average receive 17% lower pensions compared to the average pension for men.

The highest difference between the sexes is observed among those convicted of the most serious criminal offences, murder and aggravated murder. In 2022, there were three women and 70 men convicted with a final and enforceable judgment, while the figures for those convicted of the criminal offence domestic violence were 147 women and 1,874 men. Victims of domestic violence are women in 79% of all cases and men in 21% of all cases.

37 *Women and Men in the Republic of Serbia*, SORS, 2024, available at: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2024/pdf/G20246004.pdf>

Among public officials, legislators and managers, 65% are men. Women account for a mere 13.3% of all heads of municipalities or mayors and 37.6% of councillors in municipal and city councils.

The Progress Report on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 in the Republic of Serbia³⁸ is the fourth report produced by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia on this subject matter. The report's findings by specific goals are as follows: *SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere* – significant progress has been made in reducing the risk of poverty and social exclusion across all age groups except the older population (65+), which is moving away from the goal; *SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all* – regarding the provision of free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education for all girls and boys, there is a movement away from the goal due to reduction of the proportion of children and young people at the end of the first cycle of primary education achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematics. Movement away from the goal is observed regarding raising children's linguistic and numerical literacy in reading, science, and mathematics, while moderate progress has been made in the area of early childhood development and in the participation of children in pre-school education; *SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls* - the general legal framework has largely been established, but that there is a need to further improve the framework in the area of violence against women and marriage and family. In regard to elimination of all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage (target 5.3), the data shows significant movement away from the goal concerning marriage before age 15 (32%), as well as before age 18 (11.4%); *SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all* - moderate progress has been made in relation to maintaining positive economic growth and reducing the unemployment rate for the youth and the general working-age population; however, one in ten children is exposed to child labour abuse, and boys are more exposed to the risks of child labour than girls; *SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels* - progress in ensuring legal identity for all, including birth registration (target 16.9), has been made and is close to full, while significant movement away from the goal was registered in the domain of the target which envisages the promotion of the rule of law and ensuring equal access to justice for all, due to the increase in unsentenced detainees as a proportion of overall prison population.

38 *Progress Report on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 in the Republic of Serbia*, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024, available at: <https://sdg.indikatori.rs/media/1680/izvestaj-o-napretku-u-ostvarivanju-ciljeva-odrzivog-razvoja-do-2030-godine-u-srbiji-2023.pdf>

The publication *Leave No One Behind! Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals in the Republic of Serbia for the Elderly Population (65+)*³⁹ states that the proportion of the population 65 and over was 21.1% in 2022, on par with the EU as a whole. Serbia is among the countries with the largest proportion of elderly population in Europe, with Greece (22.7%), Croatia (22.5%), Italy (23.8%), and Portugal (23.7%). If current trends persist, by 2041 this population contingent will represent nearly a quarter of Serbia's total population, accounting for 24.1%.

According to the 2022 census, individuals aged between 65 and 74 constituted 63.8% of the total elderly population. The dependency ratio, or the functional population index has increased from 46.3 in 2011 to 57.3 in 2022, with a notably higher ratio for the population in rural settlements compared to urban settlements.

Due to longer life expectancy, women comprise the majority of the elderly population (56.9%), while in 2022 they constituted 54.9% of the population aged 65–74 and 60.5% of the population aged 75 and over.

Contrary to children and the middle-aged population, which experience a steady decline in the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate, the elderly population exhibits an increase; thus, in 2022, individuals over 65 are at a greater risk of poverty compared to all other age groups in the population, with women facing a higher percentage of poverty risks (24.6%) than men (20.0%).

The use of digital technologies is extremely low among the elderly population, which can limit their access to public administration services, social services, as well as to general information; thus, access to information on the websites of the state administration was used by just 10.2% of them, while just 4.8% of those aged over 65 submitted forms to state institutions online.

The report *Everyday Injustice – Realisation of Economic and Social Rights in Serbia*⁴⁰ states that Serbia has not made significant progress in improving the realisation of social rights in the past two years. Social assistance is increasingly difficult to access for those at the risk of poverty and are already marginalised, while the minimum wage is still extremely low, significantly below the minimum consumer basket, as is the financial social assistance, which is not available for an entire year. A positive step is the reduction in child poverty, which nevertheless remains high compared to the EU average, and another positive change is the harmonisation of the secondary legislation which served to reduce or terminate

39 *Leave No One Behind! Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals in the Republic of Serbia for the Elderly Population (65+)*, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024, available at: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/vesti/20240306-napredak-u-ostvarivanju-ciljeva-65plus/?a=0&s=090201>

40 *Everyday Injustice – Realisation of Economic and Social Rights in Serbia*, A 11 – Initiative for Economic and Social Rights, 2024, available at: <https://www.a11initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Svakodnevnina-nepravda-Izve%C5%A1taj-o-stanju-ekonomskih-i-socijalnih-prava-u-Srbiji.pdf>

the entitlement to financial social assistance for those who earned income from seasonal jobs.

Roma men and women and other vulnerable citizens, women, the elderly, persons with disabilities and young persons are often discriminated against in the labour market. Serbian trade unions have been unsuccessful at negotiating within the framework of the Social and Economic Council of the Republic of Serbia, the labour inspectorate has been ineffective at combating discrimination in the labour market, while workers still wait for amendments to the Labour Law and the draft Law on Employment due to Increased Workload in Certain Business Activities. A11 Initiative further documents a case of fictitious employment of Roma men and women in the informal settlement at Vuka Vrčevića street and abuse of the “My First Salary” programme. Regarding the ineffectiveness of the inspectorate, the report notes that the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality has persistently proposed the adjustment of labour regulations as a key element in their recommendations for enhancing the situation and safeguarding workers’ rights, along with enhancing inspection controls and the inspection authorities. The report also mentions the attempted forced eviction of Roma from the informal “Antena” settlement, in connection with which the Commissioner had instantly issued recommendations of measures for the City Municipality of Novi Beograd, advising them to refrain from the eviction procedure. The effects of affirmative measures with regard to access of Roma to higher education are very modest. Thus, in the school year 2021/2022, the number of enrolled Roma students was 128, and all of them were men.

A particular issue in the field of health care is the billing of expenses associated with childbirth or pregnancy-related medical services to uninsured pregnant women and new mothers. Another negative development mentioned in the report is the reduced number of sick leave days which the chosen physician is allowed to prescribe.

A11 Initiative concludes that, in order to improve the situation regarding protection of economic and social rights, systemic changes are needed which will take into account the status of the most vulnerable populations, include their perspective in the decision-making processes and result in harmonisation of the practice of administrative and judicial authorities with their commitments concerning the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

*prEUgovor Alarm Report on Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1*⁴¹ shows the reporting period was marked by a lack of true dialogue in institutions and in the media,

41 *prEUgovor Alarm Report on Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1*; May 2024, Miša Bojović, Miloš Đorđević, Zlata Đorđević, Rade Đurić et al., available at: https://preugovor.org/upload/document/preugovor_202405_alarm_sr.pdf

while the efforts undertaken by the Government and the National Assembly failed to yield results in the reform process with regard to political criteria and Chapters 23 and 24 in the EU accession negotiation process. The report specifically states the current approach to reforms under Cluster 1 needs to be overhauled and notes that reform activities are currently implemented *pro forma*, in expedited procedures and at the last moment, a minimalistic interpretation of the obligations is accepted, while the authorities avoid addressing the key issues. The European Commission once again scored Serbia with a 2 out of 5 with regard to the standards that should be reached under Chapters 23 and 24. As regards the enjoyment of fundamental human rights, there had been no progress in preventing violence and protecting vulnerable groups, in particular women and children. Hate speech in the public space, the anti-gender narrative and attacks against persons with different opinions remain prevalent, and the practice of institutional maltreatment of LGBT+ persons has continued. The situation regarding media freedom, independence of the judiciary and the fight against corruption and organised crime is also seen as poor.

The report further states there is no information as to the current stage of development of the Draft Law amending and supplementing the Law on Protection of Persons with Mental Health Issues, that education is targeted by conservative social forces, while the pressure on schools and the line ministry increases constantly. Numerous local support services for families and children are also lacking, which prompted the Commissioner to react and issue a recommendation to cities, advising them to provide this service.

The report also provides recommendations for improving the current situation, including: improving the legal frameworks and practices, a systemic approach to issues of protecting children and women against violence, increased transparency of information provided by public authorities, protecting the public space from discriminatory speech and behaviour, preventing threats to safety and various pressures on organisations etc.

The report ***Human Rights in Serbia 2023: Law, Practice and International Human Rights Standards***⁴² provides an annual analysis of the legal framework and practice concerning civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. The report states that Serbia is now seen by many international organisations and analysts as a trapped state that is sliding towards authoritarianism and systemic destruction of the political and public space for free expression of views and critical opinions, which is confirmed by the Freedom House report which notes that Serbia has seen a significant decline in freedoms in the past decade and is rated as a partly free country. It is also stated that the Swedish institute V-Dem quantified Serbia in this year's report as a country of electoral autocracy and a country with "broken democ-

42 *Human Rights in Serbia 2023: Law, Practice and International Human Rights Standards*, Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2024, available at: <https://www.bgcentar.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Ljudska-prava-u-Srbiji-2023-Tabak-odobrenje-za-stampu-v2.pdf>

racy”, with deep polarisation and a permanent lack of dialogue, not just in institutions, but in the society as a whole, defining the situation in the country in 2023.

The survey of young people’s opinions *Violent Extremism and Young People: from Disinformation to Radicalisation*⁴³ was conducted by the Centre for Free Elections and Democracy on a representative sample of 1,000 young persons aged between 15 and 30. Most [young people in Serbia](#) have a positive [outlook](#), a desire to advance (23%), they are content (21%) and believe in a brighter [future](#) (19%). Regarding their relationship with their [parents](#), most young persons state they get along, even if their opinions sometimes differ (47%), while a quarter of them state they get along very well with their parents. As regards influences of young persons’ important decisions, the largest share (27%) believe their parents have the greatest influence, with the father and the mother ranked equally in terms of the influence they have. The majority of the young respondents are religious, but do not accept all teachings of their religion (36%). With regard to their view of the work of the state institutions in charge of security, 72% of the young respondents rate their performance as average, with the average score of 2.53 assigned to the performance of those institutions. Two thirds of the young respondents have never felt discriminated against or suffered injustice in their environment; however, 34% of the respondents felt discriminated against to a certain extent, most commonly because of their financial situation. Discrimination is regularly experienced by 4% of the respondents.

COMPLIANCE OF GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES WITH THE COMMISSIONER’S RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on an overview of the situation from available data and institutional practices throughout the year, the Commissioner provides recommendations to public authorities in regular annual reports for addressing identified problems, especially those affecting social groups at an increased risk of discrimination. During the year, some recommendations of the Commissioner are fully implemented, while other activities that have effects on improving the population’s situation are carried out, albeit partially. State authorities submit reports on their compliance with the recommendations to the Commissioner because, in accordance with the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, the annual report on the state of equality protection issued by the Commissioner includes an assessment of the work of public authorities, among other things.

43 *Violent Extremism and Young People: from Disinformation to Radicalisation*, CeSID, 2024, available at: <http://www.cesid.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Izvestaj-iz-istra%C5%BEivanja-javnog-mnjenja.pdf>

The following did not submit their reports to the Commissioner: the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Mining and Energy as well as three cabinets of ministers without portfolios (the one in charge of coordinating activities and measures in the field of relations with the diaspora, the one in charge of international economic cooperation and the social position of the Church in the country and abroad and the one in charge of promoting the development of underdeveloped municipalities).

Below is a summary of the received reports. Also, the section of this Report addressing discrimination on the grounds of specific personal characteristics identifies certain activities as positive developments, while those recommendations of the Commissioner which the authorities have not implemented during the year are highlighted as key issues. This approach, coupled with the repetition of certain recommendations from previous that have not been complied with at all or have only partially been complied with, ensures a specific assessment of the efforts made by public authorities to improve the equality of certain social groups, so as to provide members of parliament with more comprehensive insights into this matter.

The Ministry of Tourism and Youth reported it had continued holding competitions for youth associations, to support them in implementing youth policy projects. In 2024, the Ministry supported 18 projects in the field of education, as well as 40 projects concerning safety, health and social inclusion of young people.

The Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs stated in its report it had conducted an *ex ante* analysis of the Law on Social Protection, which is currently undergoing verification by the Ministry's officials, after which it will be available on the website for consultation by experts and the general public. The Draft Action Plan on Implementing the Strategy to Prevent and Combat Gender-based Violence against Women and Domestic Violence 2024/2025 has also been developed, but has not yet undergone a public hearing. The working party tasked with developing a Draft Social Welfare Strategy for the Period 2025-2030 and the supporting Action Plan on its implementation in 2025-2027 has been formed and has held its first meeting.

The labour shortage in Serbia's social welfare system has been reduced through new employment, with the Government's approval. The Committee on Approval of New Employment and Additional Hiring by Public Funds Beneficiaries allowed the employment of 600 persons of various profiles in 2024. Furthermore, social welfare institutions are now able to hire without the Committee's approval indefinitely employed and fixed-term employed interns in a year to cover up to 70% of the total number of persons whose indefinite employment was terminated on any grounds in the preceding calendar year.

A working group has been tasked with preparing the Draft Bylaw amending and supplementing the Bylaw on the Organisation, Norms and Standards of Operation of Social Work Centres, which should draft new provisions which would reflect the de facto situation and the demand of social work centres in terms of the number and structure of workers.

Notable progress has been observed in the development of community-based services that support staying of children with the family and prevent institutionalisation, although the geographical spread of such services remains uneven, especially in rural communities. According to the most recent data available, these services are offered in 151 or 93.8% of Serbian municipalities; there has been a positive downward trend in the number of municipalities which did not offer a single service by licenced providers; staff cuts have been reported only by providers of shelter and day care services; the most commonly available service is domestic help, followed by personal aides to children and SOS helpline services. However, only 25 municipalities offer a plurality of services, i.e. they provide more than four services to citizens. Most of the municipalities have made one or two services available to their citizens.

A working group has been tasked with drafting amendments and supplements to the Bylaw on the Detailed Conditions and Standards for the Provision of Social Welfare Services, which held its first meeting in November 2024. Work is currently underway on amending and supplementing the Regulation on Earmarked Transfers, which enables underdeveloped local self-governments to obtain funding from the national budget to establish and develop social welfare services.

The Government of Serbia has adopted the Action Plan for 2024-2026 on implementing the Employment Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2021-2026, which focuses in particular on improving the labour market situation of unemployed women, young people, persons with disabilities, welfare beneficiaries and members of the Roma national minority, in view of the difficulties they face in the process of integration or reintegration in the labour market.

Acting on proposal from the Ministry, the Government passed the Regulation on the Conditions, Criteria and Procedure for Exercising the Entitlement to receive Funding to promote the Development of Social Entrepreneurship (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* No. 18/24).

Continual efforts are underway to raise public awareness and foster recognition of the importance of equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, both with regard to child care and upbringing and with regard to caring for older family members and sharing domestic and other unpaid work, as well as

efforts to provide expert support to supervisors at Social Work Centres with the aim of improving the professional development available to the supervisors and providing continual support in the supervisory role in relation to case workers.

In the course of 2024, the Institute conducted the Analysis of the Assisted Housing Service for Persons with Disabilities in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, the aim of which was to take stock of the situation regarding this service and provide recommendations aimed at developing this service and ensuring its sustainability. The Analysis provides an overview of information on the providers of the assisted housing service in the territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, their material and human resource capacities and conditions for service provision, the funding arrangements for such services and the provisions governing them, an overview of information on the beneficiaries, and the identified difficulties and good practice examples of service provision, together with proposals to improve the normative framework for the provision of this service. The survey covered nine organisations/institutions which provided the assisted housing service in 2023 (including both licenced and unlicenced service providers).

The Ministry of the Interior undertook a number of activities in 2024 to promote gender equality, in addition to their active participation in numerous expert meetings, seminars, workshops and conferences organised by other state institutions and civil society organisations.

To improve the knowledge of police officers on how to recognise and respond to discrimination, the curriculum for the compulsory “Theory Lessons” includes the subject “Definition, Recognition and Police Response to Manifestations of Discrimination”, which was attended by 27,762 police officers in 2024.

The Women Police Officers Network held the third European Conference to share experiences in the work of associations of its kind at regional and European levels. Participants from the region signed the Declaration on Cooperation and Improvement of the Position of Women and Networks of Women in the Police in Europe.

In 2024, four members of the Roma national minority who successfully completed the Roma Vocational Training Programme for 2021 organised by the National Academy of Public Administration (“Barvalipe”) were employed indefinitely at the Ministry of the Interior. A health promotion activity was also implemented through the distribution of hygiene products free of charge to female pupils of the Secondary School of Internal Affairs “Jakov Nenadovic” and female trainees at the Basic Police Training Centre.

A report on implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic violence (the Istanbul

Convention) was submitted to the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), in line with the mandate of the Group of Experts and as part of the first cycle of assessment of each state party's implementation of the Convention.

As part of 16 days of activism, police officers took part in a number of events to raise awareness of gender-based violence, domestic violence and partner relationships. Moreover, numerous public information and media campaigns have also been held throughout the year to introduce citizens to various security issues in the society (violent behaviour, abuse of alcohol and psychoactive substances, domestic violence etc.), the ways of addressing those issues and self-protection of persons at risk, in particular the vulnerable categories of the population.

The International Day for Older Persons was marked through the campaign "Let's keep each other safe!", aimed at raising the awareness, especially among the elderly, of security risks and providing advice on how to protect personal property. The activities took the form of contacts with citizens at street stands, visits to associations, public debates and appearances at local TV and radio stations.

Furthermore, preventive activities were conducted on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, aimed at promoting the rights of persons with disabilities and raising awareness of their situation across all aspects of social life. On this occasion, 3,796 contacts were made with persons with disabilities and organisations that address their issues and numerous meetings, workshops and public debates were held with organisations and individuals who support and care for persons with disabilities, medical institutions, rehabilitation centres, social services etc.

The Regulation on Vocational Training and Professional Development at the Ministry of the Interior was amended and supplemented in 2024, including *inter alia* with regard to the issues previously highlighted by the Commissioner.

The Ministry of Economy continued promoting various incentives and empowerment measures targeted at domestic micro, small and medium-sized companies and sole traders, as well as affirmative measures aimed at promoting gender equality and equal opportunities of women and developing of female entrepreneurship as well as предузимањем конкретних мера подршке female entrepreneurship. Thus, in 2024 the Entrepreneurship Development Promotion Programme was implemented through financial support to female entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship of women who are single parents, enabling micro and small enterprises founded and legally represented by women to access financial resources under favourable terms. The total amount available for grants under this programme was RSD 100,000,000.00, but female entrepreneurs were also free to apply for financial

support under any other entrepreneurship promotion programme. Additionally, support for female entrepreneurship continued through the development of training, mentoring services, and other forms of professional support, providing women with free non-financial support through the Standardised Set of Services Program for micro, small, and medium enterprises and entrepreneurs. Numerous activities were also conducted regarding the media promotion of female entrepreneurship with examples of best practices. Institutional support has been provided for years to the “Success Flower” project.

The Ministry of Information and Telecommunications held gender equality workshops for male and female journalists, under the title “Challenges of Divisions and Prejudice”, aimed at fostering gender equality in the field of public information and information society. The aim of these workshops was to empower media professionals to provide more inclusive and more equal public information and overcome prejudice which may affect the depiction of different social roles of women and men.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management stated in its report it had successfully implemented its education module “Knowledge Transfers in Agriculture for Gender Equality Promotion”, through its Annual Training Plan for Agricultural Advisors and Farmers in 2024. The aim of the education module was gender sensitisation of the advisors, to ensure equal treatment of women and men in rural areas with regard to access to knowledge and information and to adapt the knowledge transfer system to their specific needs. In addition, the aim was also to educate the advisors on the specific risks for rural women resulting from climate change.

A Working Group for Gender-responsive Budgeting was formed at the Ministry level, tasked with implementing the gender equality principles in the budgeting process. The activities of this Working Group resulted in the implementation of Gender-responsive Budgeting as a measure under the programmes *Regulation and Supervision in the Field of Agriculture* and *Regulation in the Field of Agriculture and Rural Development*. The first project aims to improve gender equality in the field of agriculture and rural development, and efforts are underway to prepare an analytical study of support measures in agriculture, aimed at improving the position of rural women.

Within the framework of the Sava and the Drina Inland Waterway Corridor Development Project, the Republic Water Directorate, an administrative authority subordinate to this Ministry, set an indicator relating to gender-responsive budgeting, namely the number of women protected from 100-year floods in the Sava and the Drina basins. Under the programme activity “Sustainable Development and Improvement of Hunting”, the Forest Directorate introduced a gender-responsive

objective with an appropriate indicator which involves monitoring the number of female hunters' association.

Under the Bylaw on the Conditions for and Manner of Exercising the Entitlement to Loan Support, women who are owners of registered agricultural holdings are entitled to a more favourable loan interest (1% per annum), and 531 such loan applications were approved in 2024. Female owners of agricultural holdings had four IPARD projects approved in the course of 2024, while beneficiaries of IPARD support received finance for 102 projects.

The Ministry of Environmental Protection stated in its report that preparation of the draft Environment Protection Strategy – Green Agenda for the Republic of Serbia was at its final stage. This Strategy will incorporate the measure “Gender and Antidiscrimination Mainstreaming in Public Policies, Plans and Projects in the Field of Environment Protection.

Efforts are also underway to draft the Strategy on Implementing the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, which aims to guarantee the right of access to environmental information, the right of public participation in decision-making in environmental matters and the right to legal protection in environmental matters, as well as to promote antidiscrimination activities.

In accordance with the Programme of Cooperation in the Provision of Public Administration Support to Higher Education Institutions in the Education Process in 2023/2024, the Ministry made arrangements for 35 students (28 female and 7 male) of 10 faculties of the University of Belgrade to work in job placements in order to improve their knowledge of environmental matters.

A Draft Study on Gender Exposure to Microplastics and Nanomaterials contained in Identified Consumer Goods has been prepared, presenting the impact of such exposure on women, men and children and underscoring the vulnerability of children and pregnant women.

The Ministry organised a Climate Change Dialogue, which highlighted that gender mainstreaming in climate policies and financing was essential for achieving more just, more inclusive and more sustainable solutions and combating climate change. Also, as part of efforts to develop staff competencies, “Training on Gender-responsive Planning and Budgeting” has held for members of all departments within the Ministry.

The Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure stated in its report it had continued providing scholarships to female doctoral students in scientific fields, branches or disciplines associated with railway transport, in an effort to develop high-quality human resources in the railway sector and increase the number of female students enrolled in doctoral academic studies in this field.

Within the framework of the project “Improving Accessibility of Public Facilities for Persons with Disabilities and Mobility Issues”, the remaining issues were delivered in 2024, marking the completion of works in 14 municipalities/cities and closure of the project.

Through IPA 2020 II, funding is provided for the project “Reconstruction and Adaptation of Selected Public Facilities across Serbia”, which aims to improve the accessibility of public facilities for persons with disabilities. Works are scheduled to be carried out on 18 facilities in 11 municipalities/cities, signing of all required contracts was completed in 2024 and works are underway.

Under the project “EU Support to Social Housing and Active Inclusion”, numerous workshops and trainings were held in 2024 to build the capacities of the institutions/state authorities/organisations responsible for providing housing and active inclusion services for effective and gender-responsive planning and implementation of housing programmes and provision of appropriate support services. In addition, works to construct 12 apartments in four residential buildings in Bujanovac were completed in August 2024.

The Ministry of Sport stated in its report began developing the Sport Development Strategy 2025-2035 and its Action Plan in 2024. A cross-departmental Working Group was formed, with 8 subgroups, 2 of which are relevant for improving the equality of social groups at an increased risk of discrimination – the subgroup tasked with increasing the participation of citizens in sports across all population segments, especially persons with disabilities and the elderly, and the subgroup tasked with improving the position of female athletes.

A stock-taking exercise is currently underway with regard to the organisation and financing of sports in Serbia, which should result in an *ex-ante* analysis for the preparation of the 2025-2035 Strategy and the Action Plan. This exercise focuses in particular on collecting data on the number and share of women in sport organisations and associations, as well as in the steering and managing bodies of such organisations and associations. In the drafting of the Strategy and the Action Plan, a goal was set concerning the development of female sport and its promotion at all levels, taking into account the different personal characteristics of female athletes, the aim of which is to encourage mass participation in and improvement of female sports, achieve gender equality and prevent and combat gender-based violence in sports. Measures and activities to achieve this objective will be designed to accommodate the need for higher investment in female sports and allocate funding for this purpose.

In April 2024, a public call was issued for the submission of programme and project proposals for the construction of sports facilities for persons with dis-

abilities and adaptation of existing sports facilities to the needs of persons with disabilities; however, the selection and approval procedure for these programme proposals has not yet been carried out and will be conditional upon the amount of approved funding under the 2025 budget.

The Ministry of Internal and Foreign Trade stated in its report that, although it had not carried out any specific activities in 2024 pursuant to the recommendations set out in the Commissioner's Regular Annual Report for 2023, it observed the principles of equality and prohibition of discrimination across all areas of its remit. In this context, the Plan on Achieving and Promoting Gender Equality and the Plan for Managing Risks of Breaches of the Gender Equality Principle were adopted for 2024 and the line Ministry has been submitting regular reports on their implementation. One of the measures under the Plan for Managing Risks of Breaches of the Gender Equality Principle which is implemented continually is fostering a culture of gender equality and mutual respect of employees, regardless of any personal characteristics, such as sex, gender, gender identity, age, appearance, disability, property status, sexual orientation etc.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated in its report it had participated in numerous conferences and events in the field of equality protection, both in the country and abroad, and had donated USD 5,000 for the programme "Senior Women Talent Pipeline (SWTP)".

The Cabinet of the Minister without Portfolio in charge of gender equality, prevention of violence against women and economic and political empowerment of women stated in its report that, since its establishment in May, it had carried out various activities aimed at promoting and advancing the gender equality principle, economic and political empowerment of women, combating gender-based discrimination. Thus, financial support was provided for 81 projects of civil society organisations working towards combating and preventing violence; the first national conference to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women was held and was attended by more than 300 participants, including the country's President and representatives of public authorities and the civil sector. In addition, the Cabinet took part in the preparation and data collection from competent institutions for the GREVIO report and arranged for a visit by the GREVIO Committee, as well as meetings with representatives of the state authorities and institutions whose remit includes this area. Apart from its efforts to raise awareness and educate, the Cabinet also initiated amendments to the Law on Health Insurance, aimed at improving the position of pregnant women who are sole traders in relation to women who are employed under employment contracts. Amendments to specific provisions of this Law would entitle this category of women to 100% wage compensation during pregnancy leave.

The Cabinet of the Minister without Portfolio in charge of reconciliation, regional cooperation and social stability stated in its report it had held four public competitions in 2024 for financial support to reconciliation programmes, including two intended for citizens' associations and two intended for local self-government units. A total of RSD 110,668,000.00 was allocated for these programmes.

The Ministry of Education stated in its report that the existing Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Serbia by 2030 – SDERS 2030 (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* No. 63/21), which is supported by an operational Action Plan, clearly set out and elaborated measures and activities and identified specific strategic goals of education development in Serbia with regard to the adult education system, which were harmonised with the existing Strategy, and the Ministry therefore believed that a separate public policy document in the field of education would be unnecessary.

With the aim of developing model inclusive education (IE) institutions as a new mechanism for supporting inclusive education, 6 candidate schools for the status of model IE institutions received intensive support in 2024 through a capacity building programme, mentoring and the provision of grants for developing inclusive practices and enabling horizontal learning for other schools. More than 400 schools applied and benefited from the horizontal learning exercises held by the 6 candidate schools for the status of model IE institutions, which showcased their inclusive innovative practices.

Continual efforts are made to develop education courses for pupils and for teaching and non-teaching staff, as the Catalogue of Continual Professional Development Courses for Teachers, Educators and Expert Associates for the school years 2022/2023, 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 includes 7 accredited courses on the subject of interculturalism, 5 courses on the subject of gender equality and 20 courses on the subject of protection against discrimination. Furthermore, 5 trainings have been accredited which specifically provide support to pupils of the Roma ethnicity in the education process. The Catalogue is adopted every three school years, and in November 2024 the Competition for the Approval of the Continual Professional Development Courses for the School Years 2025/2026, 2026/2027 and 2027/2028 was completed.

In cooperation with the Centre for Interactive Pedagogy, a video training tool entitled "Upbringing and Socioemotional Learning for Children's Wellbeing and Holistic Development" was developed to empower employees to plan and implement preventive activities with pupils (with the involvement of parents) that promote the development of socioemotional skills in pupils (self-awareness, awareness of others, emotional self-regulation and self-control, responsible decision-making), as well as the development of constructive conflict resolution skills and assertive communication.

In addition, the Ministry has been cooperating with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to implement the programme “Adolescence Skills”, which aims to enable the creation of an accepting and supportive school environment by developing the skills of assertive communication, responsible decision-making and self-awareness (awareness of one’s opinions, values and needs) and building self-confidence. Implementation of the programme is underway. The project “Together Safely through Childhood” has continued through the school year 2024/2025. The interactive workshops on the subject “Prevention of Peer Violence in Real and Digital Environments” held to date have covered 90% of the total number of primary school pupils.

In the course of 2024, the Ministry received eight reports of situations involving discriminatory behaviour between pupils, with membership of a national minority as the most commonly stated personal characteristic as the grounds for such discriminatory behaviour. In accordance with the procedures laid down by the law, disciplinary procedures were initiated against the pupils who perpetrated the discrimination, intensive correctional programmes were developed, protection plans were developed for the pupils who had experienced the discriminatory behaviour, while the institutions involved carried out increased preventive antidiscrimination activities involving pupils and employees, with the involvement of parents.

The National Platform “I Protect You” currently features 20 trainings for employees, parents and children on topics of protection against violence, discrimination and recognition, response and support in situations of violence. Some of the trainings available on the Platform are more directly related to antidiscrimination: thus, the training course entitled “The Course of Action for Education Institutions in Situations of Discriminatory Behaviour”, developed in June 2024, was attended by 3,659 school employees by the end of 2024, while the training course “Protecting Children with Developmental Disorders in Cases of Harassment and Discrimination, Abuse and Violence” was attended by 2,782 employees over the course of 2024.

A new extracurricular activity has also been developed for primary school pupils in grades five to six: *Values and Virtues as a Compass in Life I and II*, which aims to empower pupils’ personal development and promote the development of values and virtues as the main pillars and guiding principles in life for the well-being of the individual and the society, as well as the development of social skills relevant for prosperity, physical and mental health and living in an atmosphere of mutual respect and care.

In cooperation with the Council of Europe, the Ministry selected 36 mentor schools to promote a democratic culture in schools, within the framework of the project “Quality Education for All”, and held initial visits and trainings for more than 150 new schools in the territory of the Republic of Serbia, in all school

administrations. The mentor schools used mentoring guides and guidelines for new schools to develop competencies for a democratic culture.

The Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue stated in its report it had prepared the Bylaw on the Methodology for Calculating the Cost of Unpaid Domestic Work, which came into force on 15 March 2024 and set out in detail the methodology for calculating the cost of unpaid domestic work, as well as the value and share of unpaid domestic work in gross domestic product. However, for this right to be exercised in practice, it will be necessary to harmonise other regulations in the field of health insurance, which is the remit of the Ministry of Health; however, this has been suspended by the Constitutional Court Decision of 27 June 2024, which initiated the procedure to determine whether the Law on Gender Equality is unconstitutional.

In addition, the Ministry developed a data processing software in the field of gender equality, including a web-based application for collecting and processing gender equality data. A web-based application is available on the Ministry's website for entering gender-disaggregated data by public authorities, employers, political parties, trade unions and gender equality bodies. The application is operational.

In 2024, the Ministry completed the development of the Draft Action Plan for 2024-2025 on implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy 2021-2030; however, this document was not included in the agenda of the competent Government committee and was consequently not adopted. As regards the Draft Action Plan for 2024-2025 on implementation of the Strategy for the Prevention and Protection from Discrimination 2022-2030, the Ministry has begun adapting the text to reflect the opinions it received from the Secretariat for Legislation, the Public Policy Secretariat and the Ministry of Finance. Regarding implementation of the Strategy on Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women 2022-2030, an analysis of the Action Plan for 2022-2024 has been completed, the procedure for the establishment of a new Coordination Body on Monitoring Improvement in the Situation of Roma, with an Expert Group which will begin drafting the Action Plan for 2025-2027.

In 2024, the Ministry prepared the Report on Implementation of the Poznan Declaration, which covered the period 2019-2024. The Analysis of Implementation of Roma Social Inclusion Measures at the Local Level in 2023/2024 was also prepared. The Civil Society Platform for Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women has been established and its first task will be to select 5 representatives of CSOs as members of the Expert Group of the Coordination Body on Monitoring Improvement in the Situation of Roma.

Three trainings were held for gender equality officers in the authorities, institutions and gender equality bodies of local self-government units: in Belgrade, Niš and Novi Sad. These trainings were attended by 90 persons. Two series of training events were held across Serbia on the subject "National Minority Rights and Achiev-

ing National Equality at the Local Level”, the Functionality Analysis of the Council on Interethnic Relations has been carried out, and a survey has been conducted of the actions of national minority councils with regard to exercising public powers in the fields of education, culture, information and official use of languages and scripts, as well as the role of national minority councils in intercultural dialogue and fostering of interethnic relations.

The Ministry of Justice stated in its report that in the previous year it had once again adopted the Plan and Programme of Gender Equality Measures, while the process of preparing the 2025 Budget focused on improving gender-responsive budgeting and included three programme budgets, namely: “Advancement and protection of human and minority rights and freedoms to build capacities for gender-responsive analytical operations”, regarding the provision of free legal aid; “Improvement and management in the judiciary system”, which aims to contribute to an improved position of vulnerable gender groups in accordance with the objectives of the Gender Equality Strategy; and “Financial support to the work of judicial authorities”, which aims to improve the conditions that would enable persons with disabilities to exercise the right of access to justice and a fair trial for persons on an equal basis as other citizens. Execution of the gender-responsive budget thus planned will significantly improve the position of citizens in the exercise of their rights before judiciary authorities.

In the preceding period, the Ministry prepared the Draft Law amending and supplementing the Criminal Code, while the National Assembly adopted some of the draft amendments to the Criminal Code at its session held in late 2024, including most notably the introduction of three new criminal offences: *Attack on a Person employed at an Education Institution*, *Attack on a Person employed at a Health Care Institution* and *Attack on a Person employed at a Social Welfare Institution*, in response to the growing number of cases of violence against employees in these sectors.

The initiative to supplement the Criminal Code by providing for a new criminal offence *Unauthorised Distribution and Abuse of an Intimate Recording* is justified, and in this regard the best possible legal arrangement will be proposed to protect intimate content from abuse and distribution via social networks, either by legislating for a new criminal offence or by expanding the definition of commission of an existing one. Also, the new criminal offence *Publishing of Content that Encourages the Commission of a Criminal Offence* received much attention from participants in the public hearing. The definition of this criminal offence will certainly be worded more accurately by stating that punishable offences will be those involving the publishing of content that encourages the commission of criminal offences, including those relating to paedophile content and paedophilia, the victims of which are usually women and children.

The already initiated support to magistrates in the effective implementation of the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence was continued throughout this reporting period, through workshops on the subject “Judiciary Response to Gender-based Violence, Violence against Women and Domestic Violence”. Furthermore, the Ministry supported the Judiciary Academy in organising trainings on the subject “Gender Equality and Gender-based Violence”, intended for judicial office holders, judges and public prosecutors in the jurisdictions of all four courts of appeal in the Republic of Serbia, the aim of which was to build the capacities of practitioners regarding the interrelatedness of gender equality and gender-based violence, in both civil and criminal proceedings.

To raise public awareness on recognition of violence and the need to report it, in 2024 the Ministry once again analysed and published information on extended emergency measures on the website “Turn off the Violence”, calling on all citizens to report and condemn any form of domestic and gender-based violence, including violence committed by digital means.

The General Protocol of Action and Cross-departmental Cooperation in Situations of Gender-based Violence, Violence against Women and Domestic Violence has been adopted, which will contribute to the establishment of a coordinated and cross-departmental approach in addressing this complex issue, with the aim of ensuring swifter risk identification, improved protection for victims of violence and more efficient prosecution of perpetrators.

After the Higher Courts of Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac and Novi Pazar established Victim and Witness Support Services, four more such services were established by the end of 2024, in the cities of Zrenjanin, Sombor, Požarevac and Vranje.

The Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation stated in its report that, in 2024, it had continued implementing its National Scholarship Programme “For Women in Science” in the Republic of Serbia and scholarships were awarded to three more young female scientists, making a total of 41 scholarships awarded since the start of the programme.

The Ministry has been implementing affirmative measures to retain young and talented human resources in the country through several programmes. Thus, a public call for the employment of young researchers from among students of doctoral academic studies in 2024 resulted in the hiring of 245 of doctorands as young researchers, while a public call for the award of scholarships in 2024 extended the existing scholarships and awarded new ones for a total of 388 doctorands and young researchers receiving such scholarships, 65% of whom are female.

According to the data available on the e-Innovation portal, the Register of Operators in the National Innovation System currently includes 40 persons listed under the category “Natural Person”, 12 of whom (30%) are women.

The Science Technology Parks in Belgrade, Čačak, Niš and Novi Sad make efforts to include as many women as possible in their activities and events, thus promoting female entrepreneurship. For example, within the framework of the programme Raising Starts Contest Days in 2024, 33% of the startup founders and cofounders in the Čačak region were women, while in Niš, 23% of the supported startup founders under the project Technopark Serbia 2 were women.

Of the 1615 recipients of the Fund for Young Talents of Serbia scholarships, 1157 were women, while 918 of the 1609 award winners in a competition for secondary school pupils were girls.

The Ministry of Defence stated in its report it had prepared the Draft Third National Action Plan (NAP) on implementation of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in 2024 and submitted it to the procedure leading to its adoption by the Serbian Government. It is stated that the share of women in the Ministry and the Serbian Armed Forces is 26.69%, which is an increase by more than half a percentage from the previous year. Since women have been enrolling in the Military Academy since 2007, the share of women holding command and administrative duties has been increasing every year. Advertising in the media aimed at attracting new military staff featured both sexes in equal numbers.

The Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-government stated in its report that, in order to lay down in detail the content and the manner of keeping the Central Human Resource Records and obtaining the data necessary for inclusion in those records, the Serbian Government had adopted the Regulation on the Central Human Resource Records. All state authorities are required to enter human resource data on their employees in the human resource management system, including information on their national affiliation, but only if the employees provide this information voluntarily, as well as information on the language in which they completed primary, secondary and higher education.

To improve the position of the Roma community, the National Academy for Public Administration prepared a package of multidisciplinary trainings for members of the Roma population with higher education qualifications, entitled “Roma Training Programme 2021 (Barvalipe)”. Out of the total number of persons hired through this programme (19), 9 are in (indefinite/fixed-term) employment, while one person is hired outside of an employment relationship.

In cooperation with the Office for IT and e-Government, a new electronic service, the e-Registry Office, was launched on the e-Government portal in July 2024, which enables citizens to electronically and effortlessly file applications from their mobile device or computer, to keep up with the progress of their case and to have the award decision or any other document delivered electronically to their e-Mailbox.

In connection with the recommendation addressed at all ministries, special organisations and administrations in connection with deciding on the promotion of employed female civil servants, not to take into consideration any interruptions in successive performance review scores because the employee could not have been subject to a performance review because she was using her pregnancy leave, maternity leave or child care leave, the Ministry noted that, under Article 88 paragraph 8 of the Law on Civil Servants, which was amended in 2018, an interruption in successive performance review scores due to absence of a civil servant from work is not considered to be an interruption in successive performance review scores which are a precondition for the promotion and rewarding of civil servants.

The Ministry of Health stated in its report that, in order to improve the availability and accessibility of health care services, it had cooperated with more than 200 health care institutions, the Institute for Public Health of Serbia and the network of public health institutes in 2024 to arrange for preventative medical examinations during weekends for all citizens (with or without a health insurance card), without scheduling of different examinations. These initiatives resulted in the examination of more than 236,000 persons, with 500,000 individual analyses conducted. Health Caravans were held in 11 cities/municipalities, which featured numerous debates, counselling sessions and lectures for citizens, as well as different preventative examinations.

Efforts were focused in particular on carrying out regular medical examinations of schoolchildren, with more than 3,000 examinations carried out in selected schools. In addition, 33 local self-government units funded additional parenting support services and 124 projects were implemented for the reconstruction, construction and rehabilitation of medical institutions and facilities at all levels and at different stages.

The Working Group on Youth Mental Health and Safety Support opened the Youth Centre (CEZAM), which helps resolve issues and improve the mental health of young persons through interventions, education activities and informal programmes with peer support for young people. A notable development has been the completion of the Institute for Early Child Development and Inclusion, which is currently in the process of establishment as a new medical institution in the Medical Institutions Network Plan of the Republic of Serbia. Implementation of the Minimum Mental Health Services Pack for Youth is currently underway in five cities (Subotica, Zrenjanin, Kragujevac, Novi Pazar and Užice).

The Ministry has maintained continuity in employing the best graduates from faculties of medicine and medical schools: in 2024, 100 best physicians and 140 medical technicians (May 2024) and 100 best physicians and 370 medical technicians (December 2024) were hired. Also, 85 female health mediators were hired in 2024.

The List of Prescription Medication covered by Compulsory Health Insurance was expanded in 2024 to include 55 new medications, including 22 innovative ones, of which 16 are used to treat diseases that have not previously been included in the List (medicines for multiple sclerosis were previously available in six hospitals and are now available in 22, while medicines for colorectal cancer were previously available in eight hospitals and are now available in 29).

A Working Group made up of representatives of the Ministry of Public Investments, the national coordinator for the Programme of Support to Breastfeeding and Family and Developmental Care of Infants, practitioners (gynaecologists/obstetricians, neonatologists), public health institutes and the National Health Insurance Fund, visited all 55 obstetric clinics in Serbia. The aim of these visits was to identify possibilities for reconstruction of the birthing rooms in accordance with the standards which enable the presence of the partner or another person during childbirth, as well as support after childbirth (family rooms). Space-related and human resource-related issues were also identified.

The Institute for Public Health of Serbia enabled the entry of information in the Register of Persons with Disabilities through its information system *Public Health Service (PHS)* in the second half of 2024; previously, in mid- 2022, it had enabled the entry of information on children with developmental disorders. The expert methodological guidance on maintaining these registers enables evaluations of the degree of difficulties faced by children with developmental disorders and persons with disabilities in everyday activities (communication, mobility, personal care, learning etc.), thus allowing for a change in the medical approach to capacity assessment of persons with disabilities and developmental disorders.

The Ministry of Rural Welfare stated in its report it had implemented five programmes in 2024 through public competitions in the territories of 153 local self-government units. Two regulations have been drafted and implemented. Under the Regulation establishing the Grant Programme for the Reconstruction of Rural Culture Centres, 19 local self-government units were selected as eligible and received funding to facilitate the organisation of cultural and social life for the population of all ages.

Under the Regulation establishing the Grant Programme to Support Entrepreneurship Development in Rural Communities, 14 local self-government units received funding which they are to pass on to entrepreneurs in their territories in public competitions, with the aim of economic empowerment of the rural population, including young persons who had previously received funds to purchase a rural house with a garden.

Under the Regulation establishing the Grant Programme for the Purchase of Rural Houses with Gardens, 870 applicants aged under 45 were selected as eligible

to exercise this entitlement. Out of those, 73 applicants stated they were of Roma ethnicity, with an average age of 28.

The Ministry has modified the eligibility conditions for this public competition to extend the right to apply for a grant to purchase a rural house with a garden also to persons with past convictions, as well as persons who are under criminal prosecution or investigation.

To facilitate the mobility situation of the rural population, 17 local self-government units received funding to purchase minibuses under the Grant Programme for Addressing Public Transport Issues in Rural Communities.

The Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography stated in its report that the Government had passed the decision to establish the Council on Ageing and Intergenerational Cooperation, with a four-year term of office.

Agreements on co-financing of population policy and support measures in the field of family and children have been signed with 68 local self-government units. Of those, only two local self-government units have not implemented their programmes.

Furthermore, the Ministry worked on amendments and supplements to the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children, which the National Assembly enacted on 30 September 2024.

The amendments and supplements include, *inter alia*: changes in the conditions applicable to the calculation of the wage compensation for employed fathers who use child care leave, when the mother is an independent professional or has the status of an independent professional as the registered owner of an agricultural holding pursuant to the law governing personal income tax, with regard to the periods used to determine the base for calculating the wage compensation for persons in an employment relationship with an employer; changes in the conditions applicable to the calculation of other allowances for childbirth and child care available to persons who are independent professionals or registered owners of agricultural holdings, so that the period from which the calculation bases are taken into consideration for the purpose of exercising these entitlements is identical to the period from which the calculation bases are taken into consideration when calculating the amount of wage compensation for persons in an employment relationship with an employer; the manner of exercising the entitlement to child allowance has been defined more accurately with regard to the amount of income and the ability to exercise this entitlement regardless of the family's financial situation and the amount of the child allowance; the manner of exercising the entitlement to cost reimbursement for the stay of children at preschool facilities has been clarified in cases of children without parental care, children with developmental disorders, children with disabilities and children who are social welfare

recipients, where the local self-government unit does not provide funding for this entitlement. This means almost all recommendations of the Commissioner have been implemented, apart from those pertaining to the granting of equal status to female sole traders.

The Ministry has cooperated with UNICEF to finalise the Draft Action Plan on Youth Mental Health, as an instrument of implementing the Cooperation Agreement signed between UNICEF and six competent ministries in September 2023.

As part of the activities to provide assistance to persons and families of persons with rare diseases, decisions have been passed to disburse one-off financial assistance and issue vouchers, as explained in more detail in the subsequent sections of the report. Furthermore, through two public calls, funding was provided for a total of 155 projects submitted by citizens' associations. Of those, three associations have withdrawn their projects.

The Ministry of Finance mistakenly reported to the Commissioner in connection with information of public importance and personal data protection and its obligations regarding compliance with the Law on Gender Equality within the remit of the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue. It also reported that the Tax Accounting Division Subotica of the Tax Administration had complied with the Commissioner's recommendation to undertake the necessary measures and produce an application form that would be available in those languages and scripts of national minorities that are in official use in Subotica according to the city's Statutes.

KEY ISSUES IN EQUALITY PROTECTION

Based on an overall assessment of the state of protection against discrimination and attainment of equality, taking into account in particular the Commissioner's practice, which includes acting on complaints and other communications submitted by citizens to this institution, as well as our other activities, such as different surveys, reports, analyses, participation in meetings, at conferences and other events addressing specific issues relevant for achieving progress in the exercise and protection of human rights, certain key issues regarding equality protection have been identified, as outlined below. Considering that these activities are not an absolute indicator of prevalence of discrimination in the society, other available sources were also examined for more comprehensive insights, primarily the legal and strategic framework through enacted and/or amended acts on an annual basis, certain judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, as well as other sources such as reports and acts of the EU, international organisations and treaty bodies, reports and surveys by domestic institutions and organisations, as well as reports by public authorities submitted to the Commissioner for a review of compliance with previously issued recommendations and the progress achieved during the year. Members of parliament in the National Assembly, as well as other state bodies and civil society organisations, should have a comprehensive overview to proactively act and undertake activities to improve equality for all citizens.

Once again, certain issues emerged during the year which were common across multiple areas, namely issues that affect multiple social groups or have a broader impact. Some of these issues have been persistent over the years, which was to be expected in some situations because they could not be addressed in the course of a single year. Among these was, for example, qualitative and quantitative capacity building of certain services, such as social welfare, health care, inspections, education etc., which are vital for citizens' daily lives and to which the Commissioner has been drawing attention for years. However, some issues could have been resolved, in particular those concerning the legal and strategic frameworks. Thus, for example, although the Law amending and supplementing the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination of 2021 set a timeframe for passing a secondary legislation instrument which would govern the keeping of court records of final and enforceable judgments and decisions in misdemeanour, criminal and civil proceedings due to breaches of non-discrimination provisions, the Ministry of Justice has not yet passed such instrument.

The key common issues affecting the achievement of equality and non-discrimination based on personal characteristics are presented below, while some issues specifically related to certain societal groups are addressed in the sections relating to those particular characteristics, which also summarize some of the instances of progress observed in relation to the relevant societal groups.

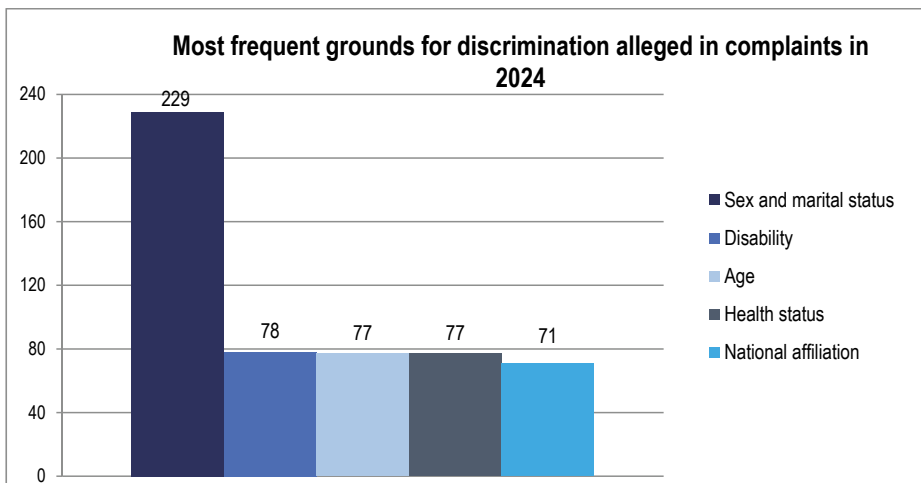
Based on the overall assessment of the current state of play, this Report provides general recommendations to improve equality and eliminate discrimination and identifies the authorities responsible for resolving the issues addressed by each recommendation.

In the course of 2024, the Commissioner received communications from citizens through various channels, including direct contact, phone calls, emails etc. The Commissioner handled over 3,700 cases, including more than 700 complaints; 421 recommendations for measures were issued, along with a total of 50 warnings, communications and announcements. Training sessions were provided to more than 1,200 individuals, and 2,400 confirmations of non-discriminatory behaviour were issued. Additionally, 42 opinions and initiatives to amend legislation were issued, we actively participated in 730 different events, roundtables, conferences and other meetings, and the Commissioner independently organised a number of expert meetings, conferences and trainings and prepared multiple surveys and publications, which are covered in detail in the sections of this Report dealing with the relevant activities of this institution.

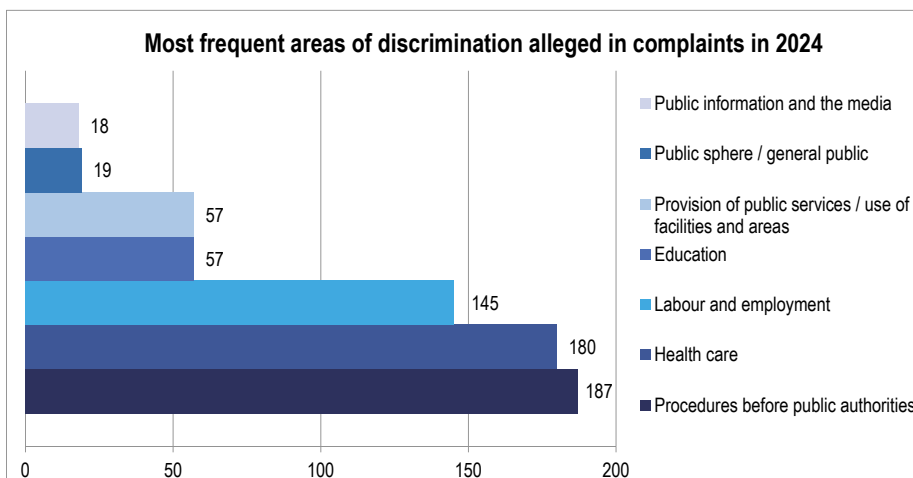
During the year, citizens communicated with the Commissioner via mail, telephone, e-mail, social networks and in person at the reception office, drawing attention to various issues. A conclusion that can be drawn from those communications is that, since the formation of this institution, the most common grounds for discrimination alleged by the citizens have included sex and marital and family status, disability, health status, age and national affiliation or ethnic origin. It should be noted that the number of complaints reflects the number of cases handled, rather than the total number of communications by citizens. The frequency of complaints in a given year is influenced by a number of factors, including the passing of specific regulations, public awareness of certain phenomena, activities of the civil sector etc. Moreover, the prevalence of discrimination in the society is influenced by a number of factors, including the social and cultural context in which we live, social attitudes towards certain societal groups and discrimination in general, citizens' awareness of the necessity and importance of compliance with laws, as well as citizens' willingness to report any human rights violations, the degree of tolerance of differences, trust in the work of institutions, awareness of the phenomenon of discrimination and other factors.

The most frequent grounds for discrimination alleged in the complaints lodged with the Commissioner in 2024 were sex and disability, followed by discrimination on the grounds of health status, age, national affiliation or ethnic origin and marital and family status, while other personal characteristics were less frequently cited by citizens as the grounds for discrimination. The Commissioner also received a number of complaints on the grounds of another personal characteristic, namely those that are not explicitly stated in the law, including those relating to the place

of residence, affiliation with groups such as refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons, different treatment of education institutions depending on whether they were founded by the state or by a private entity etc. Other common grounds for discrimination alleged in the complaints included membership in political, trade union and other organisations, religious or political beliefs, property status, skin colour, sexual orientation and race.



As regards the sphere of social relations, the most common reasons for complaints in 2024 included procedures before public authorities, followed by health care, labour and employment, education and vocational training, provision of public services or use of facilities and areas, the public sphere and the media.



The status of citizens and certain social groups is also influenced by legislative activity. Frequent election cycles cause “standstills” in the full functioning of legislative and executive government, which is reflected in the number of regulations enacted and strategic documents adopted during the year. In 2024, elections were held in a certain number of local self-governments, which affected primarily activities at the local level. Examples of regulations passed in the reporting period which are relevant for the exercise of rights of various social groups include: the Law amending and supplementing the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children, Strategy for Improving the Position of Persons with Disabilities in the Republic of Serbia in 2025-2030 and the relevant Action Plan for 2025-2027, the Strategy of Occupational Safety and Health in the Republic of Serbia in 2024-2027 with the Action Plan for its implementation, the Strategy for Addressing the Issues of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in 2024-2030 etc.

A problem in this regard is that, in breach of their obligation under the law, certain authorities fail to present draft regulations and other documents for the Commissioner’s opinion or they submit drafts that lack an assessment of their impact on the exercise of rights of socioeconomically vulnerable persons, which is mandatory under Article 14 of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination. Such practice results in the enactment of regulations that, when implemented, cause effects that were not taken into consideration during their enactment, that adversely affect certain social groups or that are disadvantageous to certain citizens. On a number of occasions, regulations which had not been enacted in compliance with the proper procedure under the law were subject to reviews of constitutionality and legality before the Constitutional Court. This was the case, for example, with the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children and the Law amending and supplementing the Law on Registration with the Real Estate Cadastre and the Infrastructure Cadastre.

The Commissioner also provided comments on draft regulations at the public hearing stage, for example in connection with the Draft Law amending and supplementing the Criminal Code. The Commissioner also gave an opinion on this Draft Law after the public hearing. In these opinions, we also highlighted the fact that the competent ministry had not considered a single initiative to amend and supplement the Criminal Code submitted by this authority over the years and underscored it was necessary to harmonise laws with the ratified conventions and with antidiscrimination regulations.

During the year, we submitted a number of initiatives to the competent authorities to amend and supplement certain regulations, in a way which, as explicitly made clear in each of those initiatives, would result in an improved status of certain social groups. Thus, for example, we initiated amendments and supplements to the Law on Social Protection, including *inter alia* less stringent conditions that would apply to the exercise of the entitlement to financial social assistance, as

well as the establishment of vital socio-medical services. The Commissioner also initiated amendments and supplements to the Law on Public Order and Peace, to afford proper legal protection to persons exploited for prostitution and to harmonise the national legislation with the international standards in the fields of gender equality, prevention of gender-based violence and prevention of human trafficking. An amendment to the Law on Registration with the Real Estate Cadastre and the Infrastructure Cadastre was also initiated in order to improve the position of poorer citizens and those with lower income, along with a proposal for a review of constitutionality and legality of the provisions of that Law. An initiative was also submitted to amend and supplement the Law on Transplantation of Human Organs and the Law on Human Cells and Tissues, to reestablish the legal framework and regulate the transplantation of organs and tissues from deceased persons as soon as possible. We also asked for amendments to the provisions of the Law on the Rights of Veterans, Disabled Veterans, Disabled Civilians Disabled by War and Family Members; amendments and supplements to the Law on Enforcement of Criminal Sanctions by imposing a duty on the competent authorities to always notify the victim of the release of the convicted person or his escape from prison in cases of gender based and domestic violence and in cases of human trafficking; amendments and supplements to the Law on Health Care or enactment of a new regulation to regulate in detail the work of Emergency Medical Services; amendments to the Bylaw on the List of Prescription Covered by the Compulsory Health Insurance Fund; amendments and supplements to the Bylaw on Detailed Requirements and Standards for the Provision of Social Welfare Services, to consider adjusting the existing social welfare services or standardisation of new targeted services etc.

Furthermore, some regulations have not been passed or amended for years, as is the case with the Family Law, the Law on Civil Procedure, the Labour Law, the Law on Work Placement, Law on Ratification of ILO Convention No. 190, Law on Certification of Signatures, Misdemeanour Law, Law on Enforcement of Criminal Sanctions etc., as well as documents pertaining to adult education, corporate social responsibility, implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 Women, Peace and Security, improving the status of national minorities etc. Adoption of strategic documents and development of action plans are necessary to establish a framework of action or ensure continuity in the undertaking of measures and activities, and it is essential that strategic documents are passed on the basis of an analysis of the state of play, on realistic foundations and according to actual needs of citizens, with secured funding for the achievement of goals which will result in an improved quality of life for citizens.

The Commissioner's experience regarding the acceptance of initiatives submitted to the competent authorities shows that most executive authorities tend to undertake the relevant measures and activities, while some of them, for various reasons, including a lack of understanding of the importance of the rule of law, the

legal nature of acts of independent institutions and their corrective role, either fail to respond to the initiatives or tend to amend the relevant regulations or undertake measures only after major delays.

Thus, for example, in accordance with the amendments and supplements to the Prohibition of Discrimination⁴⁴, the Commissioner is vested with a new competence which concerns the establishment and keeping of records of protection against discrimination; namely, the Law imposes a duty on courts to submit to the Commissioner anonymised judgments in the field of antidiscrimination by the 31st of March of the current year in respect of the preceding year, while the minister in charge of the judiciary is authorised to pass a piece of secondary legislation within six months of entry of this Law into force to lay down the manner of record-keeping by courts and the manner of their submission to the Commissioner. This piece of secondary legislation has not yet been passed, to which the Commissioner drew the attention of the Ministry of Justice, and the Commissioner is consequently unable to keep the required records.

Consistent application of the legal and strategic framework, improving this framework, with accountability for implementation of the regulations and political will, as well as continual education of all stakeholders, are crucial for respect for and advancement of the principle of equality and will result in an improved situation for citizens. In 2024, the Commissioner's priorities included informing citizens, public service employees and civil sector representatives on how to recognise discrimination and how to respond to unequal treatment, along with education on human rights. The trainings involved more than 1200 participants from various sectors and the level of interest in the education has been consistently high, which is why activities of this type are always in the focus of this institution, as part of the efforts to improve equality. To ensure a proper response to all demands for different types of education on protection against discrimination and improvement of equality and thus bring about to improved qualitative capacities, especially those of public services that directly serve citizens, as well as citizens' and employers' associations, it is essential also to strengthen the Commissioners capacities.

The Commissioner has been drawing attention to the limited human resource capacities of this institution and the fact that the number of employees has remained unchanged for years. According to the job classification, the Commissioner's Professional Service should have 60 civil servants and general service employees in total. In 2024, the Commissioner obtained the approval of the National Assembly to employ two persons. At the end of 2024, there were 42 civil servants and employees on indefinite contracts in the Expert Service of the Commissioner. As the occupancy of the systematised positions is 73.33%, continual filling of vacancies will be needed, as highlighted in the conclusions of the National Assembly.

44 *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* No. 52/21

Furthermore, to ensure timely and appropriate response to citizens' needs, it is necessary to build the quantitative and qualitative capacities of other institutions, in particular social, health care, child care, education and free legal aid services, inspection authorities, the police and others, and this is another issue to which we have been continually drawing attention for years. A conclusion that can be drawn from citizens' communications is that they are, in some cases, unable to exercise rights and services or face difficulties in doing so, due to a lack of capacity of certain local self-government service. However, it is often the case that a lack of understanding, or indeed awareness, of the strategic directions in certain areas, relevant bodies are not formed, or appropriate measures and activities are not undertaken, or no systemic approach is adopted at the local level to address the problems faced by certain social groups are not addressed or efforts are not made to improve their situation. Appropriate capacities and continual staff education would contribute to a better response to citizens' needs.

In addition, citizens have also drawn attention to the complicated procedures they must undergo to exercise certain rights, the fact that those procedures are time-consuming and involve excessive numbers of required documents, long waiting times, unclear ways of exercising rights etc., all of which points to the conclusion that the procedures need to be further simplified, along with regular checks of compliance with and implementation of all regulations and strengthening of inspection and supervision authorities. While there has been intensive work in recent years on modernizing and streamlining procedures, with one of the goals of the administration being to completely shift service desk operations to an electronic governance system, thereby accelerating, modernizing, and fully digitising processes, we must not lose sight of the fact that not all citizens, least of all the elderly, are familiar with modern ICT tools and the options of using services in this way. There is also the issue of network coverage, availability of the appropriate devices (a smartphone or a computer) etc., which is why these issues need particular attention and efforts should be made to ensure smooth exercise of the rights. There have also been examples of systemic issues regarding actions of the authorities in terms of unequal treatment, including for example the provisions of Articles 18 and 25 of the Law on the Procedure of Registration with Real Estate Cadastre and Infrastructure Cadastre, because they put poorer persons and those with lower income at a disadvantage, which is why we have filed a proposal for a review of constitutionality and legality, as already discussed in detail in previous sections of this Report.

Numerous communications received from citizens, as well as a number of reports and services, have highlighted the issue of insufficient social welfare services, which are lacking both in terms of scope and in terms of types of services, their availability and continuity. In early 2022, after several years in development, *the Strategy for Deinstitutionalisation and Development of Community-based Services for*

2022–2026⁴⁵ was adopted. The Strategy states *inter alia* that, although the Republic of Serbia is formally committed to implementing the deinstitutionalisation process, in practice there has been certain progress with regard to children and young persons, while the results regarding persons with intellectual and mental difficulties have been unsatisfactory. The number of these persons placed at residential care institutions has remained virtually unchanged for years, and instances of removal from institutions have been rare, because community-based services which support the stay of such persons in their natural environment remain underdeveloped. However, although several years have passed since the adoption of this Strategy, the action plan and the funding for its implementation and for the development of community-based social welfare services are increasingly delayed, as stated in the *European Commission's Serbia 2024 Report*⁴⁶, while public expenditure for social welfare and budget transfers as a share of GDP continue declining. Based on the Commissioner's practice, persons who are unable to exercise certain services or are unable to exercise them continually are consequently unable to integrate with the society, i.e. they have no access to education, employment etc., which puts those persons in an unequal position, i.e. it leads to discrimination against them on the grounds of different personal characteristics, most commonly disability, age and health status. These cases, as well as issues concerning availability of health care, are described in more detail in the relevant sections of this report; however, it should be noted that they have been recurring for some time and we have been highlighting them throughout the year, through various opinions and recommended measures and through regular annual reports. There is also an apparent lack of integrated social welfare and health care services (Article 60 of the Law on Social Protection), as well as cross-sectoral actions of these systems, as well as the institutions in the fields of education, employment, the police, judicial and other state authorities, authorities of local self-government units and civil society organisations, to achieve optimal results with regard to exercising the rights, and consequently also improving the position of citizens.

The year 2024 was, just like previous years, marked by numerous cases of violence, both gender-based and domestic, especially against women, and peer violence among children and young persons. This violence is rooted in inequality, patriarchal patterns of behaviour, sexism, misogyny, prejudice and stereotypes regarding certain social groups, i.e. discrimination as a negative social phenomenon. The Commissioner has continually been drawing attention to the link between discrimination and various forms of violence.

Femicide is one of the most drastic forms of gender-based violence. According to media reports, 19 women were murdered in Serbia in 2024, down from 28

45 *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 12/2022

46 *Serbia 2024 Report*, European Commission, 2024, available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2024_en

in the previous year. Even if the number of murdered women has gone down, it will take comprehensive analyses to determine if there has been a corresponding reduction in gender-based violence. As a reminder, the Commissioner supported the initiative to establish a national control mechanism to monitor cases of femicide, which was submitted to the National Assembly. However, the mechanism has not yet been established, although it is envisaged by the Strategy for Combating Violence against Women. Gender-based violence required continual monitoring of the situation and urgent response through appropriate measures in the protection and prevention system. In this context, we have submitted several initiatives for amendments to the criminal legislation regarding the definition of sexual violence based on the concept of the lack of consent, as well as by providing for a separate offence on the grounds of abuse and publishing of videos with explicit sexual content, coupled with introduction of the duty for competent authorities to inform victims of gender-based and domestic violence always and in each case when the convict is released from or escapes prison. The Criminal Code has not yet been amended in this regard.

According to the survey *Perception of Women at Increased Risk of Discrimination on Gender Equality*⁴⁷, conducted in late 2024, the main issues regarding the response to violence according to the respondents are insufficiently strict sanctions for perpetrators of violence (58.6%) and failure to apply the law in practice (55.8%), which is indicative of deficiencies in the judicial system, but also shows the underlying message is that violence against women is not perceived as a serious social problem. The respondents also state that civil servants are not sufficiently trained to recognise and properly respond to instances of violence.

Economic dependence and inability to manage property increase the risk of experiencing some form of violence. Women who have their own property and income are independent and more willing to report violence than those who have no financial stability or property. In view of the still prevalent inequalities regarding property inheritance, the Commissioner conducted an analysis of the legal framework applicable to inheritance⁴⁸ and the *Survey on the Influence of Social Norms on Attitudes and Decisions Regarding Property Inheritance*⁴⁸, which included women and men of different age categories in rural and urban areas across Serbia. As was to be expected, the share of women who support full equality regarding inheritance

47 *Survey on the Perception of Women at Increased Risk of Discrimination on Gender Equality*, Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Belgrade 2024, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/istrazivanje-o-percepciji-zena-u-vecem-riziku-od-diskriminacije-oro-dnoj-ravnopravnosti/>

48 *Survey on the Influence of Social Norms on Attitudes and Decisions Regarding Property Inheritance*, Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Belgrade 2024, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/istrazivanje-o-naslednim-pravima-i-stavovima-prema-nasledjivanju-u-srbiji/>

(66%) is significantly higher than the share of men who share that view (39%), with traditional and family values most commonly cited as the key motivations for renouncing inheritance, as well as moral duty and a desire to preserve harmonious family relations. Renunciation of inheritance has significant legal consequences of which women are often unaware. This was why the Commissioner resubmitted the initiative to amend the Law on Social Welfare relating to the requirements for the exercise of the entitlement to financial social assistance.

The Commissioner continued with activities aimed at improving the safety of children. As part of the project “Together and Safely Through Childhood”, in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Education, the Commissioner, the Criminal Police University, the Traffic Safety Agency, the OSCE Mission to the Republic of Serbia and Caritas Serbia Mission, activities are underway to raise the awareness of pupils about recognising different forms of violence and discrimination in both real and virtual environments, as well as to impart knowledge on safe behaviour in traffic and in emergency situations. As part of this project, 17,023 workshops were held in total in the first semester of the school year 2024/2025, which were attended by 222,221 first, second, fifth and eighth grade pupils. It is a positive and encouraging development that the pupils demonstrated a certain degree of progress after completing the workshops in terms of recognising different forms and instances of discrimination, with the share of correct answers in initial and final tests increasing from 63% to 80%.

During the year, activities were also set afoot to implement the project “The Commissioner’s Youth Panel for the Protection of Equality – Youth for Equality”, supported by the European Union Erasmus+ programme, in partnership with the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality of Croatia. A peer education programme will be implemented as part of this project, which is intended for the recognition and response to discrimination, as well as the establishment of a peer educators’ network, which is vital since learning from each other is the best way for young persons to acquire knowledge. After the training, the peer educators will be involved in the implementation of a number of education activities in Serbian primary and secondary schools.

Statistical data collected and published by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia are of great importance for the review of the situation, planning and creation of policies based on data. According to the data contained in the report *Leave No One Behind!*⁴⁹, the proportion of the elderly population (65+) is increasing in Serbia and in the rest of Europe, which requires adjustment of public policies so

49 *Leave no one Behind! Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals in the Republic of Serbia for the Elderly Population (65+)*, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024, available at: https://sdg.indikatori.rs/media/1668/lnob_65plus_srp.pdf

that no one is left behind the development. In 2022, Serbia was among the countries with a large proportion of elderly population, and according to the projections, this population contingent will represent 24.1% of the total population in our country until 2041. Although the functional population index is increasing, the elderly in Serbia remain in a disadvantaged position, they are at higher risk of poverty, while women are at higher risk than men (24.6% compared with 20% in men). In view of these facts, and also this institution's practice regarding discrimination against the elderly, the Commissioner has cooperated with the Office of the Attaché for Social Protection of the Austrian Embassy, the United Nations Population Fund in Serbia, the Red Cross of Serbia and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia to hold the conference under the title "My Future – Whose Cares? Inclusive Society for Older Persons". Some of the conference's conclusions concern securing the sustainability of, first and foremost, the pension and disability insurance system, as well as the social welfare and health care system, which face numerous challenges due to the rising number of users and longer life expectancy of the population. It is therefore necessary to aim for providing coverage and scope of the services needed by older persons, who increasingly live on their own, providing long-term care, a wider range of innovative services, sufficient support institutions, the use of modern technologies in the provision of support and services to older persons, as well as to formal and informal caregivers.

Regardless of their many underlying causes, the challenges of depopulation also affect children and their rights, persons with disabilities, chronically ill individuals, and those with rare diseases, Roma men and women, individuals living in remote or rural areas and others. These individuals often find themselves unable to access certain social and healthcare services because such services are not organised in less populated areas, there is a lack of appropriate personnel or employment opportunities for skilled professionals, and transportation to larger centres is not organised, among other reasons. Preschool facilities and schools also face challenges, considering the declining number of pupils in some settlements, which leads to the closure of classes or schools due to depopulation. Significant funds are allocated for planned population policies, while the necessary family support services receive far lower allocations. In almost all major cities, there is an evident shortage of places for children in state-run day care centres, which is compensated for by private day care centres, although conditions and prices are not the same. To achieve equality in the exercise of rights and services, it is necessary to undertake various forms of intervention across multiple domains, from population policy measures to the provision of infrastructure, transportation to and from remote and less populated areas, employment and consequent retention of young persons, provision of all necessary services, including in particular social welfare and health care, according to the needs of the population. To achieve greater effects on the birth rate, population policy and birth support measures should, in

addition to financial support, focus on achieving gender equality in the full sense of the word, through a compulsory parental leave period for fathers, flexible forms of work, provision of appropriate capacity of preschool institutions, extended stay at schools etc. Availability of preschool institutions and other options to support child care is a precondition for a sound work-life balance and opportunities for career development and professional advancement.

Property status greatly influences the position of all social groups. Poverty is one of the main reasons behind inequality and social exclusion. The abovementioned *European Commission's Serbia 2024 Report* states *inter alia* that, in the area of social inclusion and social protection, in 2023, according to the latest survey on income and living conditions (SILC), the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate was 28.1% (EU-27 21.6%), and the means-tested social assistance programmes, with strict eligibility criteria, do not sufficiently reach the poor; a large share of children living in poverty are not covered by any benefit, and the social protection system remains understaffed.

The fact is that poor citizens rarely contact the Commissioner in connection with property status, and the number of complaints on these grounds remains rather low. It should be noted that people who are poor and financially vulnerable are not a homogeneous group; instead, among them are people of different sex, age, national affiliation, marital or family status, religious and political beliefs, etc. The practice of this institution has shown that complaints on the grounds of property status are usually filed by individuals, mostly in the areas of social welfare or in procedures before public authorities, which suggest there is ample scope for human rights organisations to become involved in various ways as crucial partners in human rights protection. The reason why poor citizens file complaints less often mainly stems from the fact that in the struggle for existence they are not familiar with the protection mechanisms, they are ashamed of their situation or they blame themselves because they did not ensure a better life. To ensure a timely and proper response to citizens' needs, all authorities need to focus more on their issues, which is why it is necessary to continually take account of the capacities of social welfare, health care, child protection and free legal aid services, as we have consistently reiterated in our reports on the state of play regarding the achievement of equality.

The ability to leave poverty behind is greatly influenced by the state of the labour market, the level of education and employability, and the level of exercise of labour and labour-related rights. This year, the area of labour and employment is among those with the highest numbers of complaints filed with the Commissioner (145). It has been observed that in this area complainants or witnesses often point out that they cannot find employment because they are not politically active and do not belong to any political party, or are members of a political other than the ruling party, and that because of their different attitudes or opinions they are assigned to a lower position, or their employment is even terminated. They state

that they do not trust institutions, they are afraid of the consequences of reporting, that the law is not the same for everyone because individuals are “protected”, have the power to decide and “can freely break laws”, which is why they do not seek protection or withdraw from further proceedings, particularly because they cannot remain anonymous.

According to the *Labour Force Survey*⁵⁰, in Q3 2024 the employment rate was 51.9%, which was an increase of 1.4 percentage points (p.p.), while the unemployment rate was 8.1% - down 0.9 p.p. The inactivity rate was 43.6%, which was 0.9 p.p. lower than in the same quarter of the previous year. This labour market situation has already caused a labour shortage, although this is not fully reflected in wage increases.

According to the data published by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia⁵¹, the average (gross) wage calculated in November 2024 was RSD 138,911, while the average wage after taxes and contributions (net) was RSD 100,738. The average net wage in the period January-November 2024 increased year-on-year by 14.1% in nominal terms and 9% in real terms. The median net wage for November 2024 was RSD 77,830, which means that 50% of all employees earned up to that amount.

To improve the situation through inclusive policies in the labour market, the Commissioner prepared the amended edition of the *Equality Code*, with the aim of facilitating for the employers the process of developing internal documents for the application of the principle of equality in business, as an effective mechanism for identifying and preventing potential cases of discrimination at workplace. In parallel, educational workshops on the subject “Achieving Equality in the Workplace” have been held for employers, and company representatives and employees in human resource services, and intensive efforts are underway to expand the network of employers who apply anti-discrimination labour policies in their business and strengthen their capacities through the *Partnership for Equality*.

It should be noted that the legal framework in this field has not been completed and fully harmonised either with the actual situation and the identified needs or with the European legislation. Implementing regulations pursuant to the Law on Entrepreneurship have not yet been passed, the Law on Work Placement has not been enacted, and the International Labour Organisation’s Convention No. 190 concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work has not been ratified, as the Commissioner had recommended in previous reports. To improve the situation of citizens in the field of labour and employment, it will also be necessary to adapt labour legislation, especially in terms of precise governing of rights of workers who work without an employment relationship, increase the

50 *Labour Force Survey*, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, November 2024, available at: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/oblasti/trziste-rada/anketa-o-radnoj-snazi/>

51 Available at: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-latn/oblasti/trziste-rada/zarade>

number of inspections and strengthen the inspection bodies. When designing active employment policy measures and mechanisms, especially in the local labour markets, the effects of such measures on employment and keeping jobs for persons who face difficulties finding employment (including young persons in residential, foster and guardianship care; persons over 50 years of age, and in particular women aged 55+; Roma men and women; persons with disabilities, long-term unemployed etc.). It is also necessary to utilise comparative advantages of certain communities, promoting development and acknowledging the needs of the local labour market. To achieve sound long-term effects of increased employment and improved situation of employees, it is also necessary to involve employers in these processes.

One of the issues that persisted in 2024, as well as in previous years, was the still prevalent discriminatory speech in the public space, promoting an atmosphere of intolerance, fearmongering and creating a hostile environment, perpetuated also by numerous inappropriate humiliating and offensive statements and comments, usually targeted at political opponents, women, LGBT persons and Roma. In a democratic society, the media are an important means of receiving and sharing information and ideas. The role of the media can be supportive to the development, exercise and protection of human rights or, by inappropriate and unprofessional reporting, can lead to deepening of prejudice and spreading of intolerance and indeed hatred against certain social groups, as we pointed out on a number of occasions throughout the year.

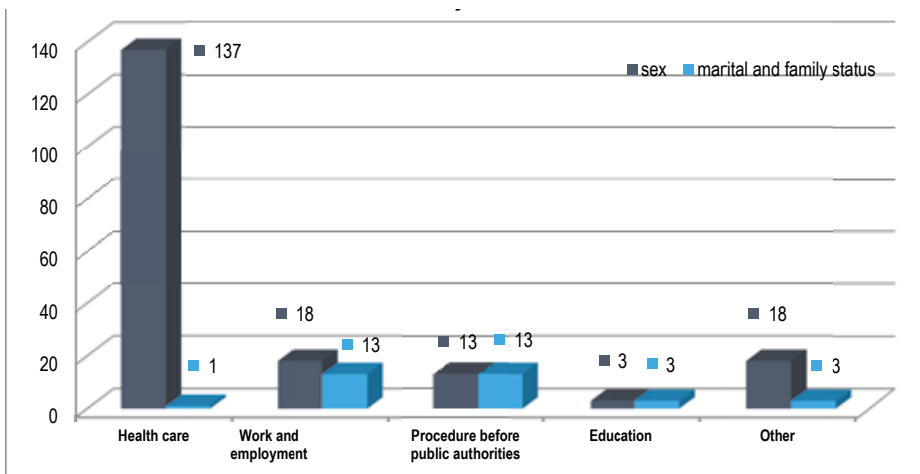
An analysis of media content also suggests that the public scene is biased and sensationalist, which precludes the right of all citizens to be objectively informed, while also thwarting the obligation of professional media to refrain from serving as a tool of manipulation. This is why it is necessary to make efforts to include different social stakeholders in the prevention of hate speech, sexism, homophobia, transphobia etc. and provide as many education and training events as possible on recognising and preventing discrimination as prohibited behaviour. In the public and media space, which is an important factor, it is necessary to implement programs and encourage topics that promote a culture of tolerance, non-discrimination, respect, understanding and appreciation of diversity, gender equality and intergenerational solidarity. Discriminatory attitudes, harassment and degrading treatment by public figures are particularly dangerous, because they influence public opinion to a greater extent, encouraging stereotype and prejudice, which have far-reaching consequences.

For these reasons, we conducted the analysis “Prevalence of Hate Speech in Serbian Media” and continued providing trainings for media professionals.

Based on the examined key issues, we issued the general recommendations presented in the summary of this Report, together with recommendations relating to specific personal characteristics.

DISCRIMINATION ON THE GROUNDS OF SEX AND MARITAL AND FAMILY STATUS

The trends observed in previous years regarding frequency of complaints and citizens' communications claiming discrimination on the grounds of sex as a personal characteristic continued through 2024. The Commissioner formed 192 cases pursuant to complaints filed on these grounds. The number of citizens' contacts by phone, electronically and direct contacts in the Commissioner's registry office is much higher than the number of formed cases, as indicated above in the Report. Most of the complaints were filed by natural persons (179, of which 161 by women and 18 by men). In the course of 2024, the Commissioner also received 37 complaints on the grounds of marital and family status as a personal characteristic. Bearing in mind that the complaints on the grounds of marital and family status were usually filed by women, and a large number of the cases involved multiple discrimination (discrimination on the grounds of two or more personal characteristics where the impact of individual personal characteristics is distinguishable, while in case of intersectional discrimination the impact of individual personal characteristics is undistinguishable), these two grounds for discrimination are covered jointly in this Report.



The areas to which complaints on these grounds mostly pertained included health care, work employment, procedures before public authorities, education and vocational training, public information and the media, as well as private relations. In addition to these, areas that stand apart in terms of the number of complaints are culture, arts and sports, while a number of complaints concerned discrimination in providing public services or using facilities and areas.

In the field of health care, the majority of contacts and complaints were caused by treatment in clinics before, during and after childbirth. As regards discrimination on the grounds of sex and marital and family status in the field of work and employment, women still contact the Commissioner more frequently stating they

were placed in a disadvantaged position after they return to work from maternity leave and absence from work for child care, in advancement, professional advancement and also employment. The necessity was also emphasized to ensure conditions for improved work-life balance, the need to exercise equal rights in connection with childbirth, regardless of the fact whether women who are independent professionals or are employed with employers, to increase the capacities of pre-school institutions, higher financial empowerment of women and higher inclusion of men in care for children and other family members. A number of complaints also referred to misogynistic, sexist statements and comments, as well as physical and digital violence, which will be addressed in more detail further in the Report. The majority of these cases were forwarded to the Cybercrime Department as the competent authority for further acting.

Some of the observed instances of progress:

- Amendments to the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children entered into force. All mothers whose children were born from 1 January 2024 are entitled to the increased amount of parental allowance, and the identical methods have been introduced for calculating salary compensation during pregnancy leave and child care leave;
- The Strategy for Development of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises for the period from 2023 to 2027 includes the improvement of availability and the scope of financial support for female entrepreneurs, as well as the improvement of statistical monitoring of female entrepreneurship;
- To encourage female entrepreneurship, the Ministry of Economy has passed the Programme to Support the Development of Entrepreneurship through Financial Support for Women's Entrepreneurship and Mothers Who Are Single Parents in 2024 and issued a public call pursuant to it;
- Grants have been allocated for purchase of village houses with house plots for individuals, single parents, married couples and couples in civil partnership in 2024;
- Grants have been allocated for the support of the development and affirmation of women's entrepreneurship;
- The new General Protocol of Action and Multisectoral Cooperation in Situations of Gender-based Violence, Violence against Women and Domestic Violence has been adopted and four new support services for victims and witnesses have been formed (in Zrenjanin, Sombor, Požarevac and Vranje);
- Software has been developed for processing gender equality data, including a web application that automatically collects and processes gender-disaggregated data provided by public authorities, employers, political parties, trade unions and gender equality bodies;

- The Working Group was formed for the preparation of the Proposal of the Action Plan for 2024 and 2025 for Implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy for the period from 2021 to 2030;
- The Commission for Subsidies for the Purchase of the First Real Estate for Married Couples Based on Child Birth started working, subsidies in the amount up to EUR 20,000 for the purchase of an apartment or construction of a house;
- The number of female members of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts has increased in the latest election, in compliance with the Commissioner's recommendations.

Among the key issues are the following:

- The Constitutional Court initiated the procedure to determine unconstitutionality of the Law on Gender Equality and suspended enforcement of individual acts or actions undertaken on the basis of the provisions of the said Law;
- The number of femicides remains high, with 19 femicides committed during the year;
- A National Control Mechanism to monitor cases of femicide in the Republic of Serbia has not been established in accordance with the Strategy to Combat Gender-Based Violence against Women and Domestic Violence;
- The Action Plan for Implementation of the National Strategy to Combat Gender-Based Violence against Women and Domestic Violence has not been adopted;
- Insufficient capacity of safe houses and their unequal distribution;
- Gender-based stereotypes and division of gender roles in public and private domains. Women are often unjustly blamed for the low fertility rate;
- Property inheritance is strongly influenced by patriarchal norms;
- Gender gap in wages for work of equal value (8,8%-Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia);
- There are few women in positions of power. The imbalance between women and men is particularly high in the security sector;
- There is an insufficient number of preschool facilities and other forms of support to balance work and parenting;
- Education is lacking and few contraceptives are covered by the National Health Insurance Fund;

- Professional advancement is difficult for women who return from child-birth leave or leave to care for a child;
- Inappropriate treatment of women at certain obstetric clinic both during childbirth and during the induced childbirth procedure;
- significant underrepresentation of women compared with men in the public sphere, particularly in the media with national coverage;
- Discriminatory speech, sexist and misogynous statements are present in public discourse, on social network and on different platforms;
- Unequal status of female athletes and insufficient investment in female sports.

The position of women in our society can be seen from the data contained in the publication *Women and Men in the Republic of Serbia*⁵², according to which gender wage gap is 8.8%. These figures place Serbia among countries with the lowest gender wage gap in Europe; however, if we observe wages according to the education level or occupations, differences between women and men are much higher than the average gender wage gap, mainly in favour of men. Although women have higher education levels than men, they are employed in a lesser percentage and are less paid than men. A consequence of such situation is that women averagely have pensions 17% lower than the average pension received by men. Regardless of the education level, women spend twice more time doing housework, while married women with children aged less than seven spend almost entire work shift doing unpaid housework. The same source states that Serbia has 183,047 more women than men. Only 13% of women are presidents of municipalities and mayors, while there are only 37% female councillors in municipal and city councils. According to the Gender Equality Index, the Republic of Serbia lags behind the EU-27 average in all gender equality domains (labour, money, knowledge, time, power and health, as well as two satellite domains: violence against children and intersectional inequality). The smallest gap is in the domain of work and health, namely 2.3 and 4.6, respectively, while the largest gap is in the domain of money with 22.4. These are only some of the data indicating the position of women in our society.

The position of women remains less favourable in many domains also on the global level. Data in the United Nations report *Progress on the Sustainable*

52 Women and Men in the Republic of Serbia, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024, available at: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-cyrl/publikacije/publication/?p=15601>

*Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2024*⁵³ show that certain progress has been achieved in declining poverty or narrowing of gender gaps in education. Yet, according to the findings of this report, ending extreme poverty among women could take 137 more years at the current rate of change, while gender parity in parliaments may not be reached before 2063. Six years before the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals, not a single indicator under the Goal 5 – gender equality has been fully achieved, namely, no country has all relevant laws to prohibit discrimination, prevent gender-based violence, uphold equal rights in marriage and divorce, guarantee equal pay and provide full access to sexual and reproductive health. In the *Global Gender Gap Insight Report 2024*⁵⁴, Serbia ranks 26th of the total of 146 countries, which is an improvement compared with 2023 when it ranked 38th in the world. Also, according to the OECD report⁵⁵, several of 38 member states significantly progressed towards equality between personal monthly income of men and women, but in no country in the world women are paid more than men. These data show that no country in the world has achieved full equality between women and men, as well as that the position of women is dramatically difficult in certain parts of the world.

The Commissioner's survey entitled *Perception of Gender Equality by Women at Higher Risk of Discrimination*⁵⁶ also provides an insight into the position of women. According to the findings of this survey, 41.7% of female respondents think that gender equality in Serbia has been achieved, while 45.9% believes the opposite, which shows different experiences and perceptions by women. This division points to deeply rooted norms and stereotypes that shape the perception of gender roles. Thus, for example, more than one half of female respondents think that women make decisions mainly based on emotions, which supports stereotypes of women as less rational and less suitable for leadership positions. Findings of this survey and an analysis of the legal framework governing discrimination against women in vulnerable social groups were presented at the conference entitled "Between Law and Reality: Women's Perspectives on Gender Equality in Serbia", with the aim of contributing to the comprehensive review of the situation in the field of gender equality, and shaping of public policies that meet the actual needs of women.

53 *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2024*, UN, available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/09/progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2024>

54 *Global Gender Gap Insight Report 2024*, World Economic Forum, available at: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2024.pdf

55 *Development Finance for Gender Equality 2024*, OECD, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/e340afbf-en>.

56 *Perception of Gender Equality by Women at Higher Risk of Discrimination*, 2024, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/istrazivanje-o-percepciji-zena-u-vecem-riziku-od-diskriminacije-o-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti/>



Conference “Between Law and Reality: Women’s Perspectives on Gender Equality in Serbia”, 2024

Gender inequality is also present in the private sphere (in housework, the exercise of the parental right, care for children and old family members, preparing meals, upbringing, hygiene, health). Women are mainly perceived as the “only” parent as regards informal caregiving and childcare responsibilities, leaving fathers in the background. As regards household and support work, almost one half of persons are informally employed, and this is mainly the provision of care (50%), followed by easy house repairs (29%) and cleaning and maintenance work (21%). Observed by gender, in distribution of tasks, women mainly (92%) care for children and the elderly, while men more frequently engage in household maintenance tasks (95,8%).⁵⁷ The Female Leadership Academy states that, according to their survey and the actual prices on the market, the value of unpaid work women do at the monthly level is minimum RSD 72,000. One half of female respondents spend averagely 52% of time daily doing unpaid work, while only few women have paid assistance for cleaning of houses or apartments, maintenance of gardens and house plots, ironing and laundering.⁵⁸

Gender stereotypes affect the position and gender roles of both sexes. Usual stereotypes are that care for children and the elderly is a “female task”, while earning income is a “male task”, i.e. men are often expected to fulfil patriarchal roles, to be the “head of the family” who must ensure financial existence and stability, and these roles might often put a pressure on them that make their lives more difficult. Gender prejudice and stereotypes make more difficult for parents to change usual behaviour patterns and adjust to modern social and economic conditions and the hectic way of life.

57 *The Position and Challenges of Women Workers Doing Cleaning and Care Work in Serbia – Quick Assessment*, SeConS Development Initiative Group, 2024, available at: <https://secons.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Polozaj-i-izazovi-radnica-na-poslovima-ciscenja-i-nege-u-Srbiji.pdf>

58 Available at: <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/604847/koliko-vrede-neplaceni-svakodnevnikucni-poslovi>

A father filed a complaint against a school because of discrimination on the grounds of marital and family status. The complainant required to be included in the class Viber group formed by a teacher, where information important for his child's education is exchanged, but was rejected with an explanation that he should contact the child's mother, as a parent who exercises the parental right, for any information on the child's schooling and activities at the school. The child's father indicated that it was true that the girls was awarded to her mother after divorce, but that does not mean he does not have the right to take care of her and to be informed about her education and progress. The Commissioner issued an opinion that the school violated the provisions of the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination and recommended to the school to ensure access to the class Viber group to the father as soon as possible. The recommendation was complied with.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/rs/1238-23-prituzba-zbog-diskriminacije-po-osnovu-bracnog-i-porodicnog-statusa/>

In this regard, it should be noted that amendments to the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children, that followed previously submitted Commissioner's initiatives and a proposal for review of constitutionality, a possibility was provided to fathers to exercise the right to absence from work for child care and special child care and salary compensation, i.e. compensation of the father's salary, if the mother is an independent professional or is a holder of a farm. Also, after the Decision was passed by the Constitutional Court⁵⁹, the disputable article of this Law as amended and the manner of calculation of wage compensation was unified for the duration of maternity leave and absence from work for child care for women who were prevented from working because of complications in pregnancy maintenance and women who had no complications during pregnancy. The Article was amended in such a manner that instead of taking into account 18 months preceding the month when maternity leave began for the calculation of wage compensation, 18 months preceding absence from work due to complications in maintenance of pregnancy are taken into account.

Less financial resources, higher responsibilities for unpaid household work and care affect the limitation of women's potential. The *Global Life-Work Balance Index 2024*⁶⁰ reveals which of the world's top 60 GDP countries have the best work-life balance in 2024. Serbia is not among these 60 countries. Establishing the balance between business and private life of employed persons became more challenging due to demographic and economic changes at the global level.

59 IUz-60/2021 of 14 February 2024

60 Available at: <https://remote.com/resources/research/global-life-work-balance-index>

The introduction of the following measures should be considered to contribute to work-life balance: flexible working hours, short working hours, short working week, working from home, children daycare centres in office buildings and other programmes to support employees.

The Law on Gender Equality ensured the exercise of the right to health care based on the performance of unpaid household work. To ensure efficient implementation of the said Law and issues of unpaid housework, in the preceding years the Commissioner contacted the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, pointing at the same time to the remarks by the Ministry of Health relating to the need of previous harmonisation of this regulation with the Law on Health Insurance. Regardless of this, the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue passed in 2024 the Bylaw on the Methodology for Calculating Unpaid Household Work, which is virtually not applicable, because regulations have not been harmonised previously, which is the issue that we timely emphasized.

Although the Law on gender Equality contained certain norms that could lead to the advancement of gender equality, primarily the use of gender-sensitive language put these norms in the background and triggered various public reactions and opinions, which resulted in often unfounded discussions and media publications, and often led this important topic to sensationalism, or even trivialisation. During the course of the year, the Constitutional Court initiated the procedure determine unconstitutionality of the Law on Gender Equality and virtually suspended the implementation of this Law.

Support to balancing household and family duties, care for children and elderly family members, and thus indirectly to gender equality, should be provided by various systems – social welfare, healthcare, child protection, education, free legal aid service and other services. A survey carried out by the UN Women Agency⁶¹ also states that social welfare and child protection systems should recognise such situation and create an integrated, gender-responsive approach that would contribute to the advancement of gender equality. Having in mind that there is still lack of various services at the local level, the Commissioner has been pointing continually in her annual reports to this challenge, the importance of the introduction and continual provision of services in accordance with the needs of local communities and their availability at the entire territory of the state. It is necessary to strengthen the capacities, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, primarily of social welfare and also of other systems the operations of which directly affect lives of all individuals, and to establish inter-municipal cooperation in this field,

61 *Harnessing Social Protection for Gender Equality, Resilience and Transformation - World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*, UNWomen, 2024, available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/World-survey-on-the-role-of-women-in-development-2024-en.pdf>

with continual education of professionals in these systems, as can be seen in a case from the Commissioner's practice.

Recommended measures were issued to the city of Kikinda to ensure the exercise of the entitlement to allowance to a nursing mother who changed her permanent place of residence just before childbirth.

The Commissioner was contacted by a nursing mother born in the city of Kikinda who was a resident of this city until the ninth month of her pregnancy, when she moved to another city due to family situation. After childbirth, she submitted an application for the exercise of the entitlement of childbirth allowance in the city where she moved, but her application was rejected because she has not had her permanent place of residence in the territory of that city for at least one year before childbirth, in accordance with the decision of the city. After that, she submitted an application to the city of Kikinda where she lived before she changed her permanent place of residence. The city of Kikinda also rejected this application because in accordance with their decision the mother of the child does not meet the requirements for the exercise of the right because she did not have her permanent place of residence in the territory of that city at the moment of childbirth. Thus, the nursing mother could not exercise the right neither in the city of Kikinda, nor in the city where she moved just before childbirth. Taking into account the mother's situation, the Commissioner issued recommended measures to the city of Kikinda to review again the application individually, or if it considers it purposeful together with the city of where the mother is currently resident, and to approve the right to childbirth support.

The recommendation explained that the mother lived in the city of Kikinda since she was born, and thus contributed to this city. The city of Kikinda is an industrially developed area and as a local self-government unit it makes progress owing to the work and contributions of its citizens, and it ultimately values and rewards that contribution through various forms of allowances and support to the population. If the mother decided to move after her child was born, she and her child would exercise the right to allowance awarded to nursing mothers by the city of Kikinda. The mother who lived her entire life in the territory of the city of Kikinda and moved to another city just before childbirth should not suffer the consequences of her moving.

The recommendation was complied with, i.e. the right to financial compensation for the first child was recognised to the nursing mother.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/592-24-preporuka-mera-gradu-kikinda-za-finansijsku-podrsku-za-porodilje/>

A special problem are cases when one parent does not pay child support after a divorce, in accordance with a final and enforceable court decision. Although the law provides for a possibility of forced collection, such procedures in practice generally take a long time, and the child support debtors often avoid their obligation in various manners. According to the applicable legal arrangements, in such cases, the conditions are met for the parent who does not pay child support to be completely deprived of the parental right, while failure to pay support constitutes a criminal offense. Some countries provide a special fund in these cases, from which support is paid to the children instead to be paid by parents who does not respect their legal and judicial obligation. In this manner, the risk of the inability to collect support is shifted from a child to a fund established by the state. Regular support for children and meeting their basic needs is a particular benefit of this fund. Also, this prevents impoverishment of families and ultimately entering poverty. Establishment of such fund would contribute to the improvement of the position not only of children, but also of parents who support children.

The position of women can also be seen from the data relating to entrepreneurship and managerial positions in companies. According to the figures of the Serbian Business Registers Agency⁶², more than one third (34%) of registered sole traders in Serbia are women. The number of female founders and women holding managerial positions in companies has seen a mild upward trend, with women accounting for a quarter of the total number. There are 2,597 women registered in managerial positions at companies, accounting for 25.3% of the total number of managers, while 27% of registered legal representatives are women. This increase, which is still insufficient to significantly close the gap between the women and the men, was influenced by support measures for the development of female entrepreneurship, both through allocation of grants and through of favourable loans or in another manner.

Although the most recent amendments to the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children improved the position of female entrepreneurs and women hired on the basis of various contracts during maternity leave and absence from work for childcare, they are still not in a fully equal position with women employed with employers, which is evident from the Commissioner's practice and the initiative for amendments and harmonisation of several regulations.

62 BRA, March 2024, available at: <https://apr.gov.rs/%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8.6.html?newsId=3763>

With the aim to make the position of female entrepreneurs and women working under employment contract outside employment fully equal with the position of women employed with employers, because they do not have equal rights during pregnancy, maternity leave and absence from work for childcare, we contacted competent ministries. Namely, an analysis of regulations and the practice of the institution showed that female entrepreneurs and women working under various types of employment contracts outside employment receive allowances based on childbirth, care for children and special child care that do not include paid taxes and contributions, while employed women have these taxes and contributions paid by the state in addition to salary compensation, which has been emphasized by the Commissioner before. In addition, the applicable legislation does not guarantee the same rights to women working under employment contract outside employment as to women employed with employers, they do not have protection from overtime work, night work, the right to redistribution of work, the right to paid vacation, sick leave and other rights, although they should have these rights according to the Constitution and ratified conventions. The initiatives emphasized that it is the same life event (pregnancy and childbirth) and thus there should be no difference in women's rights in fully comparable circumstances. Also, this demotivates and weakens female entrepreneurship, self-employment and makes difficult the position on the labour market during a very demanding and sensitive period of life.

These amendments require harmonisation of several laws, including the Labour Law, the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children, the Law on Compulsory Social Insurance Contributions, the Law on Personal Income Tax, the Law on Health Insurance, the Law on Companies and the Law on Pension and Disability Insurance, which is why the initiatives were submitted to ministries competent for proposing these regulations.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/20-25-inicijativa-ministarstvu-za-rad-za-izjednacavanje-preduzetnica-i-zena-koje-rade-po-ugovoru-sa-zaposlenim-zenama-kod-poslodavca-tokom-trudnoce-i-porodjaja/>

The Commissioner also provided her contribution to the empowerment of female entrepreneurship through participation in the project entitled "She Knows" by the American Chamber of Commerce, aimed at active promotion of corporate culture, nurturing gender equality with engagement of and support from men, ensuring conditions where all individual can develop and progress regardless of their sex. The focus of companies' actions as regards gender representation is shifting from the workforce to overall business, and in parallel with global and national activities in the field of developing and improving public policies related to gender equality, the corporate world is increasingly investing in DEI - Diversity Equity and Inclusion programmes, which are also one of the aspects of this project.



Conference to mark the beginning of the project “She Knows”, 2024

In addition to the improvement of the position of women in the above areas, the advancement of gender equality is also influenced by the review of the position of women in other areas of social life.

We often forget that many women have contributed greatly to the development of art, science, culture... However, this women’s contribution is often not recognized and presented, and has been disputed and marginalized throughout history. Although there have been many meritorious female scientists and artists who have shaped our society with their work and knowledge, they have remained insufficiently recognized and inadequately valued for decades. Unfortunately, even today, many people have similar beliefs about the role and place of women in society, and they support their views with quasi-tradition, quasi-scientific theory, myths and mantras that have been nurtured through centuries-old patterns of discrimination against women and have become deeply woven into the social fabric as the strongest means of controlling women. Despite the evident progress due to regulations, education, culture, and even upbringing, we must be aware that society and values are not formed under the coercion of the law, but rather through interactions with others and through the acceptance of modern cultural models.

To emphasize women’s achievements in the past, the Commissioner, the House of Jevrem Grujić and the Office for Cultural Diplomacy continued the cycle dedicated to discovering and presentation of important women in our history and culture by the exhibition “Great Women of Serbian Culture”⁶³. During the exhibition, accompanying workshops are also organised with secondary school pupils who are motivated to think critically, acquire new knowledge, and create an anti-discriminatory and anti-misogyny cultural model.

63 The project is implemented under the auspices of the British Council and the British Embassy in Belgrade.

Gender gaps remain significant both also in science, which is why female scientists often received no reward and credit for their work.

Before regular elections for members of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU), and having in mind that only one woman was elected on the previous elections as a foreign member, the Commissioner issued recommended measures pointing to the need to improve representation of women among members of our largest cultural and scientific institution, which were accepted in this elections cycle.

Namely, on elections held in 2024, 12 women met all criteria for correspondence membership, one woman was elected as a new foreign member and four women became regular members of the SANU, thus the Academy now has 137 members, of which 22 women. By amendments to the Statute of the SANU made before the elections, members of the Academy and its President showed their commitment to the achievement of fairer balance so that the composition of this body could reflect a more realistic contribution of each individual to science and art. This acting by the SANU is a stimulus for change of the dominant narrative on the role and importance of women in or society.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/163-24-preporuka-mera/>

The Commissioner met with Mr. Zoran Knežević, President of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU), with whom she talked about the necessity of a higher representation of women among members of the Academy and recommended measures for the advancement of equality, among other things. The President of the SANU expressed full understanding for this issue, stating that talks made within the Academy emphasized the need to achieve a fairer balance through



election of more women. He said that amendments to the Statute of the SANU introduced a new article stating that in election of new correspondent members of the SANU departments must take account of gender equality. The Commissioner emphasized that the achievement of equality is neither an easy nor a simple task and that it requires involvement of all stakeholders, and that the speed of response and measures

undertaken so far for the achievement of gender equality are encouraging and show that the SANU, as a very important institution, is a honest partner in building of a society that respect equality and tolerance.

According to the data held by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, women accounted for more than one half in a large number of fields of education among graduate students in 2022, while men are dominant in the fields of information and communication technology (66%) and engineering, production and construction (55%). In 2022, more women (59%) than men (41%) earned doctoral degree.⁶⁴

On the occasion of the Girls in ICT Day, the Commissioner emphasized in her announcement that this day was an opportunity to congratulate all girls who bravely entered the dynamic field of the ICT sector and showed how things can change for better and that education and occupations can be selected based on personal interests and talents. The Commissioner traditionally supports the celebration of the Girls in ICT Day, and this year prizes were awarded on the competition “Catch the Idea” that included girls from 7th and 8th grades in primary schools in Serbia.

Available at: https://www.instagram.com/brankica_jankovic_poverenica/p/C6L5CskNqQT/?img_index=1

Violence against women and girls remains a major social problem. Although causes of violence against women are very complex, one of the key causes are deeply rooted, traditional, patriarchal stereotypes on gender roles in the family and wider community. Femicide, as the most drastic outcome of gender-based violence, is often the final consequence of years of abuse and systematic neglecting of the need for justice and support. 19 women were killed in Serbia in 2024. Although the number of committed femicides is slightly lower (24 killed women in 2023), the problem of gender-based violence has not decreased. The work on the prevention of all forms of violence, imposition of effective, proportionate and dis-suasive sanctions should constantly be a high priority of all competent authorities. In addition, it is necessary to establish a mechanism to monitor cases of femicide, which should be formed within the existing state authorities that would collect, monitor, analyse and make available relevant data.

64 *Women and Men in the Republic of Serbia*, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024, available at: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-cyrl/publikacije/publication/?p=15601>

The initiative to establish a national control mechanism to monitor cases of femicide, and for the improvement of regulations in terms of collection, keeping and publishing of statistics on cases of femicide and gender-based violence was resubmitted to the Ministry of Justice.

Establishing of this mechanism would help all actors in coordination of the existing activities and more effective work on the prevention of and fight against this most extreme form of violence.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/rs/540-2024-inicijativa-za-uspostavljanje-nacionalnog-kontrolnog-mehanizma-za-pracenje-slucajeva-femicida/>

The abovementioned *European Commission Annual Report* states that the Action Plan and related funding for the 2021 strategy against violence against women and domestic violence, and a new action plan on the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, are increasingly delayed. An integrated system needs to be set up for collecting and monitoring cases of violence disaggregated by type of violence and by relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, and also reliable official statistics on femicides, attention needs to be paid to ensuring equal access to safe houses for all women, including refugee and migrant women, transgender women and women from other marginalised groups.

In her announcement on the occasion of 18 May, the Day of Remembrance of Women Victims of Violence, the Commissioner said that data on 415 women and girls murdered since the beginning of 2011 and at least as many families destroyed in domestic and intimate partner violence are more than alarming and warn us that all gaps and omissions in the protection system must be reviewed. Violence against women is a huge social problem that will not disappear on its own. More than 50% of victims were murdered at their homes by their current or former partners, and many of them reported violence several times to competent authorities. The establishment of the national control mechanism to monitor cases of femicide would ensure collecting all fact at one place, which would ensure better coordination, a faster response and more efficient support from the protection system.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/saopstenje-povodom-dana-secanja-na-zene-zrtve-nasilja-2/>

Women still do not feel safe enough to report violence. A survey conducted previously by the Commissioner⁶⁵ showed that the main reasons why women do not report domestic violence include fear of the perpetrator, shame because of violence suffered, fear of condemnation by immediate environment, unfavour-

65 *Why Women Do Not Report Domestic Violence*, 2023, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/istrazivanje-zasto-zene-ne-prijavljuju-nasilje-u-porodici/>

able financial situation and lack of trust in institutions. Although progress has been made in the preceding years to observe violence as a social problem instead as a private problem, it still often remains unreported, which is why much more work should be done on the elimination obstacles that prevent them from reporting violence. As regards prevention, one of the main steps is deconstruction of stereotypes on gender roles that maintain inequalities between men and women, as well as financial and psychological empowerment of women, with a message from the society that violence will be adequately sanctioned.

In her announcement in connection with International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and the beginning of the global campaign “16 Days of Activism to combat Violence against Women”, the Commissioner emphasized that no woman and girl should suffer violence in silence, but they must be sure they will be heard when they ask for help, that they will not face condemnation and belittlement, and primarily they must know they will not be left alone. This is why everyone in the protection and prevention system must understand the position of victims and show professional and human commitment to provide absolute support and assistance. What would encourage them is support from family and friends, institutions, as well as financial support, particularly after they undertake the key step and leave their violent partners.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/medjunarodni-dan-borbe-protiv-nasilja-nad-zenama/>

As regards the identification of main problems related to gender-based violence, in the *Survey of Women’s Perception of Gender Equality*⁶⁶ we implemented in late 2024, female respondents indicated as the main problem in response to violence insufficiently stringent sanctions for perpetrators (58.6%) and failure to enforce law in practice (55.8%). Also, female respondents believe that civil servants are insufficiently trained to recognise and adequately respond to cases of violence. Inadequate response by the state to violence against women results from the combination of institutional weaknesses, failure to enforce the law and the lack of financial resources. Insufficiently stringent sanctions for perpetrators, failure to enforce the law and women’s financial dependence are among the main factors contributing to women’s staying in violent situations. Victims of violence and their family members should be protected from secondary and repeated victimisation, from intimidation and retaliation, and it is also necessary to provide appropriate social and psychological support, particularly for children who witness violence.

In addition, it is necessary to constantly improve legal framework, which is why we resubmitted several initiatives for amendments to criminal law regulations.

66 *Survey of Women’s Perception of Gender Equality*, Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, 2024, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/istrazivanje-o-percepciji-zena-u-vecem-riziku-od-diskriminacije-o-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti/>

The initiative was submitted to the Ministry of Justice to amend Article 181 of this Law to consider the introduction of a duty for competent authorities to notify the victim *ex officio* of the release of the convicted person or his escape from prison in cases of gender based and domestic, regardless of the risk assessment by an institute in a specific case. It was also proposed that, if the initiative that victims must be notified is not adopted, a duty must be introduced for competent authorities to inform the victim at each stage of the procedure on how to obtain or request the notification referred to in Article 181 paragraph 1 of the Law. Also, the Commissioner proposed in the initiative to lay down the duty to notify the victim for more criminal offences than specified by the law at the moment.

After associations “Atina” and “Astra” contacted the Commissioner, a supplement to the initiative was submitted, which requested that the notification on the release of the convicted person from prison should be expanded to victims of human trafficking, because it would have far-reaching positive effects on safety, recovery and reintegration of victims in the society. It was emphasized that Article 30 of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings supports measures to protect victims, witnesses and persons cooperating with judicial authorities, and emphasizes the duty of the Parties to adopt legislative or other measures to ensure the protection of victims’ private life and safety and protection from intimidation in the course of judicial proceedings.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/rs/390-24-inicijativa-za-izmenu-zakona-o-izvršenju-krivичnih-sankcija/> and <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/480-24-inicijativa-za-izmene-i-dopune-clana-181-zakona-o-izvršenju-krivичnih-sankcija/>

Initiatives to amend Criminal Code

In the reporting year, we submitted to the Ministry of Justice several initiatives relating to amendments to several articles of the Criminal Code. Having in mind that previous Commissioner’s initiatives were not adopted, i.e. the Criminal Code was not amended, initiatives from the preceding years were repeated and supplemented. The Commissioner pointed again to the need to amend several articles of the Criminal Code laying down the following criminal offences: inadmissible pregnancy termination (Article 120), rape (Article 178), sexual intercourse with a physically or mentally helpless person (Article 179) spreading HIV virus infection referred to in Article 250 of the Criminal Code, as well as amendments in Chapter 14 of the Criminal Code regarding the introduction of a new criminal offence that would incriminate abuse and publishing of sexually explicit content by means of separate sanctioning of abuse of real or fake recordings with sexually explicit content. It is particularly necessary to penalise making available such recordings to a third person or many persons, as well as when recordings were published or

forwarded using a computer, information and communication technologies tools or in another manner. In addition to the fact that consequences of this criminal offence affect the victim, we should not ignore the fact that they also affect members of the victim's family and his/her immediate environment, and the victim is recovering slowly because the content can remain available even after several years and retraumatise the victim over and over again. Victims of these criminal offences are mainly women and children, but men can also be victims. Having in mind the consequences of the criminal offence, it is necessary to improve their protection, which is in many cases impossible without assistance from prosecutor's offices and police.

Such changes require provision of additional human and technical resources; however, this cannot be the reason not to sanction this form of violence and not to protect victims. Laying down abuse and publishing of recordings with sexually explicit content as a criminal offence would inter alia have a preventative function in dissuasion of potential perpetrators from this criminal offence. A situation where a child is the victim should certainly be specified as a qualified form of this criminal offence. The fact is that our Criminal Code already contains a number of criminal offences that regulate unauthorised photography, recording, eavesdropping, publishing and displaying someone else's writings, portraits and recordings, unauthorized collection of personal data, etc., however, these criminal offences do not recognise sufficiently the specific features of such sophisticated forms of violence and making content available to a large number of persons through information technologies.

Taking into account that the number of femicides has been increasing over years, we emphasized that it should be considered whether the introduction of femicide as a separate criminal offence would contribute to an improved response to this form of violence, because certain characteristics and specific features make this criminal offence different from murder. The introduction of the criminal offence of femicide would convey a clear message on the importance of addressing of this burning social issue, and would also ensure appropriate and centralised data collection, which would inter alia contribute to better planning of preventative activities and other adequate measures.

At forums and in a public debate, the Commissioner also supported an initiative, namely a proposal for a criminal offence which was submitted the Ministry of Justice through a petition entitled "SWEAR BY THE LAW!"; available at the following link: <https://www.womenngo.org.rs/vesti/2261-zakuni-se-u-zakon-posalji-predlog-ministarstvu-pravde-da-neovlascenodeljenje-intimnih-snimaka-postane-krivicno-delo>

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/389-24-objedinjena-inicijativa-ministarstvu-pravde-za-izmenu-krivicnog-zakonika/>
<https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/696-24-misljenje-na-nacrt-zakona-o-izmenama-i-dopunama-krivicnog-zakonika/>

Women and girls facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and inequalities are among the most susceptible to enter, engage or remain in prostitution, and therefore to violence, states the *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls*.⁶⁷ Disability, age, social class, race, ethnicity, migratory and legal status, sexual orientation and gender identity are factors that exacerbate the risk of entry into prostitution. As a result, prostituted women and girls often have irregular status and no access to effective assistance, protection, services or livelihood opportunities. Many suffer from poverty, adverse childhood experiences, destitution and substance abuse, and have limited or no education, while having to provide for family members, while a large majority has a history of sexual and physical abuse, neglect and child abuse.

Initiative to amend the Law on Public Order and Peace

In 2024, the initiative was resubmitted to the Ministry of the Interior to amend Article 3 paragraph 1 item 15 laying down the meaning of the term “prostitution” and Article 16 determining prostitution as an illegal act against public order and peace and imposing a sanction. The most recent amendments treat those who engage in prostitution and those who use these services equally, with equal penalties being prescribed. Prostitution is almost never the result of a free choice, but rather the result of coercion and/or fraud, poverty, it is one of the cruellest forms of exploitation and discrimination, and is often linked to human trafficking and slavery. Sexual exploitation, as one of the cruellest forms of human rights violations, is directly related to gender inequality, with women being the most common victims. Having in mind the recommendation of the CEDAW Committee relating to the deletion of the infringement referred to in Article 16 paragraph 1 of the Law, the Commissioner emphasized that it was necessary to delete the first two actions referred to in this Article, “engagement in prostitution”, and to retain sanctions for the use of prostitution and provision of premises for prostitution. Based on Article 52 of the Criminal Code and Article 38 of the Law on Infringements, the initiative proposes to consider the possibility of imposing community service as a secondary punishment. It was also pointed out that community service cannot be imposed without the consent of the perpetrator, as this is in contradiction with international documents prohibiting forced labour, as well as ILO Convention No. 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labour, which Serbia ratified. Since the emphasis in the initiative is on the use of prostitution services, it is also necessary to change the meaning of the term prostitution, so that it also includes the act of using the service. After amending of the Law on Public Order and

67 *Prostitution and Violence against Women and Girls, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls, its Causes and Consequences*, Reem Alsalem, 2024, available at: https://www.womenngo.org.rs/images/vesti_2024/Prostitucija_i_nasilje_protiv_zena_i_devojica-zvestaj_Specijalne_izvestiteljke_2024.pdf

Peace, the Commissioner pointed out that it is also necessary to consider amendments to the Criminal Code, which in Article 184 currently incriminates the mediation in prostitution, as well as the promotion and advertising of prostitution. The Criminal Code should also contain provisions that sanction the purchase of sexual services and the provision of premises to a minor for prostitution, which is currently regulated only by the Law on Public Order and Peace and is prosecuted as an infringement. In parallel with this step and the proposed amendments to the relevant laws, manners of providing long-term support and empowerment to women who wish to leave prostitution should be considered. The CEDAW Committee also recommended to the Republic of Serbia to “provide exit programmes and alternative income-generating opportunities for women who wish to leave prostitution”. For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/897-24-in-icijativa-mup-u-za-izmene-i-dopune-zakona-o-javnom-redu-i-miru/>

Economic dependence and inability to manage property increase the risk of suffering a form of violence. It has been observed in practice that women who have their own property and income are independent and ready to report violence, unlike those women who have no financial stability or property. Bearing in mind the persistent inequalities regarding property inheritance, we conducted the *Survey on the Influence of Social Norms on Attitudes and Decisions Regarding Property Inheritance*⁶⁸, which we presented at the conference “Fair Inheritance – A Step Towards Women’s Empowerment”. According to the results of this survey, a significantly higher percentage of women (66%) support full equality in inheritance than men (39%), while traditional and family values were most frequently indicated as the key motives to renounce inheritance, as well as a moral duty or a wish to keep good family relations.



Conference “Fair Inheritance – A Step Towards Women’s Empowerment”, 2024

68 *Survey on the Influence of Social Norms on Attitudes and Decisions Regarding Property Inheritance*, Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Belgrade 2024, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/istrazivanje-o-naslednim-pravima-i-stavovima-prema-nasledjivanju-u-srbiji/>

Renunciation of inheritance has significant legal consequences, of which women are often not aware. This is exactly why the Commissioner repeated the initiative to amend a part of the Law on Social Welfare relating to the requirements to exercise the entitlement to social financial assistance, which result the exclusion of a number of citizens, mostly women, from exercising this entitlement.

In the initiative to amend the Law on Social Welfare, the Commissioner pointed to the need to consider the excluding condition referred to in Article 82, laying down that the right to social financial assistance cannot be exercised if an individual, or a family member, sold or gave as a gift immovable property or renounced the right to inherit immovable property or if a period expired within which he/she could ensure assistance within the meaning of this Law from the market value of the immovable property he/she sold, gave as a gift or renounced the right to. This condition must be considered from the aspect of its purposefulness because it fully prevents a person from exercising the right to social financial assistance and from its duration, in terms that no deadline was specified by the Law; instead, the only relevant fact considered is for how long could a person financially ensure himself/herself or his/her family members if he/she possibly did not renounce inheritance.

It is necessary to review this condition, particularly taking into account still deeply rooted prejudice and beliefs and behaviour patterns where tradition prevails over the law in the inheritance procedure and where the expectation is still deeply rooted that in property inheritance women would renounce their right to inheritance in favour of male cousins.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/894-24-inicijativa-za-izmene-i-dopune-zakona-o-socijalnoj-zastiti/>

In recent years, the issue of inhuman and inadequate treatment of women in health care institutions during pregnancy and childbirth has become increasingly pertinent, which was the reason why many female citizens contacted us. Bodily autonomy of women and girls and sexual and reproductive health and rights are very important issues that require much more attention, and measures and activities by competent institutions. Continual lack of comprehensive legal protection and inadequate availability of sexual and reproductive health services remain significant obstacles.

We emphasized the necessity of humane and adequate treatment in gynaecology and obstetrics institutions by issuing recommended measures for the achievement of equality to gynaecology and obstetrics clinics and the Ministry of Health, which was addressed in more detail previously in the Report.

All relevant actors, primarily healthcare institutions, must be involved in ensuring improved conditions and an atmosphere in which giving birth will not be a distressing and traumatic experience, or even a reason to change one's mind about future pregnancies, but will instead be a special moment and joy

for every mother and her family. During pregnancy, and also during childbirth and afterwards, namely, in one of the most sensitive and important periods in life, women should have full support and should feel safe, secure and protected. Also, this problem should not be approached in a sensationalistic manner, nor should these cases be generalized, which is why it is of utmost importance to examine in each specific case the responsibility and circumstances that led to the omissions and inadequate treatment of pregnant women and nursing mothers.

Women must be provided with the highest standard and humane treatment in the provision of healthcare in the fields of gynaecology and obstetrics. Thus, in addition to adequate available space, it is necessary to ensure constant education of medical staff, from reception workers to physicians and midwives, not only from the aspect of health care but also from the aspect of exercising all human rights, equally for all. Any possible action should be taken to eliminate bad practices that lead to inadequate and inhumane treatment of pregnant women and nursing mothers, and even put at risk their health and lives. With the aim of achieving equality and protection from discrimination, in order to improve the health care of women during pregnancy and childbirth, as well as during induced miscarriage procedures, and ensure the highest standard of health care and humane treatment, without degrading or offensive actions, in accordance with the regulations and the established professional standards, the Commissioner issued recommended measures advising healthcare institutions, among other things, to arrange for their capacity development, both in terms of available space and in terms of regular quality reviews of the health care services they provides; to ensure continual professional development of health care workers to enable women, if they so wish, to have family members or other persons attend the childbirth/accompany them during childbirth.

After the recommendations were issued, the Ministry of Health carried out control of all 55 maternity units in Serbia with the aim of improving the situation and review the need for reconstruction of maternity units, delivery rooms and family rooms, and shortcomings were also identified in terms of spatial and human resource capacities. Women that contacted the Commissioner confirmed the improvement of treatment before, during and after childbirth after recommended measures were issued, stating that the situation has improved particularly in treatment and attitude of medical staff towards pregnant women and nursing mothers.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/104-24-preporuke-mere-zdravstvenim-ustanovama-koje-pruzaju-uslugu-iz-oblasti-ginekologije-i-akuserstva/> and <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/rs/128-24-preporuka-meraministarstvu-zdravlja/>

Having in mind the modern rapid development of science and technology, we are witnessing the increased use of digital technologies as a means of committing violence, so that this type of violence is taking on a wider scale and is not limited to the physical space, as it is also spreading to the online sphere via the Internet and social networks. This very pronounced social problem should be treated seriously, legally regulated and adequately sanctioned, because it is often a very complicated and severe violence. There is no comprehensive analysis or continual monitoring of these cases of violence. As regards speech in the public sphere, female journalists, activists, politicians, and other women in public life are often subjected to greater threats and insults and more extreme forms of online abuse.⁶⁹ The anonymity and perceived impunity of the Internet can encourage perpetrators, as well as the lack of adequate legal regulations and protection from digital violence. The algorithmic digital structure often contributes to, rather than prevents, the spread of gender stereotypes and toxic digital subcultures, while at the same time allowing a perpetrator to target individuals across cities, countries, or continents with minimal effort from the privacy of their own homes. For this reason, the Commissioner has cooperated with UNPFA to continue the BodyRight campaign “Your Body is Yours! Both on the Internet and in the Real World!”, aimed at raising the awareness of the general public, and young persons in particular, of the widespread gender-based digital violence and its consequences. The campaign calls on decision-makers, technology companies and all other relevant organisations to improve both protection mechanisms and support mechanisms for persons of different ages who are exposed to this type of violence and abuse.

In connection with an inappropriate and sexist advertisement placed on a billboard at the entry of a city, the Commissioner issued recommended measures to a company to remove the advertisement.

Having in mind that there are numerous examples of sexism and misogyny in public space, where women are presented mainly as sexual objects, as early as in 2019 the Commissioner issued recommended measures to all marketing agencies, advising them to ensure, when creating advertising content, that such content does not advocate or condone prejudice and other social behaviour patterns based on stereotypes, and in particular to ensure that such content does not offend the dignity of persons because of their personal characteristics.

For more information, see <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/preporukamarkagen/>

69 *Gender-Based Digital Violence in Serbia, a Review of Trends*, Share Foundation, 2024, available at: <https://sharefoundation.info/rodno-zasnovano-digitalno-nasilje-u-srbiji-pregled-trendova/>

Cultural context, access to resources, and life circumstances often play a key role in women's inclusion in sports activities. Lack of support, infrastructure or sexual violence in sports limits women's interest in sports and discourages them from participating in sports. Based on contacts by citizens, various sports associations, as well as on the basis of conducted surveys, it can be concluded that women in the field of sports continue to face obstacles and problems such as insufficient investment in female sports, insufficient affirmation of female sports, lack of women in decision-making positions in sports, and also humiliating and disturbing treatment and sexual harassment. In the part of the Report dealing with criminal charges we filed, a criminal report against a coach because of sexual harassment of a female athlete was presented in more detail.

Understanding women's problems in this field, we issued recommended measures to the Ministry of Sport to popularise and improve female sports, achieve gender equality and prevent gender-based violence in sport.

The Ministry of Sport was recommended to prepare a proposal of a strategic sport development document that specifically defines the development of female sports and its promotion at all levels, taking account of various personal characteristics of women in sports (such as age, health status, disability etc.) with the aim of popularising and improving female sports, achieving gender equality and preventing gender-based violence in sport. It was also recommended to increase investment in female sports, and to provide and distribute funds for these purposes.

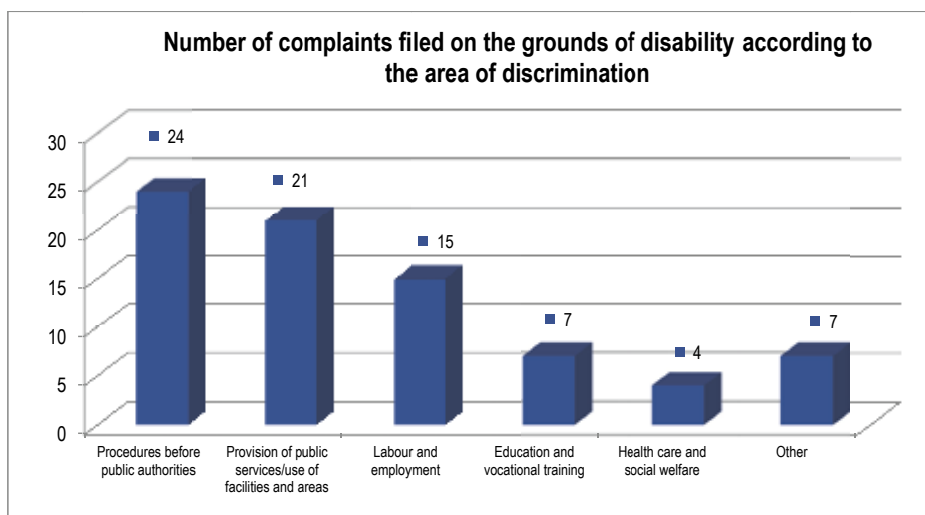
For more information, see <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/preporukamarkagen/>

The Commissioner's cooperation with relevant state authorities and institutions, civil sector and international actors in the field of the improvement of gender equality that is closely related to challenges in terms of discrimination on the grounds of sex and marital and family status is presented in the part of this Report that addresses the improvement of equality and cooperation.

Relevant recommendations are issued based on the overview of the situation and the issues in the exercise of equality and the protection against discrimination on the grounds of sex and marital and family status, which are provided in the summary of this Report.

DISCRIMINATION ON THE GROUNDS OF DISABILITY

In 2024, the Commissioner formed 78 cases pursuant to complaints of discrimination on the grounds of disability. At 10.6% of the total number of citizens' communications, it was the second most common discriminatory ground stated in citizens' complaints.



The majority of complaints were filed against discrimination in procedures before public authorities (24), in providing services or using public facilities and areas (21), followed by the area of labour and employment (15), the area of education and vocational training (7), health care and social welfare (4) etc. This year, natural persons filed the highest number of complaints (65 complaints), including approximately the same number of men and women.

Some of the observed instances of progress:

- High rate of compliance with the Commissioner's recommendations and initiatives concerning this discriminatory ground;
- Complaints were mostly filed by individuals, i.e. natural persons, while in earlier years this was mostly done by civil society organisations, which suggests citizens have been empowered to increasingly contact this institution;
- The number of accessible facilities of public authorities has been increased;
- The Strategy for the Improvement of the Position of Persons with Disabilities in the Republic of Serbia for 2025-2030 and the first Action Plan for its implementation from 2025 to 2027 have been adopted;

- The Informal Parliamentary Group for improving the status of persons with disabilities has been formed by the National Assembly;
- The Bylaw on Accessibility of Programme Content for Persons with Hearing and Visual Impairments has been adopted;
- The first Catalogue of Textbooks Adapted to the Needs of Pupils with Developmental Impairments and Disabilities has been published and includes a list of current textbooks with information on the type of adaptation;
- For the school year 2024/25, 2,140 textbook units have been provided for pupils with developmental impairments and disabilities; these include adapted textbooks in an electronic format with video contact in sign language and textbooks written in Braille, with an enlarged font.

Among the key issues are the following:

- Accessibility of all medical institutions specialised institutions, medical centres, outpatient clinics, social welfare institutions and other public services has not been ensured;
- while the Action Plan on implementation of the 2022 Strategy and the related financing of the Deinstitutionalisation Strategy have been significantly delayed;
- The inclusive education process is hampered by the inadequate/unequal provision of rights and support services;
- The social welfare system does not sufficiently recognise persons with autism, as well as persons with rare diseases, and some services are not suitable for the needs of these users; this issue affects them primarily after they complete primary and secondary education and when they reach 26 years of age and concerns the use of social welfare services;
- Underdeveloped community-based support services, lack of cooperation among local self-governments in connection with the provision of services;
- Insufficient inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market, subpar adaptation of tasks and/or posts to the needs of persons with disabilities; consistent enforcement of the duty to employ persons with disabilities is required;
- Persons with intellectual and psychosocial difficulties are still at a risk of being declared incapacitated.

Discrimination on the grounds of disability has been among the top five discriminatory grounds since the establishment of the Commissioner's institution, and disability was the most common discriminatory ground based on the total number of citizens' communication which resulted in the forming of cases pursuant to complaints between 2015 and 2024. The number and variety of problems they face on a daily basis when exercising fundamental rights and using services, coupled with the

fact that their the capacities and abilities of persons with disabilities are not recognised, puts persons with disabilities at a greater risk of discrimination. It should be borne in mind that persons with disabilities are a heterogenous group comprised of persons of different age, sex, health status, marital and family status and economic and social situation, which often exposes them to multiple and intersectional discrimination, i.e. discrimination on the grounds of multiple personal characteristics.

These were the reasons that prompted the Commissioner to prepare and submit to the National Assembly, within the shortest possible period after the present Report, the *Special Report on Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities*, which analyses and presents the problems faced by persons with disabilities, primarily in the provision of public services or the use of facilities and areas, in the areas of labour and employment, education and training, as well as in the areas of social welfare and health care. The report presents the activities carried out by this institution to improve equality and provide protection against discrimination, as well as the Commissioner's surveys and publications which highlight the position of persons with disabilities, notably the *Survey on the Position of Persons with Disabilities in the Labour Market* conducted in 2024. It also provides illustrative examples from the Commissioner's practice, which best depict the most common problems and discriminatory behaviour which can be precluded through proper recognition and preventive action. The report is based on the exercise of the rights set forth by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, together with recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of persons with Disabilities. Based on a comprehensive review of the state of play, the report provides relevant recommendations to improve the position of persons with disabilities. Also, to introduce employers to the concept of reasonable adjustment, work and inclusion of persons with disabilities in their work environment, the Commissioner prepared the *Guidance on Reasonable Adjustments of Workplaces and Jobs for Persons with Disabilities*, as an annex to the Special Report, which clarifies in detail this statutory obligation and provides practical examples of compliance.

For this reason, in the following sections we have highlighted just several examples from this institution's practice in 2024, to match the structure of this Report.

A female employee filed a complaint against her employer, alleging the employer had discriminated against her on the grounds of sex, health status, disability and age. She claimed she was the oldest in her workplace, she had undergone backbone surgery and "had a capacity assessment certificate" on the basis of which she had been categorised as a person with a certain degree of disability, but nevertheless worked on the post of assistant manufacturing worker and was assigned to heavy manual labour tasks, while also claiming that other employees received their salary on a more regular basis than her. She believed she had been discriminated against because she was "a woman who, in spite of her age and her capacity assessment and disability, worked at a plant manufacturing heavy piping".

After conducting the procedure and finding facts, the Commissioner determined that salary delays, while constituting a breach of employment rights, was not causally linked to any personal characteristic of the complainant, because other employees' salaries had also experienced salary delays. Upon analysing the statements given by the proposed witnesses of both parties, the complainant's job description according to the employer's job classification document, the Risk Assessment Document for the complainant's post and the relevant Decision of the National Employment Service, it was determined in the course of the procedure that the complainant had been assigned to tasks which were not suitable for her remaining capacity. For this reason, the Commissioner stated in her opinion that, by failing to assign the complainant to a suitable post considering her health status and disability, i.e. considering her assessed capacity, the employer had breached the provisions of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination. The employer was issued with a recommendation to rectify the consequences of the discriminatory behaviour towards the complainant regarding her assignment to a post that would be suitable to her capacity. Actions to comply with this recommendation are underway. For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/160-24-postupak-po-prituzbi-zbog-diskriminacije-po-osnovu-invaliditeta-i-zdravstvenog-stanja/>

Even after the Commissioner's recommendation made in 2018, we continued receiving communications from citizens and civil society organisations which called for accessible polling stations during elections, as well as for accessibility of the election process as such.

The City Electoral Commission was issued with recommended measures after the Centre for Independent Living of Persons with Disabilities of Serbia had contacting this institution, highlighting the need to make arrangements for blind persons to vote secretly and in person in the coming election for councillors in the Belgrade City Assembly in accordance with the Constitution. The recommendation underscores it is necessary to ensure accessibility and enable blind and vision-impaired persons to vote on accessible ballots, while future bylaws should regulate in detail the voting procedure for blind and vision-impaired persons, while respecting the dignity of persons with disabilities. The City Electoral Commission informed us it had adopted a Conclusion by which it committed itself to undertaking all necessary measures and activities mandate to ensure future elections are organised in a way which ensures accessible voting. For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/356-24-gradska-izborna-komisija-bg/>

An analysis of media content reveals that certain media content do not broadcast or do not sufficiently broadcast content in accessible formats for persons with hearing or vision impairment, using sign language, open and closed captions and audio description and reporting to ensure normal exercise of the right to public information by all persons.

For these reasons we have issued recommended measures to all television stations with national coverage (Public Broadcaster “Radio Television of Serbia”, Provincial Public service broadcaster – Public Broadcaster “Radio Television of Vojvodina”, “Pink” Television, “Happy” National Television, “B92” Television and “Prva” Television). It was recommended that these broadcasters ensure, to the greatest extent possible, that content is broadcast in formats that are accessible to persons with hearing and vision impairments, by using Serbian sign language, open and closed captions and audio description and reporting, to ensure such persons can normally exercise the right to full and timely public information. The broadcasters have informed the Commissioner they will improve their broadcasting of content in accessible formats.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/441-24-preporuka-mera-republickom-javnom-medijskom-servisu/>

Furthermore, the recently adopted Bylaw on Accessibility of Programme Content to Persons with Hearing or Vision Impairments⁷⁰, which governs in detail the obligations of television service providers to make their programme content accessible to persons with hearing or vision impairment and the manner of using Serbian sign language, open and closed captions and audio description and reporting, to ensure such persons can normally exercise the right to public information.

The issue of accessibility of both public facilities and residential buildings, not only those built in the past, but also newer ones, has for years been the subject of complaints filed by citizens and civil society organisations alike. In particular, they have been drawing attention to the worrying fact that, in some cases, even though the facilities are new or fully renovated, the adaptation was done without considering compliance with the accessibility standards. The same is true of residential buildings, especially those that must be made accessible in accordance with the law.

⁷⁰ *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 43/2024*, available at: <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/pravilnik-o-dostupnosti-programskih-sadržaja-osobama-ostecenog-sluha-odnosno-vida.html>

We have issued recommendations of measures to all local self-governments in connection with the issuing of building permits and certificates of occupancy in compliance with the accessibility standards, to improve the current situation regarding the construction of new facilities or adaptation of existing ones, so that the process of issuing building permits and certificates of occupancy ensures consistent application of the regulations and norms which incorporate technical standards for planning, design and construction of facilities which enable unhindered movement and access for persons with disabilities. To ensure consistent application of regulations, the recommendation refers both to antidiscrimination regulations and regulations in the field of construction.

Although the recommendation was issued on the 19th of December, most of the local self-governments informed us within a short period they would undertake measures within their spheres of competence and noted they had immediately notified the recommendation to their organisational units responsible for issuing building permits and certificates of occupancy.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/982-24-preporuka-mera-lokalnim-samoupravama-povodom-izdavanja-gradjevinskih-i-upotreb-nih-dozvola-uz-postovanje-standarda-pristupacnosti/>

During the year, attention was also drawn to inaccessibility of certain facilities used by medical institutions, which in turn calls into question the accessibility of health care services. Thus, it was claimed that the entrance to a medical centre did not feature a sloping ramp or that the angle and incline of such ramp was an insurmountable obstacle to safe movement and access to the facility by wheelchair users or persons with limited mobility.

We have issued recommended measures for medical centres to undertake the necessary measures and activities to ensure accessibility of medical institutions and health care services to persons with disabilities, including both physical and information and communication accessibility. Where only one entrance was accessible, the Medical Centre was recommended to undertake activities to ensure as many of its entrances as possible are made accessible and to visibly post appropriate notices or signage pointing to the accessible entrance.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/715-24-preporuka-mera-zdravstvenim-ustanovama/>

Furthermore, the communications received by the Commissioner drew attention to the inaccessibility of facilities used by special rehabilitation hospitals. Spa medical centres are vital for improving and maintaining the health of persons with disabilities. A person with disabilities who is able to live an unassisted life is

often forced to accept accommodation in the outpatient section of a spa complex, because of the inaccessibility of the facilities used by special rehabilitation hospitals, including in particular their hotel sections (lack of an accessible room with an accessible toilet, inaccessible swimming pool entry and inaccessible therapy services), even if their general condition does not warrant such accommodation.

All medical institutions specialised in rehabilitation were issued with recommended measures urging them to undertake all necessary measures and activities to ensure accessibility of the facilities they use and the services they provide in those facilities, to ensure that persons with disabilities, especially those who are wheelchair-bound, can independently stay at those facilities and use therapy services equally with other users. The final date for compliance with this recommendation has not yet passed.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/964-24-preporuka-mera-banjama-povodom-pristupacnosti/>

Citizens have also contacted us in other situations where different services were inaccessible or denied to them because of their disability, including inaccessibility of post offices, inaccessibility of public utility companies, inaccessibility of baths and other facilities used by the public. Thus, for example, in the procedure pursuant to a complaint, the Commissioner issued an opinion determining that the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination had been breached because the facility of a field office used by the power utility company Elektrodistribucija Srbije d.o.o. Beograd was not accessible. As the power utility company undertook activities to install an access ramp immediately after the Commissioner had drawn its attention to this issue, a recommendation was made that they should continue with the activities they had initiated until accessibility was ensured.

In the procedure pursuant to a complaint filed by the mother of a child with disabilities, it was found that the school had undertaken measures to ensure accessibility of its classrooms, in accordance with the principles of reasonable adjustment, and had not breached the provisions of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, i.e. the pupil concerned had not been denied the possibility of attending classes. However, since the pupil was supposed to attend classes in specialised classrooms for certain subjects, it was recommended that the school should cooperate with the child, his legal representative and personal aide to improve accessibility of the school and provide proper equipment in the changing room.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/999-23-prituzba-zbog-diskriminacije-na-osnovu-invaliditeta-u-oblasti-obrazovanja/>

The Ministry of Education informed the Commissioner it was working on developing innovative and functional mechanisms, such as a web platform with information on resource centres in Serbia and assistive technology, which are a vital tool for children and pupils with developmental disorders in terms of their inclusion in the education process, their participation, proper learning and education in an inclusive environment and in a diverse peer group. The Ministry noted that 2,140 textbook units had been provided for the school year 2024/25 for pupils with developmental impairments and disabilities; these include adapted textbooks in an electronic format with video contact in sign language and textbooks written in Braille, with an enlarged font. In 2024, the first Catalogue of Textbooks Adapted to the Needs of Pupils with Developmental Impairments and Disabilities was published, which included a list of current textbooks with information on the type of adaptation.⁷¹

To enable access to education under equal terms, in early 2024 the Scientific and Teaching Council of the Faculty of Political Sciences adopted the *Bylaw on the Criteria and Manner of Providing Support to Students from Vulnerable Social Groups*⁷². Among other things, the Bylaw provides for the hiring of an associate who would be in charge of assisting and supporting students with disabilities in all activities necessary to exercise their rights and satisfy their needs, so they could perform student activities without hindrances. The Commissioner supported the campaign to adopt this bylaw, which was conducted by the informal student advocacy group “Able Policies” at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade.

Regarding the accessibility of social welfare services, social welfare services have evidently been lacking in scope and types, and also in terms of continuity. The lack of social welfare services puts in an unequal position those who are not able to access those services at all or are unable to access them continually. In this context, when amending the relevant laws, due consideration should be given to the ways of funding and ensuring uniform provision of social welfare services in the entire territory of the country according to the population’s needs, which should involve an analysis of the existing services to determine whether they are designed to satisfy the different needs of users.

71 Data provided to the Commissioner by the Ministry of Education in connection with compliance of state authorities with the recommendations for achieving equality set out in the Regular Annual Report of Commissioner for the Protection of Equality for 2023

72 *Bylaw on the Criteria and Manner of Providing Support to Students from Vulnerable Social Groups*, Faculty of Political Sciences, January 2024, available at: <https://www.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/Pravilnik-o-kriterijumima-i-nacinima-pruzanja-podrske-studentima-iz-osetljivih-drustvenih-grupa.pdf>

A number of initiatives were submitted to the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs to amend and/or supplement numerous provisions of the Law on Social Protection. Since this Law has still not been amended in accordance with the submitted initiatives, but the Ministry had announced it would be amended and supplemented in the near future, the Commissioner submitted an integrated initiative to amend and supplement this Law which is vital for all citizens.

The Ministry informed the Commissioner it would specifically consider the submitted initiatives when preparing the amendments and supplements to the Law.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/894-24-inicijativa-za-izmene-i-dopune-zakona-o-socijalnoj-zastiti/>

Recommended measures for the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs were aimed at ensuring the exercise of the right to personal aide or personal assistant services in cases where the person in need of such services lives in the territory of one local self-government and attends school or university or works in a different one, where such service is to be provided. It was recommended that the Ministry should pass instructions or another document to set out in detail the course of action to be followed by local self-government units in such situations.

The Ministry informed the Commissioner it had issued a recommendation to all local self-government units to ensure continual provision of personal aide or personal assistant services in cases where a person is in need of such service, regardless whether such person attends school or university or works in the territory of a different local self-government unit.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/137-23-preporukamera-ministarstvu-za-rad-zaposljavanje-boracka-i-socijalna-pitanja-u-vezi-ostvarivanja-usluge-licnog-pratioca-i-personalnog-asistenta/>

Citizens have continued contacting this institution in connection with the exercise of the entitlement to disability allowance for certain categories of pensioners. Considering that the new Government had been elected, but the Law on the Rights of Veterans, Disabled Veterans, Disabled Civilians Disabled by War and Family Members had not been amended, the Commissioner repeated the initiative submitted to the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs.

An initiative was submitted to the Ministry to supplement the provisions of Articles 66 to 73 of the Law on the Rights of Veterans, Disabled Veterans, Disabled Civilians Disabled by War and Family Members so that disabled veterans who have not reached 65 years of age can exercise the entitlement to disability allowance.

The Ministry informed the Commissioner it would consider the possibility of extending the entitlement to disability allowance to this group of disabled veterans.

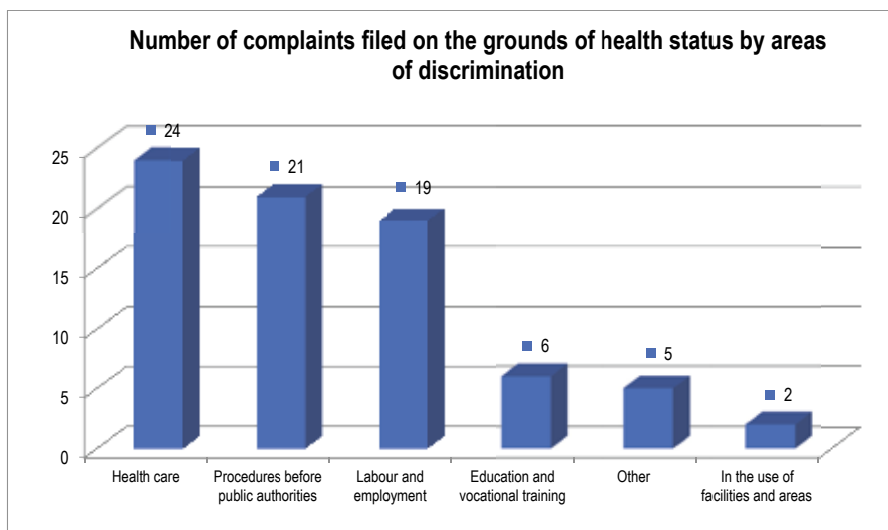
For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/137-23-preporuka-mera-ministarstvu-za-rad-zaposljavanje-boracka-i-socijalna-pitanja-u-vezi-ostvarivanja-usluge-licnog-pratioca-i-personalnog-asistenta/>

During the year, we also participated in events commemorating the illustrious figures of Serbia's disability movement: Gordana Rajkov, founder of the independent living movement of Serbia and the first female member of parliament with disabilities in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, and Damjan Tatić, a long-standing associate of the National Organisation of Persons with Disabilities of Serbia and the Muscular Dystrophy Association of Serbia, a true fighter for human rights of persons with disabilities who had taken part in the drafting of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and member of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Based on the examined state of play and issues in the achievement of equality and protection against discrimination on the grounds of disability, we issued the relevant recommendations presented in the summary section of this Report.

DISCRIMINATION ON THE GROUNDS OF HEALTH STATUS

Based on the Commissioner's practice, health status was the third most common discriminatory ground in 2024. Out of the total number of citizens' communications, this institution formed 77 cases pursuant to complaints alleging discrimination on the grounds of this personal characteristic. This discriminatory ground is often alleged in conjunction with another personal characteristic, usually disability, age, sex etc.



In terms of specific areas of social life, most of the complaints filed during the year concerned the area of health care (24), in procedures before public authorities (21), in the process of employment or at work (19), in the area of education and vocational training (6) etc. The majority of the complaints were filed by natural persons (62), including equal numbers of men and women.

Some of the observed instances of progress:

- Increasing availability of data on persons with rare diseases through registration with the Register of Rare Diseases;
- Funding for the treatment of rare diseases has increased by 67%;
- Patients with rare diseases are entitled to one-off financial assistance and vouchers for medicines and rehabilitation;
- Screening is carried out for early detection of lung cancer and an action to provide free preventative examinations, aimed at early diagnosing and promoting prevention as the most effective way of caring for one's health;
- The List of Medicinal Products has been expanded to include 55 new medicinal products, including 22 innovative ones, 16 of which are used in the treatment of diseases that were previously not included in the list, including five next-generation medicines for patients with HIV; the use of the so-called off-label medicinal products covered by the compulsory health insurance has also been improved;
- A number of medical institutions and birth clinics have been adapted;
- The University Clinical Centre of Serbia has been provided with a new surgery room, which will improve endovascular procedures to dissect the thoracic aorta and the abdominal aorta, as well as aneurism surgeries;

- A programme to expand the capacity and conditions for early diagnosing of rare diseases and other prerequisites for an improved quality of life of persons with rare diseases;
- The Public Health Service (PHS) enables the entry of data in the Register of Persons with Disabilities;
- Increased hiring of medical staff, especially young physicians and medical technicians. The Programme for employing the most successful graduates from Faculties of Medicine and secondary medical schools has been implemented and employment contracts have been signed with six physicians who have returned from the EU and the USA.

Among the key issues are the following:

- Insufficiently regulated operations of emergency medical services;
- Regulations governing organ transplantation have still not been improved after the Constitutional Court decision;
- Incomplete accessibility of medical institutions and rehabilitation institutions;
- Underdeveloped sociomedical services, palliative care and services suited to the needs of persons with autism or intellectual impairments;
- Some employers do not take health status into consideration when assigning employees to appropriate posts;
- Lack of sensitisation and insufficient qualification of medical staff for work with certain patient categories, inadequate communication with patients (e.g. HIV status, F diagnosis, communicable diseases etc.);
- Health care services are not equally available across the entire territory of Serbia (e.g. to elderly persons in rural communities and outside of medical centres);
- For certain diseases, coverage with next-generation medicinal products and expensive treatments remain insufficient; patients are not sufficiently aware of the procedure and the possibility of using off-label medicines; in some cases, patients are still sent abroad for treatment and interventions;
- Limited availability of innovative treatments and next-generation medicines.

The Commissioner's practice is diverse and points to various issues in the area of health care. Some of the complaints and other communications from citizens concerned the work of Emergency Medical Services and difficulties in exercising the right to emergency medical care. Citizens stated they had not received timely emergency medical care or had not received it at all, either because they were elderly or because they lived in a remote rural community, an informal Roma

settlement etc. Although most of these instances did not involve violations of the rights enshrined in the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, the Commissioner's practice suggests it is necessary to improve the regulations in this area to ensure the provision of appropriate and timely assistance in the entire territory of the country, and also to ensure greater awareness of the way in which these services operate. Undeniably, the number of ambulances and medical staff is limited, while on the other hand citizens' needs are high, as are their expectations in terms of what constitutes timely and appropriate response of the health care system. Furthermore, a key point to take in is that the health care system is not isolated and depends heavily on the functioning of other system, such as social welfare, education, infrastructure, regional development etc. Surveys on the work of emergency medical services have not been sufficient, and the only significant publicly available data can be found at the level of certain local self-governments, which are responsible for adopting plans for the operation and development of this type of medical assistance.

An initiative to amend and supplement the Law on Health Care was submitted to the Ministry of Health to ensure comprehensive regulation of the functioning of Emergency Medical Services as a vital segment of overall health care. According to comparative legal practice, other countries of the region regulate this area by laws and various pieces of secondary legislation. An analysis of this practice suggests the Republic of Serbia is among the few countries without a separate Law on Emergency Medical Services or detailed regulations to fully govern the functioning of the emergency medical service system.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/594-24-inicijativa-za-izmene-i-dopune-zakona-o-zdravstvenoj-zastiti-ili-donosenje-posebnog-propisa-kojim-bi-se-detaljnije-uredio-rad-sluzbi-hitne-pomoci/>

Citizens also contacted this institution during the year in connection with other issues, including those resulting from the long waiting lists for organ transplantation. Namely, after the Constitutional Court declared certain provisions of the Law on Human Organ Transplantation and the Law on Human Cells and Tissues unconstitutional in 2021, organ transplantations virtually ground to a halt in Serbia, which resulted in even longer waiting lists. The Constitutional Court held the legal arrangement would have to be clear and predictable with regard to the obligations of human organ donation coordinators and with regard to the determination of deceased persons' living will, as well as the right of relatives to oppose organ harvesting. Determination of living will in cases when there is no written statement is a particularly sensitive area, where the risk of discrimination must be carefully weighed, especially with regard to the deceased person's age or legal capacity. Furthermore, legislation must also be supported by an awareness raising

campaign among the population to highlight the importance of transplants and organ donation.

The Commissioner has repeatedly urged the Ministry of Health to initiate amendments and supplements to the Law on Human Organ Transplantation and the Law on Human Cells and Tissues in order to re-establish a comprehensive legal framework and enable organ and tissue transplantation from deceased persons after the Constitutional Court decisions.

The Ministry reported that drafting of the law was underway and the initiatives had been taken into consideration.

After receiving a communication from the association “Donorship is Heroism”, we once again drew attention of the Ministry of Health to the draft law prepared by this association, in line with the Constitutional Court decision and the comments made to the text prepared by the working group, to which the Ministry gave a positive response and sent the text to the working group for a review.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/407-24-inicijativa-ministarstvu-zdravlja-za-izmenu-zakona-u-vezi-transplantacije/>

Issues in this area also concern the criteria for determining certain medicinal products covered by compulsory health insurance, which is a point we raised this year, as well as in previous years, with the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF). Practice to date has shown that the NHIF has thoroughly and comprehensively considered all recommendations and initiatives received from the Commissioner and has accepted and applied a high percentage of them.

The Commissioner received a communication from a citizens’ association on behalf of renal patient, which drew attention to a key issue for patients in the pre-dialysis period, for whom timely treatment with medicinal products such as e.g. Forxiga and Ketosteril is essential for retaining their renal function and postponing the dialysis, but the cost of those medicinal products is currently not covered by compulsory health insurance. The situation is similar with other essential medicinal products for renal patients. For these reasons, the Commissioner asked the Ministry of Health and the NHIF to ensure the availability of those treatments to renal patients.

The NHIF informed us that applications had been filed for the medicinal products Forxig, Ketosteril and Parsabiv to be included in the List of Medicinal Products, while the medicinal product Renvela was not yet registered in the Republic of Serbia, i.e. it had not received a marketing authorisation.

The same issue was also in the communications submitted to the Commissioner by associations of persons with rare diseases, who drew attention to the problem

of availability of medicinal products, including in particular off-label ones. Major amendments to the relevant bylaw were made in 2023, which enabled insurance beneficiaries to be treated with the so-called off-label medications, the costs of which are covered by compulsory health insurance. A problem in this regard is that patients are not sufficiently aware of the procedures and the possibility of using such medications in cases where patients have been prescribed the only medicinal product with proven efficacy in treating their condition, but it is not included in the positive list of prescription medication or is registered for a different indication, which is why the only way to have the cost of such medications covered by the NHIF is to apply for the special procedure provided for by said bylaw.

The Commissioner's attention was drawn to the issues faced by patients with Neuromyelitis optica, a rare, chronic, progressive, autoimmune disease which can lead to loss of vision, immobility and even death. The female patient who submitted the communication stated she had been treated with the medicinal product Cellcept from the start, but was forced to pay for it out of pocket because it was not included in the positive list. Given that the disease is rare and has far-reaching consequences for the patient's life and health, and also considering the fact that persons of a lower property status and with lower income are unable to pay for the proper treatment, the Commissioner urged the National Health Insurance Fund to consider the initiative to amend the Bylaw on the List of Prescription Covered by Compulsory Health Insurance Funds, so that the medicinal product used in the treatment of this disease is included in the list of medicinal products the costs of which are covered by the NHIF. In its reply, the NHIF stated the Bylaw on the List of Prescription Covered by Compulsory Health Insurance Funds included the medicinal product Cellcept in List A – Medicinal Products issued of Physician's Prescription Form, and was indicated for patients for kidney, heart or liver transplant; it was also stated that the requirement for this medicinal product to be included in the treatment was the opinion of three physicians at a medical institution which provides tertiary health care. The NHIF noted it had not received an application to include the medicinal product Cellcept in the list of medicinal products indicated for Neuromyelitis optica. It was also stated that decisions to use off-label medicinal products was made at the level of the medical institution, individually for each patient, and the insurance beneficiary would have to seek information in that regard at a tertiary or secondary health care institution to exercise the right to use the said medicinal product.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/64-24-inicijativa-za-izmenu-pravilnika-o-listi-lekova-koji-se-propisuju-i-izdaju-na-teret-sredstava-obaveznog-zdravstvenog-osiguranja/>

The use of off-label medicinal products is crucial in the treatment of rare diseases, for which there are often no specific medicinal products available, and patients are instead treated with those indicated for other diseases.

Acting on initiative by the association “Život” (Life), a rare disease survey project was carried out in Serbia for the first time, to examine the views and level of information of different target groups on this subject matter. The project involved a survey of the general population of Serbian citizens of age and a survey of family members who have a child/family member with a rare disease diagnosis. Among the general population, most of the respondents stated they had not had an opportunity to hear or see any media content on the subject of rare diseases and believed more such content was needed. Among the respondents with a family member with a diagnosed rare disease, in 60.8% of the cases the rare disease had been diagnosed after the first symptoms had been observed, which means the time to accurate diagnosis in Serbia is significantly shorter compared to European statistics.⁷³

The Register of Rare Diseases lists 12,600 patients, which is about four times higher than in 2021, when data collection for the Register began. The National Organisation for Rare Diseases of Serbia (NORDS) estimates there are between 350,000 and 500,000 persons with a rare disease in the country⁷⁴. At the fifth regional conference “Caring for Rare”, which brings together regional and international experts with the aim of raising awareness of the challenges faced by persons with rare diseases and their families, the incumbent Commissioner said equality implied continual improvement of the legal framework and development of the support system, as well as elimination of various barriers and prejudice towards persons with rare diseases.

In early February 2024, a Regulation was passed under which patients with rare diseases in Serbia are entitled to one-off financial assistance and vouchers for medicines and rehabilitation. However, for persons with certain rare diseases the situation in practice is more complex. The option of special hospitals is not suitable for children with Epidermolysis bullosa (“butterfly skin”), because they provide no services they might need or offer ones they do not need, and the daily treatments of such children involve both parents because the staff is not trained to provide such services.

73 *Word for Life*, the first specialised magazine on rare diseases, issue 36, “Life” Association, 2024, available at: <https://www.zivotorg.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/C36cropped.pdf>

74 Available at: <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/u-registru-retkih-bolesti-trenutno-12-600-pacijenata-tacan-broj-obolelih-se-ne-zna>

The Commissioner issued recommended measures to the Ministry of Family Welfare and Demography to make other existing rehabilitation and recreation facilities available to the recipients of vouchers, so they could better respond to the needs of persons with rare diseases.

Namely, we received a communication from an association which stated their members were entitled to vouchers for the amount of RSD 50,000, but were unable to use them because the services provided by special hospitals were not suitable for them, and they therefore suggested the list should be expanded to include other facilities suited to treat this type of disease.

The recommendation was complied with by expanding the list of institutions at which the vouchers can be used.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/411-24-preporuka-mera-retke-bolesti/>

In connection with a similar issue, a person suffering from systemic autoimmune vasculitis, a rare disease, filed a complaint claiming he had applied for all three types of assistance in January 2024, but the competent ministry had not informed him of the status of his applications by the date of filing of the complaint. After his complaint to of the Commissioner, the Ministry of Family Welfare passed decision on the exercise of the entitlement to vouchers for one-off financial assistance, for the purchase of medicines and medical devices and for rehabilitation and recreation.

In addition to the foregoing, other examples from this institution's practice are also indicative of discrimination on the grounds of health status. Citizens have drawn attention to breaches of certain administrative procedures, inability to schedule examinations and interventions and inability to undergo rehabilitation because spa medical centres and rehabilitation centres were inaccessible. Parents of children with autism have drawn attention to discriminatory and stigmatising behaviour towards their children and failure to provide personal aide services and other social welfare services.

Following an association's communication which highlighted as a major issue the fact that children and youth with autism and multiple impediments have no appropriate social welfare service at their disposal after leaving the education system which would enable them to continue their education and professional development, to find employment and to live in their community as equal citizens, we submitted the initiative to amend the Bylaw on Detailed Requirements and Standards for the Provision of Social Welfare Services to the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs. In its reply, the Ministry stated they had examined the recommendations to consider the possibilities of adapting the existing social welfare services or developing and

standardising new ones to better meet the needs of persons with autism, as well as persons suffering from specific and various rare diseases, and that a working group had been formed to amend and supplement the existing Bylaw. For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/171-24-inicijativa-za-izmenu-pravilnika-o-blizim-uslovima-i-standardima-za-pruzanje-usluga-socijalne-zastite/>

Similarly as in previous years, during the reporting year the Commissioner received communications from parents of children with autism who highlighted various issues they faced, in particular with regard to using the services these children need.

An opinion was issued in the procedure pursuant to a complaint filed by a mother on behalf of her son with autism against the director of a day care institution, because her son had been “thrown out of the day care centre” by the director’s decision.

The Commissioner stated in the decision that the director’s action constituted a breach of provisions of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination and the Law on Prevention of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities and it was recommended that the director should rectify the consequences of the discriminatory behaviour by: providing the service to the complainant’s son; issuing a written apology to the complainant and organise antidiscrimination training for all employees; amend the internal bylaw by replacing discriminatory and incorrect terms such as “special needs persons” and “special education” with appropriate ones; and by refraining from acting in an offensive, degrading and discriminatory manner and from breaching the antidiscrimination regulations in the future when performing duties within his remit and when communicating with or discussing matters concerning beneficiaries of social welfare services.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/1059-23-misljenje-povodom-prituzbe-aa-protiv-bb-direktora-socijalne-kooperative-gg/>

As a reminder, the Commissioner is a third-party intervenor in a lawsuit filed by a mother against a private preschool institution over discrimination against her underaged son with autism. The Commissioner stated in her petition there was a legal interest for the plaintiff’s success in the civil proceedings, having in mind the significance of inclusion of children with health difficulties in educational processes and the importance of enabling them to stay at preschool institutions without discrimination.

На недостатак дневних центара и прекопотребних услуга подршке указују и оболели од Алцхајмерове болести, који често зависе од својих најближих.

The lack of day care centres and essential support services is also an issue raised by persons with Alzheimer's disease, who frequently depend on their loved ones. At



the opening event of the international event "Alzheimer's Disease: the Present and the Future", the Commissioner said this disease affected more than 140 thousand persons in Serbia and some 55 million globally, which is why this subject must be high on the political and social agenda of decision-makers. Services for persons suffering

from this disease and their families are a necessity rather than luxury, while the rights to treatment, care and other forms of support are fundamental human rights which must be available to all on equal terms.

With regard to social welfare services, it is also necessary to establish cooperation between local self-government units, since it is not uncommon for a person to have his or her registered place of residence in one local self-government unit while attending school or working in another, which is supported by the following case from the Commissioner's practice.

An opinion was issued in the procedure pursuant to a complaint filed by a mother on behalf of her underage daughter against the Secretariat for Social Protection and the City Centre for Social Work, because the Interdepartmental Committee had issued a joint opinion in which it proposed that the child should be enrolled in a residential secondary school for pupils with developmental disorders and disabilities in a different city and determined the family was already using certain services which they would continue to need, including the personal aide service, in accordance with the child's developmental needs and her needs for additional support. The City Centre for Social Work passed a decision rejecting the request for recognition of the right to the personal aide service, the explanation for which seems to suggest that the said authority considered the fact that the school was in a different city to be an issue which made the child ineligible to receive such service. The Commissioner issued an opinion stating that the failure to provide additional support in the form of a personal aide constituted a breach of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination and recommended that all necessary actions and measures should be undertaken to ensure the assignment of a personal aide to the complainant's child. Compliance with this warning is underway.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/71-24-misljenje-povodom-prituzbe-sekretarijata-za-socijalnu-zastitu-grada-beograda-i-gradskog-centra-za-socijalni-rad-u-beogradu-odeljenje-vozdovac/>

To improve the position of children with health issues in the area of education, in addition to the appropriate services, it is also necessary to undertake other activities, including in the education system. The Ministry of Education has informed the Commissioner it has been undertaking activities in connection with these issues. Thus, in cooperation with the Institute for Mental Health and the Institute for the Advancement of Education, it developed a training programme for employees entitled “Improving the Competences of Employees in the Education System in the Field of Youth Mental Health”, which was attended by more than 2,400 expert associates from all primary and secondary schools⁷⁵.

In addition, the manual “Acting of Education Institutions in Crisis Events” has been prepared, with guidelines for staff action to provide psychological assistance to children to overcome a crisis/traumatic event. Through reforms, the Ministry has introduced a new education paradigm: competency-based education. One of the general cross-curricular competencies at the end of primary and secondary education is *Responsible Attitude to Health*.

Recognising the importance of developing psychophysical abilities and fostering healthy pupil lifestyles, as part of the project “Every Child has the Right to Healthy Growing-up”, additional physical education classes were provided in the school year 2023/2024 at 95 schools, for some 5,000 pupils.

In addition to education, the area of labour and employment is another area in which persons with health impairments face issues, as evidenced by an example from the Commissioner’s practice.

A female employee filed a complaint against her employer, alleging the employer had discriminated against her on the grounds of sex, health status, disability and age. She claimed she was the oldest in her workplace, she had undergone backbone surgery and “had a capacity assessment certificate” on the basis of which she had been categorised as a person with a certain degree of disability, but nevertheless worked on the post of assistant manufacturing worker and was assigned to heavy manual labour tasks.

After conducting the procedure, the Commissioner determined that the complainant had been assigned to tasks which were not suitable for her remaining capacity. For this reason, the Commissioner stated in her opinion that, by failing to assign the complainant to a suitable post considering her health status and disability, i.e. considering her assessed capacity, the employer had breached the provisions of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, which was why a recommendation was given to rectify the consequences of this discriminatory behaviour. Actions to comply with this recommendation are underway.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/160-24-postupak-po-prituzbi-zbog-diskriminacije-po-osnovu-invaliditeta-i-zdravstvenog-stanja/>

75 Data provided to the Commissioner by the Ministry of Education in connection with compliance of state authorities with the recommendations for achieving equality set out in the Regular Annual Report of Commissioner for the Protection of Equality for 2023

With regard to occupational safety and health, it should be noted that, on average, 50 persons die on their job each year, while more than a thousand sustain serious injuries; also, according to NHIF data, the number of workplace injuries has been on the rise for 10 years. Last year, more than 3,500 workers were injured at work.⁷⁶ Among the reasons for this is the fact that not enough attention is paid to the adequate assignment of workers to appropriate jobs, as well as overtime work, insufficient controls and fear of losing one's job, which is the reason why workplace injuries are often not reported. Climate change has also had increasing and serious impact on occupational safety and health of workers across all regions of the world, as evidenced by the International Labour Organisation's report⁷⁷ which estimates that more than 2.4 billion workers (out of a global workforce of 3.4 billion) are likely to be exposed to excessive heat at some point in their work. However, the impact of climate change on workers goes beyond exposure to excessive heat, creating a range of hazards. The report highlights a number of worker health conditions are linked to climate change, including cancer, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, renal dysfunction and mental health conditions. Working in a safe and healthy environment is recognised as a fundamental principle, and occupational safety and health should respond to the challenge of climate change.

On the occasion of International Workers' Day, the incumbent Commissioner drew attention in particular to worrying examples of unsafe and inhumane working conditions, which resulted in numerous deaths or serious workplace injuries during the past year, as reported by the Labor Inspectorate. We must not allow the fundamental rights of workers and human rights in general to be unprotected in the labour market and let the market determine the rules of behaviour without any controls, which is why, among other things, inspection activities need to be strengthened.

Available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/medjunarodni-dan-rada/>

Both in the field of labour and employment and in other areas of social life, especially given the current conditions, mental health is paramount. The importance of this issue became strikingly apparent after the coronavirus pandemic, with the increasing demands for mental health care. Although improved mental health only recently became a distinct priority, relevant national and international stakeholders have been drawing attention for years to the need for continual and planned

76 For more information, see: <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/5348110/povrede-na-radu--poslodavci-i-zaposleni-najodgovorniji-treba-da-se-drze-pravila-i-procedura.html>

77 *Ensuring safety and health at work in a changing climate*, ILO, 2024, available at: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/ILO_SafeDay24_Report_r11.pdf

efforts, coupled with observance of the highest standards of policies and practice and compliance with the principles of human rights. The *Analysis of Achievement of Mental Health Care Programme Objectives in the Republic of Serbia*⁷⁸ states that Serbia at the moment, notwithstanding the existence of a fundamental legislative and institutional framework, does not have a sufficiently developed, transparent, comprehensive and institutionally and financially sustainable system to protect the right to mental health. Although the Mental Health Protection Programme 2019-2026 is relatively sound, since December 2022 there has been no supporting Action Plan for its implementation, while the Programme itself is entering its final stage.

Recognising the importance of this issue, the Commissioner organised a special training for all members of the Youth Advisory Panel dedicated to challenges associated with technology, the Internet and especially social networks, which may influence unrealistic expectations and mental wellbeing of young persons.



Youth Panel – education on the subject of mental health, prevention and destigmatisation, 2024

As regards discrimination on the grounds of health status, persons living with HIV/AIDS are particularly vulnerable. As stated in the latest report of the Joint

78 2023 Report on the Exercise of the Right to Mental Health in Serbia - Analysis of Achievement of Mental Health Care Programme Objectives (2019-2026) in the Republic of Serbia, Caritas Serbia, 2024, available at: https://www.mzpokret.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IZVESTAJ-ZA-2023_POKRET.pdf

United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS)⁷⁹, the world can end AIDS — if the human rights of people living with HIV are respected, protected and fulfilled, to ensure equitable, accessible and high-quality HIV services. The HIV response has come so far that the end of AIDS as a public health threat is achievable, by 2030.

According to the data of the Public Health Institute of Serbia “Dr Milan Jovanović Batut”, FROM 1985 to the end of 2024, 4,903 HIV-infected persons were registered in Serbia, 2,251 of whom had AIDS, with the highest numbers of cases registered in Belgrade and Vojvodina. Based on the data on newly-infected persons in 2024, there were 15 times more men registered than women (102 men and 7 women), and most of them are aged between 30 and 49; worryingly, though, one in three of those persons is aged 20-29⁸⁰. Globally, new HIV infections have fallen by 59% since the peak in 1995⁸¹.

The NHIF has included five next-generation medicines for HIV treatment in the positive list. This will give HIV patients access to almost all treatment options currently available in the most developed parts of the world. These treatments should result in patients taking fewer pills, having a lower risk of the virus developing drug resistance, and being better able to coordinate this therapy with the one they have been taking for other diseases⁸².

Notwithstanding these figures and the progress achieved, persons living with HIV face various problems. In connection with the problems with the exercise of health care, “Čovekoljublje” (Philanthropy), a charity organisation of the Serbian Orthodox Church, conducted situation tests in 2023 in Novi Sad, Niš, Subotica and Belgrade at 50 medical institutions concerning the provision of health care services to persons living with HIV. Complaints of discrimination were filed in five cases, after which the Commissioner conducted the procedures and determined violations of rights in four cases. Apart from the complaints filed on the basis of the conducted situation tests, the Commissioner also received communications from other citizens, as evidenced by the following example from this institution’s practice.

79 *Take the rights path to end AIDS — World AIDS Day report 2024*, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), 2024, available at: https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/take-the-rights-path-to-end-aids_en.pdf

80 Available at: <https://www.batut.org.rs/index.php?content=2917>

81 *Fact sheet 2024*, UNAIDS, available at: https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/UNAIDS_FactSheet_en.pdf

82 Available at: <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/608615/No-vi-le-ko-vi-za-kva-li-tet-ni-ji-zi-vot-pa-ci-je-na-ta-sa-HIV-in-fek-ci-jom>

In the procedure pursuant to a complaint against a special hospital over discrimination on the grounds of health it was stated that the complainant had gone for a scheduled preoperative examination for a cataract surgery, but, after it was found that he was HIV positive, he was sent to a tertiary institution without a specified reason and without instructions as to which additional tests had to be done. The hospital failed to substantiate its reply with any evidence that the cataract surgery in this particular case would have posed a risk to the complainant. The opinion stated that a study conducted in connection with cataract surgery in HIV positive patients had determined that this surgery procedure for patients living with HIV did not differ from the same intervention in patients without HIV, subject to compliance with all standard medical protection measures, which must be in place in any case to protect the staff and the patients. The Commissioner stated in the opinion that, by refusing to provide the health care service, the specialised hospital had breached the provisions of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination and recommended that the hospital issue a written apology and comply with the antidiscrimination regulations in the future. The recommendation has been complied with.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/470-24-diskriminacija-na-osnovu-zdravstvenog-stanja/>

Regarding the position of persons living with HIV, it should be noted that the findings of the *Report on the Monitoring of Media Reports on HIV/AIDS from August 2021 to April 2024*⁸³ suggest progress has been made in media reporting on this population compared with the past practice, especially in terms of using appropriate terminology and language. The report also starts that, although mild progress has been observed in terms of improving the quality of life and reducing the stigma and discrimination against this population, regression was also noted in certain areas, especially regarding media coverage of topics which are overly generalised and do not address the core of the problem. Articles addressing specific aspects of human rights of persons living with HIV/AIDS are few, the medical approach is dominant, the topics covered usually include treatment and prevention, while insufficient attention is paid to educating beginner journalists. In most of the published articles, the headlines are sensationalists, while the content of the article provides a fair depiction. The report also notes that women living with HIV were much more frequently represented in the media than other persons with HIV. The recommendations issued in this regard include, among other things, support for

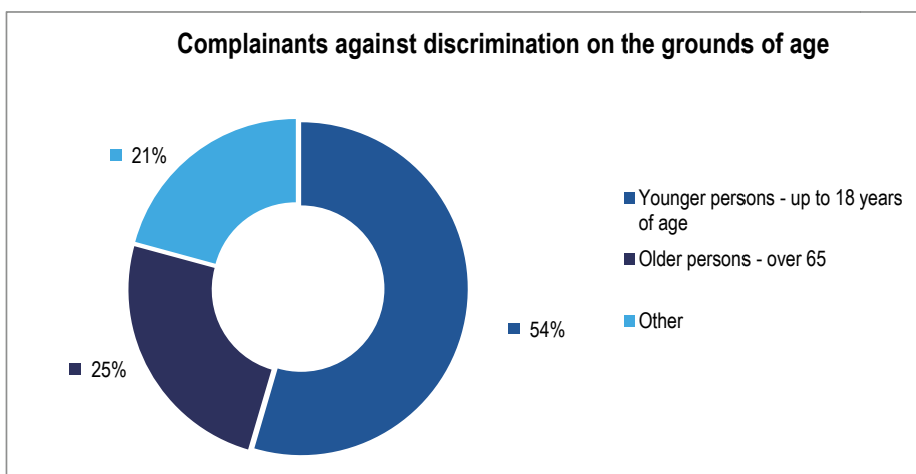
83 *Report on the Monitoring of Media Reports on HIV/AIDS from August 2021 to April 2024*, Nikola Todorović, Bojana Simonović et al., “Čovekoljublje” Charitable Foundation of the Serbian Orthodox Church, 2024, printed edition.

cooperation of the media with independent human rights bodies and organisations of persons living with HIV/AIDS, empowerment of persons with HIV/AIDS, education of journalists and editors and empowerment of health care professionals.

Based on the examined state of play and issues in the achievement of equality and protection against discrimination on the grounds of health status as a personal characteristic, we issued the relevant recommendations presented in the summary section of this Report.

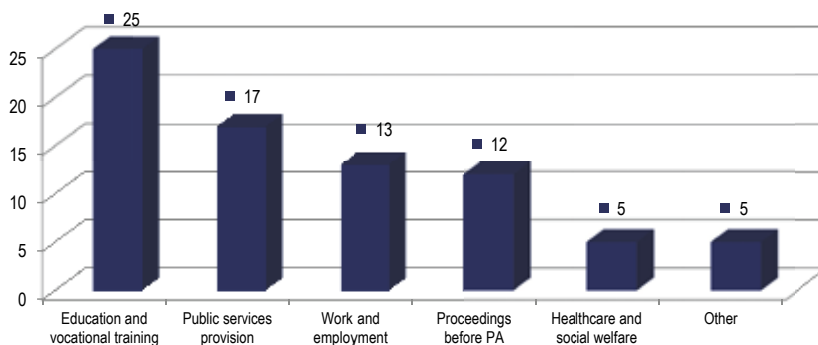
DISCRIMINATION ON THE GROUNDS OF AGE

In accordance with the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, the personal characteristic “age” encompasses all age categories and implies discrimination against children and youth, discrimination against individuals belonging to the so-called middle generation, as well as discrimination against individuals over the age of 65. In 2024, 77 cases were formed pursuant to complaints on these grounds, putting age as the grounds for discrimination fourth on the list of most common grounds for discrimination alleged in the complaints.



The highest number of complaints was filed due to discrimination in the field of education and vocational training (25), followed by provision of public services (17), labour and employment (13), in procedures before public authorities (12), social welfare and health care (5), while other areas saw fewer complaints. The majority of complaints, 72 in total, were filed by individuals, with women filing 40 complaints and men filing 32, while civil society organisations filed 2 complaints.

Number of filed complaints on the grounds of age by areas of discrimination



Some of the observed instances of progress:

- The Government established the Council for Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity;
- Adoption of the new Special Protocol for the Protection of Children against Violence in the field of Social Welfare, harmonised with the General Protocol for the Protection of Children against Violence;
- Adoption of the Law amending the Law on financial Support to Families with Children;
- Implementation of projects in the field of education related to protection against violence and discrimination in schools;
- Opening of the Youth Centre “CEZAM” in Belgrade, which should contribute to the addressing of problems and the improvement of mental health of the youth through interventions, educational activities and informal programmes with peer support for the youth. The implementation of the Package of Minimum Mental Health Services for the Youth in five cities (Subotica, Zrenjanin, Kragujevac, Novi Pazar and Užice) is ongoing;
- Establishment of 13 resource centres to improve the quality of inclusive education and increase availability of additional support to children, pupils and parents, and establishment of local bodies for support to inclusive education in 20 municipalities and towns in Serbia;
- Establishment of 13 resource centres to improve the quality of inclusive education and increase availability of additional support to children, pupils and parents, and establishment of local bodies for support to inclusive education in 20 municipalities and towns in Serbia;

- Launch of various campaigns and activities to encourage victims to report peer violence (such as the “I Keep You Safe” platform), implementation of workshops on preventing peer violence in real and virtual environments, and training related to the actions of educational institutions in situations of suspected or known discriminatory behaviour;
- Provision of free textbooks for a larger number of children at higher risk of discrimination;
- Equipping a number of schools with digital equipment for work (e.g., through the Bridging the Digital Divide in Serbia project for the most vulnerable children, 30 elementary schools across the country have been equipped);
- Ensuring the right to a voucher for subsidized vacations in Serbia for individuals over 65 who have not yet qualified for a pension;
- Provision of various types of support to both younger and older individuals (one-time cash assistance, student scholarships, improved regulations regarding the exercise of rights for energy-vulnerable customer, etc.);

Among the key issues are the following:

- Various forms of peer violence among children and youth;
- Insufficient educational programs on sexual and reproductive health, culture of mutual respect, non-discrimination, tolerance, understanding, and appreciation of diversity, gender equality, and intergenerational solidarity;
- Underdeveloped support for mental health among children, youth, and older citizens;
- The new Law on Youth has not been adopted;
- The new Strategy on the Prevention of and Protection of Children against Violence has not been adopted;
- Insufficient number of preschool institutions;
- Free textbooks have not been provided to all local self-governments;
- Widespread violation of children’s privacy rights in media reporting;
- Exposure to poverty and the risk of poverty for both children and older citizens, especially those without pensions, with low pensions, and/or dependent family members, particularly in rural areas;
- Insufficient involvement of youth in decision-making processes at all levels, particularly as regards laws with the youth as the target group;
- Challenges in the process of youth emancipation, difficult access to the labour market, and housing issues;
- Frequent discrimination in the field of employment and labour market against young people as well as “older” workers, especially women, as well as a high share of young workers in contract for a definite period or contracts outside employment;

- The strategy of active and healthy ageing not suitable for the requirements and the needs of the elderly;
- Insufficient inclusion of older people in various areas of social life and decision-making processes;
- Older people remain exposed to a higher risk of social exclusion, violence and poverty;
- Territorial unevenness in the number and coverage of social welfare and health care services, underdevelopment of socio-health services, insufficient quantitative and qualitative capacities in social protection institutions, especially social work centres;
- Burden and insufficient support for informal caregivers;
- Lack of tailored support programs for digital literacy among older adults.

In 2024, the majority of complaints on the grounds of age were submitted by the elderly citizens for various reasons, mainly in the field of the provision of services and the use of facilities and areas. A specific feature for age is that complaints often state several personal characteristics as the grounds for discrimination. Thus, in case of elderly citizens, sex, primarily female sex, followed by health status, marital and family status and property status are stated in addition to age, while in case of children, disability and health status are most frequently stated. This shows the importance of the application of the concept of intersectional and multiple discrimination, which is becoming increasingly frequent.

To review the position of the elderly citizens, it is necessary to also take into account all relevant data, primarily those held by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. According to the data contained in the report *Leave No One Behind!*, the proportion of the elderly population (65+) is increasing in Serbia and in the rest of Europe, which requires adjustment of public policies so that no one is left behind the development. Serbia is among the countries with a large proportion of elderly population, and according to the projections, this population contingent will represent 24.1% of the total population in our country until 2041. Although the functional population index is increasing, the elderly in Serbia remain in a disadvantaged position, they are at higher risk of poverty, while women are at higher risk than men (24.6% compared with 20% in men), they face gender gaps in pensions although it is officially lower than the EU average (13.7% in Serbia, compared with 25.2% in the EU). This report also states that the elderly evaluate their health status as worse than that of their peers in the EU, and they often face obstacles in access to health care because of waiting lists, financial problems or because health care facilities are remote. Digital exclusion additionally limits their access to services, and only 10.2% of the use web pages of public administration, while only 4.8% submitted online form.

To mark the International Day for Older Persons, we organised the conference entitled “*My Future – Who Should Take Care of It? For Greater Inclusion of Older Persons*” together with the Office of the Attaché for Social Protection, Health and Consumer Protection of the Republic of Austria, the UNFPA in Serbia, the Serbian Red Cross and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia. The conference was opened by representatives of several relevant institutions and organisations in the country and abroad, and it included topics relating to the improvement of life of the elderly, promotion of active ageing and the necessity to achieve digital literacy of the elderly. The conclusions of the conference among other things emphasized that the current demographic data and projections for the change of population in the coming period indicate that the Republic of Serbia is among demographically old countries, with the prospect of further aging, which inevitably has implications, primarily for the pension and disability insurance, social welfare and health care systems. The increasing number of users and the extension of life expectancy, which represents the greatest achievement of civilization, put challenges before these systems in all ageing societies and it is thus necessary to ensure their sustainability, while at the same time covering and encompassing the services needed by the elderly, who are increasingly living alone. It is particularly necessary to work on ensuring long-term care, more innovative support services, as well as support for formal and informal caregivers. Attention needs to be dedicated to and older women who, due to changes in family structure, shorter life expectancy of men and migration of the younger population to cities, most often live alone and without adequate support, particularly in rural areas. In order to better respond to the needs of the elderly, it is necessary to increase the participation of the elderly in the decision-making process, and also in all other social activities.

As part of the programme entitled “PRO – Local Governance for People and Nature”, the implementation of a project is underway which is also aimed at the implementation of innovative activities at the level of local self-governments. Within this project, the Commissioner in cooperation with the United Nations Population Fund in Serbia supports opening of the first three resource centres for intergenerational cooperation in various local self-governments, which will, using innovative approach, address challenges faced by the elderly, recognise and praise contribution of the elderly to the society and ensure opportunities for their active participation in social and economic life. This activity followed organisation of 12 round tables in 2024 on the topic “*Strengthening Local Capacities to Reduce Discrimination against the Elderly*”, which gathered all relevant actors in local communities – centres for social work, representatives of local self-government, health care, education system, NGO and representatives of both the elderly and young populations. The objective of round tables was to review the needs and capacities of the elderly and to provide support to capacity building of local self-governments to implement all policies

and provide all services to improve the quality of life of the elderly, while at the same time developing intergenerational cooperation.

The elderly should be supported to lead a healthy and active life, manage their own mental health, and intensify social interaction to reduce loneliness. Well-established and stable social welfare support services can help overcome numerous problems and maintain the capacity and abilities of the elderly, but support and long-term care must be accessible, affordable, integrated, community-based and user-friendly.

As indicated above, unequal position on the grounds of age in provision of services is a frequent reason why the elderly to contact the Commissioner. Thus, one complaint related to the provision of banking services.

A complaint was filed by a citizen who is an old age pension user. He stated that he has been a client of a bank for many years, that he has no outstanding obligations to the bank, but the bank did not approve his request for a senior cash loan. After the procedure was initiated and a request a response was sent, the complainant informed us that the bank contacted him and that the problem was addressed, and that he was therefore withdrawing the complaint.

There are dominant stereotypes and prejudice about the elderly relating to their capacities and abilities and “obsolescence”, which is why the Commissioner, in particular in the field of labour and employment, initiated in the previous year a strategic lawsuit, which is pending, and which was addressed in more detail in the part of the Report relating to court proceedings. Such attitudes are at the root of discrimination, and can also be a cause for violence, abuse and neglect.

The Commissioner acted on complaints against a discriminatory statement given at a session of the executive committee of the regional branch of the Dentistry Chamber. The statement stated that the complainant “will turn 77 in 10 days... so, if our brain can think normally at the age of 77... that is an age when we should all stay at home, when we are way past our prime“. An opinion was provided that identified discrimination and a recommendation was provided that a colleague who said this should publicly apologise to the complainant at the next session of this body. Acting is underway since a new session has not been held.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/543-24-diskriminacija-na-osnovu-starosnog-doba/>

Increasing number of services are being digitalised, both in the world and in our country. Data show that one in four persons in the EU aged between 65 and 74

has basic digital skills. Insufficient knowledge of digital skills can lead to deprivation of fundamental rights, such as access to old age pension, health care, social welfare and other services. To ensure access to public services for all, the following should be provided: participation of the elderly in the design and development of digital public services to respond to their needs; the development of required skills to use digital tools; the fight against ageism, encouraging peer learning and intergenerational training; systematic collection of data on digital literacy of the elderly etc., which was emphasized by the Commissioner on several occasions. Inaccessibility of certain services can be seen from a recent example from practice. Introduced prohibition of submission of requests for registration to the Real Estate Cadastre Service in person on their counters or by mail made more difficult for a number of citizens to exercise their rights, which is why the Commissioner submitted to the Constitutional Court a proposal for a review of constitutionality and legality of the Law on the Procedure of Registration with Real Estate Cadastre and Infrastructure Cadastre, which was addressed in more detail in the previous part of the Report. Also, citizens pointed in their complaint to the installation of ticket machines on certain railway stations, where tickets can be purchased only using a mobile application or a payment card. It is necessary to ensure that services are also provided in a traditional manner, so that a certain number of citizens is not left out.

Intergenerational cooperation, exchange of knowledge and experiences between generations and bringing them closer has been in the focus of the work of the institution for years. An exhibition of the best artworks and photographs for the prize-winning competition entitled “*Bridge of Understanding – Intergenerational Solidarity*” was held at the Đura Jakšić’s House to mark the International Day of Older People.



This prize-winning competition has been traditionally organised by the Commissioner for pupils in senior grades of primary schools in Serbia, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and the UNFPA Office in Serbia, while prizes were provided by the Unikredit Bank and the “Laguna” publishing house. The International Children’s Day was also celebrated by an exhibition of the best works and award of prizes to winners of the competition. The ceremony programme was hosted by members of the Youth Panel, the Roma child band GRUBB (Gypsy

Roma Urban Balkan Beats) had a performance, while guests were also pupils of the Primary School “Vladislav Ribnikar”. The GRUBB foundation has been active for 18 in support to Roma children to complete school successfully.

In 2024, as regards the position of children, challenges that were perceived in the previous period remained. Several procedures were initiated before the Commissioner concerning discrimination of children in the education system, particularly in the field of inclusive education. The main problem remains the exercise of the right to the personal assistant service, which will be discussed in more detail in the part of the Report related to discrimination on the grounds of health status, as a personal characteristic.

Various complaints by citizens and associations pointed out the unequal position of children in preschool education. In this area, there are frequent examples of the so-called “state-owned” preschool institutions that have large child daycare groups, where the number of children is higher than the statutory number, which is a consequence of the insufficient number of preschool institutions and educators. This issue further complicates the inclusion of children with disabilities and developmental disorders. Citizens contacted the Commissioner because they had difficulties or were refused refusal when they tried to enrol a child with disabilities and health difficulties in a preschool institution, particularly in a situation where the child does not have a personal assistant, or parents are encouraged to withdraw or transfer a child to another institution.

Considering the problems related to the equal availability of preschool services for all children, the Commissioner issued recommended measures to the city of Novi Sad to take all necessary measures and activities within its powers in order to make equal the position of children attending preschool institutions established by the city and children who are forced to attend private preschool institutions due to insufficient capacities of institutions established by the city, particularly with regard to equal subsidization of children’s stay in private preschool institutions regardless of their age.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/351-24-preporuka-mera-gradu-novom-sadu/>

Data contained in the *Annual Report on Children in Social Welfare System in Serbia for 2023*⁸⁴ show that the number of children is continually decreasing, and in 2023 it was 1,150,050, which is 7.3% less than in 2014. At the same time, 14.5% of children is in the social welfare system, of whom financially vulnerable children account for the largest share (50.3%). Children without parental care are

84 *Children in Social Welfare System in 2023*, Republic Social Welfare Institute, Belgrade, 2024, available at: <https://www.zavodsz.gov.rs/media/2883/deo-izve%C5%A1taja-deca-u-ssz-2023-1311docx.pdf>

mainly cared for in foster families (74.5%), while residential facilities are used to a much lesser extent than the EU average. This report states that the decrease in the number of adoptions is an issue of concern, and, as stated, 61 children were adopted in 2023, which was the lowest number in the last 10 years. The reasons for the decrease in the number of adoptions must be analysed and possibly undertake adequate measures accordingly in the best interest of children who need support from the system.

The same report states that violence against children is increasing, and the most frequent form is emotional violence (44.6%). In 2023, 182 cases of child marriages were reported, where girls aged between 16 and 17 are dominant (70.5%). Also, 33 children were victims of child labour abuse, while 41 children were identified as victims of human trafficking.

According to the statements of the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs in connection with the compliance with the Commissioner's recommendations, during the year, this Ministry, in cooperation with UNICEF, prepared a proposal of standards for intensive family support services (December 2024), which will be implemented in the coming period in the Bylaw on Social Welfare Services Standards for the purpose of licencing potential providers of these services in the community, which should also contribute to the improvement of the position of children and the youth. The Concept for Children, Youth and Family Centres was also prepared, which will be implemented as a pilot project in four centres for children without parental care. The Road Map – Action Plan for Transformation of Children, Youth and Family Centres was also prepared. The Ministry also reported that the Needs Assessment Analysis for the Improvement of Material and Human Resources Capacities of Residential Social Welfare Institutions for Children and the Youth (residential type) was also performed, which included four residential institutions for children and youth that provide residential care services to children and the youth without parental care, and the implementation of the Crossborder Cooperation Programme between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina was continued, through activities that included support in the implementation of the daycare service for children with behavioural disorders, participation in the preparation of the education programme entitled “Training for Implementation of Treatment for Behavioural Disorders in Children and the Youth in Social Welfare System”, as well as participation in the preparation of the “Handbook with Good Practice Examples for Establishment and Provision of the Daycare Service for Children with Behavioural Disorders”. They also stated that in 2024 a new Special Protocol for the Protection of Children from Violence in the field of Social Welfare was adopted, which was harmonised with the General Protocol for Protection of Children from Violence and distributed to all social work centres and service providers who work with children.

Such activities are welcomed, particularly having in mind the observable increasing number of cases of peer violence, which has increasingly severe forms.

Such was the case of murder of a pupil in the city of Leskovac by peers. We issued a public warning in that regard.

WARNING

Yesterday, a young life ended when a pupil was killed by his peers in the city of Leskovac. This, yet another extremely terrible and disturbing event is a symptom of a deeply-rooted problem of violence that manifests itself at all levels, among young people, politicians, citizens or activists in the streets. Physical violence, as the most extreme form of violence, is becoming an increasingly accepted pattern of behaviour in our society, denying tolerance, understanding and mutual respect, warned the Commissioner.

In recent months, there have been increasing reports of discrimination and violence among pupils and peers, while it is not uncommon for teachers and school staff to be the target of attacks and threats. An example of a school in Indija shows the absurd situation, where activities were organised to promote tolerance and normal communication, but, as a result, teachers become victims of hatred, threats, verbal and psychological violence and their work was reviewed by non-competent institutions, certain parents and extremist individuals.

We allowed aggressive communication and violence to be normalized, which inevitably spills over to children and young people. In just a few days, we witnessed scenes of violence in front of and in institutions, and even in the National Assembly, then on the streets, in public places and in connection with sport events. Social networks did not lag behind in promoting and sharing content that spreads hatred and incites violence. Thus, we witnessed various examples of posts in which an elderly person or a victim who was beaten up is ridiculed and belittled or, in another case, the finger is pointed at national affiliation and demands that state authorities, police and prosecutors to respond differently depending on national affiliation, in the latter case Romanian and Serbian.

This is a moment for a serious reviewing of the negative social patterns of behaviour that have become our reality. Each of us should, by giving our own example at home, at school, at work, in public space, show respect, appreciation and tolerance and say “no” to violence and discrimination. Violence causes new violence, leaves immeasurable consequences and destroys the fundamental values of every society.

During the year, the Commissioner continued activities relating to the improvement of children’s safety. As part of the project entitled “Together and Safely Through Childhood”, a new protocol on cooperation was concluded with the Ministry of

Interior, the Ministry of Education, the Criminal Police University, the Traffic Safety Agency, the OSCE Mission to the Republic of Serbia, and Caritas Serbia Association, with the aim of raising pupils' awareness of the recognition of various forms of violence and discrimination in real and virtual environment, as well as acquiring knowledge of safe behaviour in traffic and emergencies. As part of this project, in the first semester of the school year 2024/2025, a total of 17,023 workshops were held, which included 222,221 pupils of I, II, V and VIII grades. The workshops were implemented by 1,679 police officers, in cooperation with about 12,813 representatives of schools and with participation of 510 parents. It is positive and encouraging that pupils showed a certain progress in recognizing various forms and cases of discrimination after the workshops, with the percentage of correct answers at the beginning and end of the test increasing from 63% to 80%.

In addition, the Commissioner initiated the implementation of the project “The Commissioner’s Youth Panel for the Protection of Equality – Youth for Equality”, supported by the European Union Erasmus+ programme, in partnership with the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality of Croatia. The aim of the project is to improve equality of children and the youth through a number of activities that will empower the youth, raise their awareness of discrimination and improve communication with equality institutions. A peer education programme is also being developed, which is intended for the recognition and response to discrimination, as well as the establishment of a peer educators’ network, which is very important because young people best learn from each other. After training, peer educators will be included in the implementation of five educations in primary and secondary schools in Serbia, to raise awareness of equality, tolerance and non-discrimination. During the course of 2024, two trainings were held for peer educators, where they learned about the concept and forms of discrimination, protection mechanisms, and basic elements of public appearance and communication with participants of various age.



Training held as part of the project “The Commissioner’s Youth Panel for the Protection of Equality – Youth for Equality”, 2024

Safety of the youth was in the focus of the *Alternative Report on the Right of the Youth*⁸⁵ of the National Youth Council of Serbia. According to the findings of this Report, 43% of young respondents stated that they were exposed to any form of discrimination, which represents a significant decrease compared to the previous year (62%). A decline in age-based discrimination was also observed, from 38% to 27%, while the number of young people who were victims of violence motivated by personal characteristics decreased from 38% to 25%. These figures show a positive trend, but it is necessary to put more effort into ensuring youth safety. According to the results of this report, young people identify family relations as the primary cause of violence, and also deterioration of social values that swapped places with poor penal policy this year, that is the third leading cause of violence. What is worrying according to the findings of this Report is the data that the percentage of young people who believe violence can be justified increased from 42% to 52%. The majority of them justifies violence against the perpetrators of the most serious criminal offences (55%) and if the state or police is not doing their job (39%), which points to the need to improve social values and the legal system in Serbia.



Particular attention should be dedicated to children and youth, in particular in creating content and behaviours that imply tolerance, equality and respect of human rights. This is why we continually engage in communication with children and the youth in various manners, respecting their attitudes and opinions, we create activities in accordance with their wishes and needs, encouraging them to

85 *Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Youth in the Republic of Serbia – 2024*, National Youth Council of Serbia (NYCS), Belgrade, 2024, available at: https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Alternativni_izvestaj_2024.pdf

participate in these activities to the highest extent possible and to share the importance of the value of tolerance and equality to their peers. In his regard, we also launched the project entitled “Education for Equality” with the aim of promoting gender equality, tolerance, equality and elimination of violence in schools. The project was launched by opening the exhibition “Women of Serbian Culture” at the House of Jevrem Grujić in Belgrade, dedicated to important women in Serbian history who contributed significantly to Serbian history through their work, and was continued by a number of interactive workshops for pupils and teaching staff in primary and secondary schools across Serbia on the topic of anti-discrimination, protection mechanisms and gender equality, while ensuring that pupils from various ethnic and religious communities are included.

The Commissioner participates in the work of the *Coalition for the Improvement of the Position of the Youth at Risk*, formed by the National Association of Youth Work Practitioners (NAPOR) in partnership with the “SOS Children’s Villages Serbia” Foundation. This coalition gathers more than 50 representatives of various institutions, youth organisations, the business sector and media actors with the aim of developing specific recommendations to improve the position of the youth from vulnerable social categories, with a special focus on the topics in the field of housing, education, participation in decision-making and employment. During the preceding year, two coordination sessions were held to adopt the prepared normative proposals of relevance for the youth, in accordance with the existing strategic documents at the local and national levels.

The quality of education remains insufficient, which is confirmed by the PISA testing results that show a high level of functional illiteracy of the youth and increasing inequalities among pupils from various socioeconomic environments, states the *fifth annual report Human Rights of Youth in the Republic of Serbia*⁸⁶. This report states that in 2023 Serbia allocated a total of 3.1% of GDP for education, which is a significant decrease compared with the previous year. Also, the situation in the labour market did not improve significantly, and although the number of employed young people formally increased, less of them are employed in absolute figures than in 2011. Employment rate of young women saw a higher decline than employment rate of men, while two fifths of young people are employed for a definite period, which additionally increases their economic insecurity. This report states that the problem of housing remains prominent, since the average age when young people become independent is 31,4, meaning that many of them remain in their parent’s households even after they officially no longer belong to the youth category. High housing costs are a significant financial burden, because young

86 *Human Rights of Youth in the Republic of Serbia in 2023*, Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2024, available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/14z9s0cM85ieugrLQ7D9V1dzoMYiCCIex/view?usp=sharing>

people averagely spend minimum 40% of their income on these costs. The issue of safety of the youth has become one of the main problems, while peer and digital violence remain present. According to the findings of this survey, one in ten boys in primary schools was exposed to violence in school environment, while girls in the seventh grade mainly reported experiences with digital violence. In addition, increased civic activism by the youth was accompanied by restrictions on freedom of assembly and expression, including hate speech, attacks on activists, and verbal attacks by state officials.

The end of the year was marked by faculty blockades as a form of a protest due to dissatisfaction with the actions by the relevant authorities in connection with the tragedy that occurred when the canopy of the Novi Sad Railway Station building collapsed, killing 15 people and seriously injuring several others. Society has become polarized and public discourse has become more heated, with discriminatory and offensive speech, and also endangering the safety of protest participants.

In this regard, on the International Human Rights Day, the Commissioner pointed to increasing discrimination and the need for equal treatment of all citizens.

We celebrate the International Human Rights Day at a time of serious global turmoil in the exercise and protection of fundamental human rights. War conflicts, violence, hate speech and discrimination are increasingly present, said the Commissioner. Discrimination remains most common on the grounds of the Roma national affiliation, disability, sex, sexual orientation, and recently has become increasingly intense on the grounds of political and other beliefs.

She expressed concern about acting of the police and judicial authorities in the exercise of their powers towards various actors at public gatherings, reminding that state authorities must treat everyone equally. Equal treatment ensures the rule of law, while any unequal treatment creates a sense of injustice and increases tensions in society, which result in mutual conflicts, attacks on journalists, the premises of institutions and political parties, which we have witnessed in recent weeks.

Citizens' concerns, in any case where the public interest is at stake, should be taken seriously, responses should be provided in a timely manner and meaningful dialogue should be enabled in order to calm tensions, said the Commissioner.

The end of the year was marked by a statement given by member of parliament Vladimir Đukanović that caused public outrage and was the subject of condemnation in public discourse. A public warning was issued regarding this statement.

WARNING

A statement by member of parliament Vladimir Đukanović on Happy Television that children are the property of the state until they reach adulthood is absolutely unfounded, dangerous and should be condemned, said Commissioner Brankica Janković, adding that all other challenges to children's rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly are very worrying. Children are equal members of society who, as human beings, enjoy all rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution, laws and ratified international documents. Human beings are not and cannot be owned by anyone. Any misinterpretation and illegal calling on institutions, particularly social work centres, to restrict someone's rights and freedoms is prohibited.

The Commissioner also reminded that the Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees the right of children to participation, which also includes the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly, as well as the right of children to freely express their views on all matters, in accordance with their age and developmental capabilities. The state also has an obligation to respect children's views, as well as the responsibility to provide them with protection and safety at all times, including during gatherings. In addition, according to Article 2 of the Convention, the state has an obligation to take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of the child from all forms of discrimination or punishment on the grounds of the status, activities, expressed opinions or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians or family members. Finally, and in accordance with the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, every child has equal rights and protection in the family, society and the state, regardless of his or her personal characteristics and personal characteristics of parents, guardians or family members.

Continuing the activities to improve the position of the youth, the Commissioner held at the begging of the year meetings with representatives of the National Youth Council of Serbia and the Union of Secondary School Students of Serbia, which discussed the possibilities for cooperation and activities through which the Commissioner could contribute to the addressing of identified problems.

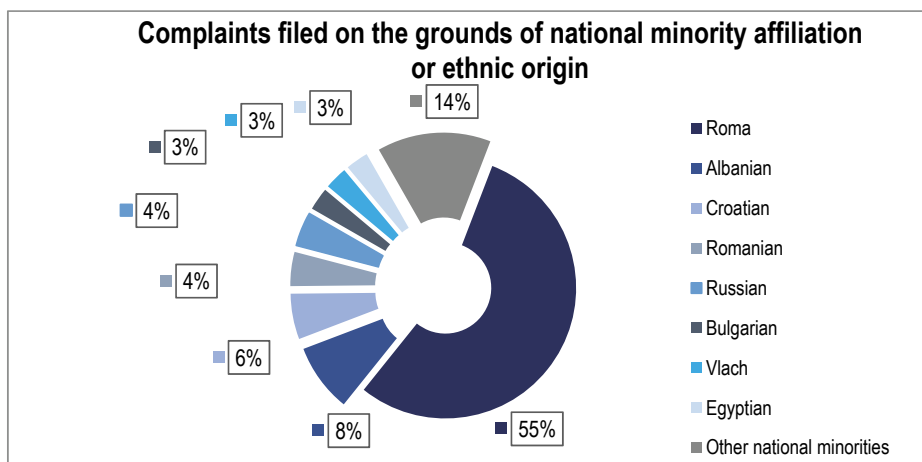
In the field of labour and employment, the Commissioner is also contacted by persons belonging to the so-called middle generation who are employed, who seek employment who cannot exercise all employment rights, such as the right to professional development, advancement, business travel etc. In this field we are also contacted by younger employees, pointing to the problems faced by "younger" employees. The practice shows that only middle-aged workers, but only for a very short period of time, are suitable for employers, and this is only if they do not have

health problems, if they are not planning a family etc. The position of employees is additionally complicated in case of women, women with disabilities, LGBTI population, members of certain national minorities etc. Examples from the Commissioner's practice are presented in parts of this Report relating to other personal characteristics.

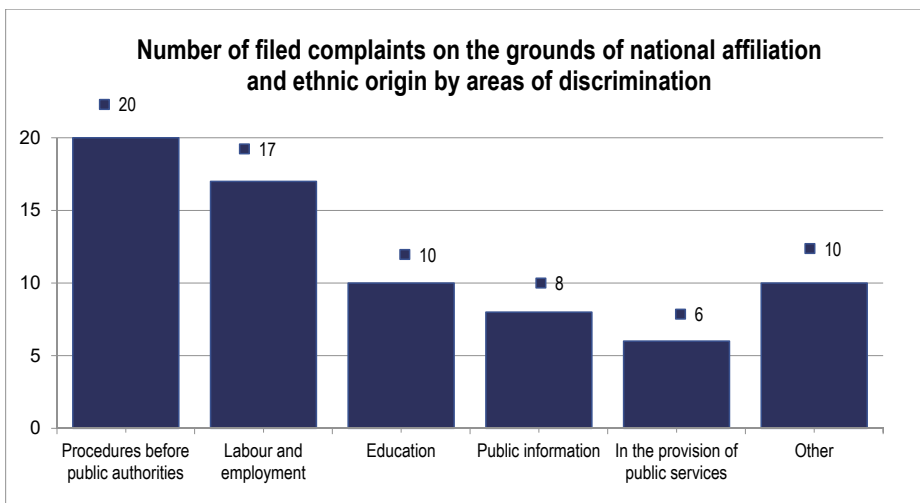
Relevant recommendations are issued based on the overview of the situation and the issues in the exercise of equality and the protection against discrimination on the grounds of age, which are provided in the summary of this Report.

DISCRIMINATION ON THE GROUNDS OF NATIONAL AFFILIATION OR ETHNIC ORIGIN

Out of the total number of citizens' communications, the Commissioner formed 71 cases pursuant to complaints on the grounds of national affiliation or ethnic origin as a personal characteristic, making it the fifth most common discriminatory ground.



As in previous years, the highest number of filed complaints related to discrimination members of the Roma national minority – 39, accounting for 55% of all complaints filed for discrimination on these grounds. In terms of frequency of complaints, these were followed by complaints by the Albanian national minority (6), Croatian (4), Romanian (3), Russian (3), Bulgarian (2), Vlach (2), Egyptian (2) and one complaint each from the Bosniak, Ashkali, Bunjevci, German, Macedonian, Ruthenian, Montenegrin, Jewish, and Tsincaré national minorities, while in one case no nationality was stated. As in the previous year, most of the complaints were filed by natural persons (43), predominantly men (26), while civil society organisations filed 22 complaints.



As in the previous year, the highest number of complaints was filed in the area of procedures before public authorities (20), followed by the areas of labour and employment (17), education and vocational training (10), public information and the media (8), in the provision of public services (6), health care (4), the public sphere/general public (4), private relations (1), housing (1). The area of public sphere includes social networks, various platforms and other places accessible to the public.

Some of the observed instances of progress:

- The rate of compliance with issued recommendations remains exceptionally high ;
- Issuing of documents to previously legally invisible persons has been improved;
- Constant increase in the rate of inclusion of children of Roma nationality in the education system, with mentoring as a proven effective method in the education process for Roma children;
- 1097 scholarships have been awarded to pupils of the Roma national minority and a significant number of pupils has been provided with free textbooks;
- 281 pedagogical assistants have been hired for Roma pupils, including 239 in primary schools, 10 in secondary schools and 32 in preschool facilities;
- Analysis of the Implementation of Roma Social Inclusion for the period 2023/2024 has been conducted;
- 73 members of the Roma national minority exercised the right to grants for the purchase of a rural house with garden;
- Progress has been achieved in media reporting through a more responsible approach, which avoids reporting on national affiliation where this information is not essential, thus contributing to less prejudice and stereotypes.

Among the key issues are the following:

- A new Action Plan on the Exercise of National Minority Rights has not been adopted;
- The staff composition of certain public authorities does not match the national makeup of the population in the territories covered by those authorities;
- Persisting stereotypes and prejudice and unacceptable speech, especially against Roma, as well as other national minorities in individual cases ;
- Continuing huge problems faced by substandard settlements, with limited access to water and electricity;
- Undefined/uncertain status of Roma coordinators and health mediators;
- Insufficient use of regulatory impact assessment to determine the impact of regulations and policies on socioeconomically vulnerable persons and other groups can result in measures that do not sufficiently take into account their specific needs and position, which in turn brings about to their further marginalisation and aggravates their situation.

Members of a number of different national minorities live in Serbia, and their rights are guaranteed in accordance with the regulations and international standards. Under the Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities⁸⁷, a national minority is any group of citizens of the Republic of Serbia which is sufficiently representative in terms of numbers, although it constitutes a minority in the territory of the Republic, which belongs to a population group that has had a lasting and strong bond with the territory and has its own distinctive characteristic such as language, culture, national or ethnic affiliation, origin or religion, which make it distinct from the majority of the population, and whose members cherish their shared identity, including culture, tradition, language or religion. The Register of National Councils lists 24 such councils, which are self-government bodies responsible for the exercise of rights in the fields of culture, education, information and official use of language and script. National Councils have been established for the following minority communities: Albanians, Ashkali, Bulgarians, Bunjevci, Bosniaks, Vlachs, Gorani, Greeks, Egyptians, Hungarians, Macedonians, Germans, Poles, Roma, Romanians, Russians, Ruthenians, Slovaks, Slovenes, Ukrainians, Croats, Montenegrins and Czechs. In addition, the Executive Board of the Union of Jewish Municipalities of Serbia, performs the function of a national council in accordance with the law.

87 *Official Gazette of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia No. 11/2002, Official Gazette of Serbia and Montenegro No. 1/2003 – Constitutional Charger and Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia Nos. 72/2009 - new law, 97/2013 – Constitutional Court decision and 47/2018*



As national minority councils are important partners in the efforts to prevent discrimination, in 2024 the Commissioner cooperated with the OSCE Mission to Serbia to hold three trainings for the members of such councils, with the aim of building their capacities to combat discrimination. The trainings were held in Palić, Pančevo and Kopaonik, thus completing the training cycle for all national councils. The trainings presented the legal antidiscrimination framework and the role of the Commissioner's institution and included workshops which enabled the participants to learn about antidiscrimination mechanisms through practical examples.

To further advance cooperation with the national councils and gain a more thorough understanding of the challenges faced by members of national minorities, in 2024 the incumbent Commissioner visited 19 national councils. The visits included discussions on the position of their respective communities and the problems they faced. Most of the national councils stated the allocated budget funds were not sufficient,



while some national councils pointed out that the identity of members of national minorities was not sufficiently acknowledged or that media reports unnecessarily insisted on national affiliation in a negative context. Furthermore, they said they faced fewer problems concerning the official use of language, but believed affirmative measures were needed to promote the employment of members of national minorities. On the other hand, some councils stated they had experienced no

problems and were well accepted in the community and did not face discrimination. Visits to the councils are scheduled to continue throughout 2025.



During the year, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Kairat Abdrakhmanov visited the institution and discussed with the incumbent the state of exercise and protection of national minority rights in Serbia, as well as the activities undertaken by the Commissioner in this regard. The two parties noted that continuity and commitment were key for advancing equality across all fields, and that independent equality institutions had a crucial role in the exercise and protection of human rights of all citizens.

According to the available data, as well as the Commissioner's practice, the position of the Roma community has been improving year after year, although numerous problems persist. Roma are still subjected to all forms of direct and indirect discrimination in all segments of social life, including education, employment, media reporting, political participation and housing. According to the results of the survey "*Attitudes of Citizens towards Discrimination*"⁸⁸, Roma are recognised as the social group against which discrimination is the most prevalent (61%).

In the course of 2024, complaints filed by members of the Roma national minority pointed to inadequate housing conditions in informal settlements, fear of forcible eviction from those settlements, problems with school enrolment, instances of high numbers of Roma pupils grouped in a single class or separate classes just for Roma children in schools near Roma settlements, difficulties in finding employment, humiliating and offensive treatment in the provision of services or in the exercise of various rights, and even hate speech expressed through graffiti, social media posts and statements made in the public space.

Affirmative measures in various areas contribute to improved position of the Roma minority, especially in the long term. According to the *European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) Report on Serbia*⁸⁹, enrolment of Roma students in compulsory preparatory pre-school programmes has increased

88 *Report on the Citizens' Perception of Discrimination in Serbia*, Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, 2023

89 *ECRI Report on Serbia (sixth monitoring cycle)*, European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, 2024, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/fourth-ecri-report-on-serbia-translation-in-serbian-/1680b06415>

(76% of Roma pupils living in substandard settlements are enrolled, versus to 63% when the last ECRI report was adopted in 2017). Also, 85.4% of Roma children attend primary school, while 64% complete primary school. The primary to secondary school transition rate for Roma pupils is 52.6%, and the secondary school completion rate is 61%. However, the attendance and completion rates are still lower for Roma children than for the general pupil population; in comparison, 99% of children from the general population have completed primary school and 98% have completed secondary school. The majority of Roma respondents (85%) included in the survey *Perception of the Roma Community on Discrimination* conducted by the Commissioner in 2024⁹⁰. However, notwithstanding these improvements, this institution's practice shows that instances of discrimination against Roma men and women in the field of education are not uncommon. Thus, for example, a complaint alleged that a pupil had created a discriminatory and offensive "meme" in an IT class targeting another pupil of Roma ethnicity. The school treated this case as an "inappropriate joke" and imposed disciplinary measures both on the pupil who created the meme and on the Roma boy, which led to a further sense of injustice and inadequate protection. Instead of supporting the victim, the school focused on his alleged omissions, such as non-attendance and poor academic performance. As a result of insufficient protection and failure to take appropriate action, the boy was forced to transfer to a different school. The Commissioner determined that the school had not complied with its obligations under the law, which include assessing the level of discrimination, creating a protection plan, conducting a school disciplinary procedure and reporting the case to the competent school administration. It was recommended that the school should issue a written warning to its pupil of Roma ethnicity, provide antidiscrimination training to its employees and undertake all necessary measures in the future to protect the rights of pupils and prevent similar cases. The recommendation has been complied with.

To improve the equality of Roma pupils, there are 281 Roma pedagogical assistants in the system according to the data of the Ministry of Education, including 239 pedagogical assistants in primary schools, 10 in secondary schools and 32 at preschool facilities. In the past 4 school years, the Ministry hired 56 new pedagogical assistants. All pedagogical assistants have access to free remote training under the title "Training for pedagogical assistants for children and pupils of Roma ethnicity in need of additional support in education".

In the school year 2024/2025, 2,502 pupils of Roma ethnicity were enrolled in the first year of secondary school through the application of affirmative measures, and 1097 scholarships were awarded to pupils belonging to the Roma national

90 Survey "Perception of the Roma Community on Discrimination", 2024, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Percepcija-romske-zajednc-o-diskriminaciji.pdf>

minority. These measures resulted in the inclusion of 0% Roma children in the Preschool Preparation Programme, the share of Roma children enrolled in primary school was increased by 15%, while the rate of progression to secondary school was increased by 20%. The share of Roma girls in secondary education has increased to 27%.⁹¹

One of the most severe forms of discrimination in educational institutions is segregation. The creation of classes made up exclusively of Roma children violates the principles of inclusive education and prevents their socialisation and fostering mutual understanding among pupils of different nationalities. This challenge is still prevalent, as evidenced by citizens' complaints. The Commissioner issued seven recommendations of measures to schools and to one school administration in connection with the creation of classes made up predominantly of Roma pupils. The greatest issue in these cases is the fact that, in some of the settlements where the schools are located, non-Roma population is scarce or the population is mostly made up of elderly persons, without children. It was recommended that the schools and the School Administration concerned should draw up a detailed and comprehensive desegregation plan and undertake urgent measures and activities in accordance with the Bylaw on the Course of Action of Institutions in Case of Suspected or Determined Discriminatory Behaviour and in Cases of Insults to the Reputation, Honour or Dignity of Persons. The schools and the School Administration concerned informed the Commissioner within the statutory period they had had a joint meeting and had begun developing a desegregation plan for each school.

During the reporting year, the Commissioner cooperated with the Ministry of Education, the Council of Europe Office in Belgrade and the European Roma Rights Centre to organise a conference under the title "Light and Shadow – Roma Children in the Education System", which addressed the challenges faced by Roma children in the education system, as well as the possible solutions to advance their educational situation. The Commissioner's survey *Perception of the Roma Community on Discrimination*⁹², conducted within the framework of an EU and CoE programme, was also presented at this event. We brought together key stakeholders, including representatives of the Ministry of education, the Council of Europe and NGOs, to discuss ways to improve inclusion and reduce discrimination in education. The conference was an opportunity to share experiences and identify key steps towards a more equal education system for Roma children.

91 Data provided to the Commissioner by the Ministry of Education in connection with compliance of state authorities with the recommendations for achieving equality set out in the Regular Annual Report of Commissioner for the Protection of Equality for 2023

92 This survey was recognised as one of the activities under the Action Plan for 2022–2024 aimed at implementing the Strategy on Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia in 2022–2030.



Conference “Light and Shadow – Roma Children in the Education System”, 2024

The Roma community also faces challenges in employment, with many of them working in the informal sector or unemployed. Consistent application of measures aimed at ensuring inclusion, coupled with fostering of cooperation among institutions and local self-governments, remains a priority for improving their position. The said Commissioner’s survey on the perception of discrimination by the Roma community has shown that nearly half of the respondents (47%) believed Roma faced more difficulties when looking for employment because employers did not want them in their businesses⁹³. In one sector, Roma still account for less than 0.1% of the workforce⁹⁴.

We have issued recommended measures to the General Secretariat of the Government of the Republic of Serbia to ensure full implementation of the Government’s Resolution which provides for the hiring of all 44 members of the Roma national minority who successfully completed the Roma Vocational Training Programme organised by the National Academy of Public Administration. Out of the 44 persons who had completed the programme, only 19 were hired under temporary contracts. The recommendation of measures stated it was necessary to undertake all further measures and activities in accordance with the powers laid down by the Law on Government and the Government’s Rules of Procedure, to ensure full implementation of the said Resolution and enable the hiring of all 44 members of the Roma national minority who completed the programme.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/77-24-preporuka-mera-generalnom-sekretarijatu-vlade/>

93 Survey “Perception of the Roma Community on Discrimination”, 2024, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Percepcija-romske-zajednc-o-diskriminaciji.pdf>

94 ECRI Report on Serbia (sixth monitoring cycle), 2024

In settlements across Serbia that are mostly or entirely populated by members of the Roma national minority, poor housing conditions remain a major issue and a threat to fundamental human rights, as well as the dignity and quality of life of people. Complaints regarding poor living conditions in these settlements concern health issues, state of hygiene and hazards arising from inadequate infrastructure.

We issued recommended measures to the City Municipality of Savski Venac, advising it to refrain from forcible resettlement of the population of Roma settlements until alternative accommodation has been provided that meets the criteria of adequate housing, in accordance with the national legislation and international standards. Furthermore, the Commissioner recommended that the entire process of resettlement and provision of accommodation should be carried out with the active participation of those persons, acknowledging their specific needs and the right to participate in the making of decisions that concern their lives, including on matters of resettlement and social integration. The City Municipality of Savski Venac informed us they had not taken any action to demolish or resettle the sites and municipal inspectors had been sent to the site pursuant to reports filed by citizens.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/677-24-preporuka-mera-gradskoj-opstini-savski-venac/>

Another recommendation of measures was issued to the City Municipality of Zvezdara for the same reasons. The municipality informed us that the Municipal Inspectorate of the City Municipality of Zvezdara had acted pursuant to a report filed by citizens alleging that an illegal dumpsite had been formed at the address in question and found that the land plot was privately owned and did not constitute public land, and it therefore contacted the owner of the land plot. They further claimed that, pursuant to this, the City Municipality of Zvezdara had published a brief communication on its website which made no mention of any resettlement of the Roma population, and most certainly made no mention of the President of the Municipality, noting that one of the priorities of the City Municipality of Zvezdara was protection of the rights of national minorities. It was further stated that Zvezdara had adopted a Local Action Plan on Improving the Position of the Roma Population, in accordance with the Strategy for Improving the Position of Roma Roma in the Republic of Serbia, which included improvement of the living conditions for the Roma population as one of its primary goals, and the said municipality had been implementing projects relevant for improving the position of the Roma population for years.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/rs/610-24-preporuka-mera-go-zvezdara/>

Poverty is one of the greatest challenges for any family and it affects the quality of life of all its members. In the provision of social welfare and guardianship services, it is vital to comprehensively assess the needs and strengths of and the

risks to the beneficiary, along with capacity building for the family and appropriate financial support. In connection with the measure of removal of children from the family, the Commissioner notes that financial and material poverty or conditions associated with such poverty must not be used as justification for removing a child from parental care; instead, such situation should be seen above all as a warning to provide the family with appropriate support. There are, of course, situations where the child has to be removed to protect his/her interest, health and safety, but the underlying assessment for doing so is the responsibility of social work centres. It is necessary to reinforce trust in the work of these services and ensure coordination between different services in such procedures.

The Social Work Centre in Žitište was issued with a recommended measures urging it to undertake all measures within its mandate to provide the social welfare services needed to improve family relations, skills and parental competencies and create a safe and secure environment to expedite the possible return of children to the family. It was also recommended that, upon review and possible return of children to the family, the Centre should cooperate with other services in the local community and family members to undertake the necessary measures to empower the family, in order to prevent or eliminate circumstances that could result in repeated removal of the children. The Centre informed the Commissioner that the children had been returned to the family because the conditions for their return had been met and the Centre had continued providing support and assistance to the family. For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/134-24-preporuka-mera-csr-zbog-izmestanja-dece-iz-siromasnih-porodica/>

Hate speech, the use of derogatory terms and spreading of stereotypes and prejudice in the media and on social networks can encourage discrimination, especially when public figures and officials set a bad example with their statements and tend to “normalise” such narrative. According to the Survey on the Perception of the Roma Community on Discrimination, as many as 79% of respondents believe that there is hate speech directed at Roma in the media and on social networks. For example, member of parliament Branimir Nestorović called opposition representatives “Gypsies” in the National Assembly and referred to their behaviour as “gypsyism”. Shortly thereafter, the member of parliament made a similar statement on a television show, where he used the derogatory term “Gypsies”, along with a comment indicative of negative stereotypes and prejudice. In this instance, the Commissioner found that discrimination had occurred and recommended that the member of parliament should issue a written apology and take care not to breach antidiscrimination legislation when discharging his duties and performing his activities in the future and refrain from making statements that are insulting to the dignity of members of the Roma national minority.

Direct contact is essential when working with members of the Roma community, as many cases of discrimination remain unreported and persons are often denied the exercise of their rights for different reasons, including lack of information, fear of reporting and lack of trust in the work of state authorities.



In 2024, the incumbent Commissioner visited Mothers' Centre "Aurora Mine" in Veliki Mokri Lug, which marked the

start of a series of scheduled field activities. In cooperation with the Council of Europe Office in Belgrade and the Vojvodina Roma Centre, nine forums were held in Roma settlements, which included interviews with more than 200 residents in Obrenovac, Kraljevo, Ripanj, Zvezdara, Novi Sad, Kostolac, Preševo, Bečej and Ub. The aim of these activities was to make it easier for members of the Roma national minority to recognize discrimination, point them to the available protection mechanisms and encourage them to report cases of discrimination.

These visits also resulted in a certain number of complaints. Thus, the Vojvodina Roma Centre approached us on behalf of the residents of the Bogdanovica settlement in the municipality of Ub, due to the problems caused by the expansion of the city landfill located in the immediate vicinity of the Roma settlement, which created unbearable odours and public health hazards, as well as risk of spreading of diseases, especially during the summer months.

The Commissioner issued a recommendation to the Municipality of Ub, advising it, in view of the need for urgent measures aim at providing safe living and housing conditions in the Bogdanovica settlement, to start working on rehabilitation and reclamation of the unsanitary landfill as soon as possible, including in particular the section of the landfill that had spread towards the settlement populated predominantly by members of the Roma national minority, until an appropriate solution is found and a Regional Sanitary Landfill is built in the territory of the Municipality of Ub.

The Municipality of Ub replied that the construction of the Regional Center for Municipal Non-Hazardous Waste Management "Eko-Tamnava" d.o.o. Ub was underway and that, once completed, it would incorporate the Regional Sanitary Landfill for Municipal Non-Hazardous Waste "Kalenic", which was situated in the territory of the Municipality of Ub and was expected to be constructed by the end of 2025.

They stated that the Regional Sanitary Landfill was not in the vicinity of any settlement and was situated in a devastated within the perimeter of the open-pit coal mine of the “Kolubara” Mining Basin. Before the construction of the Regional Centre is completed and before the commissioning of the Regional Sanitary Landfill, all unsanitary landfills near the 11 cities and municipalities participating in the project are scheduled to be rehabilitated and reclaimed, including the unsanitary landfill in Bogdanovica.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/rs/536-24-preporuka-mera-opstini-ub/>

In order to improve protection against discrimination and improve the position of Roma, a meeting was held with the group “Ambassadors against Gypsyism”⁹⁵ which brings together young people from the Roma community and the majority population. The group is actively involved in eliminating offensive and harmful stereotypes and combating discrimination in all spheres of social life. In the meeting, the parties underscored the need for continual education and awareness raising on the rights of Roma and the importance of greater coverage of these topics in the education curricula, which is a recommendation the Commissioner has been constantly reiterating. Furthermore, a representative of the Commissioner took part as a lecturer in the Roma Summer School of Human Rights, which was held in Athens and organised by the European Roma Centre for Human Rights, and presented the practice of the institution and the state of play regarding the achievement of equality.

The difficult position of Roma women is evidenced by the data presented in the already mentioned *Survey on Perception of Women at Increased Risk of Discrimination on Gender Equality*⁹⁵, which identified Roma women (49%), single mothers (36.6%) and poor women (35.5%) as the most vulnerable groups. The Commissioner has established cooperation with the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation, which runs the “Girls’ Club”, aimed at Roma girls of secondary school age, who are at the greatest risk of entering into child marriage. Through this cooperation, girls are empowered to continue their education. As members of the National Coalition to end Child Marriage, for the eighth edition of the coalition’s newsletter we have prepared a text on the topic of child marriage through the lens of the fight against discrimination, with the aim of raising awareness about this type of violation of children’s rights.

Other national minorities have also contacted the Commissioner during the year, albeit to a lesser extent.

95 *Survey on Perception of Women at Increased Risk of Discrimination on Gender Equality*, 2024 <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/istrazivanje-o-percepciji-zena-u-vecem-riziku-od-diskriminacije-o-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti/>

A complaint filed by the National Council of the Albanian National Minority concerned a piece of graffiti which read “*Death to [derogatory term for Albanians]*”, written in green paint in the car park of a Medical Centre, and a message written on paper which read “Death to [derogatory term for Albanians], we don’t want you, Kosovo is Serbia”, which had been put up at the entrance door to the children’s ward. Immediately after the Commissioner’s recommendation, the Municipality of Bujanovac and the Health Centre informed the Commissioner the graffiti had been painted over and the paper with the message had been removed and handed over to the police as evidence. Graffiti and messages such as these can engender an atmosphere of hostility and intolerance between different groups, which is especially dangerous in multiethnic communities.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/604-24-preporuka-mera-za-ostvarivanje-ravnopravnosti-opstini-bujanovac/>

Following a communication from the National Council of the Albanian National Minority, the Medical Centre of Preševo was issued with recommended measures, advising it that, after obtaining approval to expand its staffing plan and fill the vacancies at that institution, it should issue the vacancy announcements also in the language of the Albanian national minority, which is in official use in that municipality. The municipality was also advised that, when selecting candidates in the hiring process, it should take due account of the ethnic composition of the population in that municipality, to ensure appropriate representation of members of national minorities.

The National Council of the Bosniak National Minority contacted the Commissioner in connection with an article posted on the website of a daily newspaper, under the heading “Hidden Agenda behind Attempts to Change Curriculum at the University of Novi Pazar”. The Council claimed that the analyses presented and the statements made by the interviewees included breaches of the regulations pertaining to the status and rights of national minorities. In the course of the procedure it was found, among other things, that the subtitle of the article read: “Passions run high at the State University of Novi Pazar over a Non-existent Language”, while the introductory passage refers to the “introduction of a non-existent language”. Without getting into an analysis of the scientific views of the differences between languages and the standards a language should meet to be considered distinct, in this particular case the Commissioner pointed to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, specifically Article 3 of the Law on Ratification of the Charter which lists the languages to which the provisions of the Charter shall apply, including the Bosnian language. Therefore, considering the fact that the Charter has been ratified and has been incorporated in Serbia’s legal system, it

is legally binding for all. The daily newspaper “Večernje Novosti” was issued with a recommendation to make sure its articles comply with the provisions of Law on Ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the provisions of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination which prohibit the dissemination of ideas, views and opinions that insult the dignity of persons or incite discrimination on the grounds of national affiliation.⁹⁶

The National Council of the Ashkali National Minority pointed to an incident which had occurred in Novi Sad, when persons of Ashkali ethnicity were attacked by attackers who used insults and swear words and damaged their car. The Commissioner applied to the Supreme Public Prosecutor’s Office to take appropriate action, as the authority in charge of overseeing and guiding the work of public prosecutors’ offices. In our communication, we asked for urgent action and stated that the incumbent Commissioner had issued a warning which condemned such behaviour and other similar acts in the strongest possible terms.⁹⁷ The Supreme Public Prosecutor’s Office informed us of the measures undertaken by the Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office of Novi Sad, which decided to prosecute the offence as violent behaviour referred to in Article 344 paragraph 1 of the Criminal Code, in conjunction with Article 54a of the same Code, since the available data suggested that the criminal act had possibly been committed out of hatred due to the family’s national and religious affiliation.

We were also contacted by a citizen of Montenegrin descent, who drew attention to negative comments posted on media portals which painted members of national minorities in a negative context (e.g. comments posted to a news article on the portal N1Info.rs under the heading “Montenegrin Government adopts Amendments to the Resolution on Srebrenica”, including the following comment: “Personally, I would deport all of THESE Montenegrins in Serbia to Srebrenica”). In connection with this issue, measures were recommended for the portal N1Info.rs. The N1 portal informed the Commissioner that the comment to which the reader had objected had been deleted and issued an apology on behalf of the editorial board and the moderation team for this omission, noting it had been unintentional.⁹⁸

The incumbent Commissioner also condemned the inappropriate and discriminatory media reporting on the events in Banjsko Polje regarding the investigation into the disappearance of a child and the stigmatisation of all members of the Vlach national minority.

96 For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/597-24-preporuka-mera-zastovarivanje-ravnopravnosti-i-zastite-od-diskriminacije/>

97 For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/rs/upozorenje-za-javnost-14/>

98 For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/564-24-preporuka-mera-medijskoj-platформи/>

WARNING

The Commissioner warns that focusing on anyone's national, religious or ethnic affiliation in media reporting on criminal offences, investigations, suspects, perpetrators or victims does not contribute in any way to better understanding of the events; instead, it just serves to portray all members of a social group in a negative context.

We have witnessed that media coverage of the tragedy in Banjsko Polje included multiple references to the national affiliation of the persons suspected of committing and being complicit in the commission of the crime, including as one of such inappropriate claims the statement made by the Head of the Criminal Police Directorate, Ninoslav Cmolić, on a television channel with national coverage.

The Commissioner underscores that criminal liability is individual and criminal offences have no nationality or racial, religious or other affiliation and notes that media must ensure their reporting complies with the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination and the Bylaw on the Protection of Human Rights in the Provision of Media Services, which provides that, in media reporting on a criminal offence or other unlawful act, it is not allowed to state the national, ethnic or other affiliation or orientation of the person suspected of or convicted for the commission of such offence, unless such characteristic is relevant for proper understanding of the reported information.

The Commissioner received three complaints alleging that a food delivery company had refused to hire Russians. Since the complaints did not contain the elements required under the law to conduct the procedure, the complainants were asked to supplement the complaints so they could be acted upon. As the requested information was not provided, the procedure could not continue and was consequently terminated.

Towards the end of the year, the incumbent Commissioner issued a warning in connection with discriminatory social network posts by public figures which insulted members of the Romanian national minority. The warning was issued specifically taking into account that the posts had been made by public figures, whose influence on public opinion was greater, and such unacceptable content prohibited by the law was made available to a wider audience, considering the number of followers the public figure in question had on social networks.

WARNING

In connection with an Instagram post by singer Jelena Karleuša, which called for the denial of the right to equality to a member of the Romanian national minority and incited hatred, the incumbent Commissioner stated such speech was unacceptable and condemnable. Linking the work of state authorities, police, prosecutors and courts to the nationality of a person or group of persons, calling for different treatment, hatred and labelling based on nationality, ethnic origin or any other personal characteristic is dangerous and prohibited by law, the Commissioner warned.

The Commissioner stated that, under the Constitution, all citizens have the right to equal treatment and legal protection, without discrimination, noting that the Republic of Serbia is the state of the Serbian people and all citizens who live in it, based on the rule of law and social justice, the principles of civil democracy, human and minority rights and freedoms and adherence to European principles and values. The Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination clearly outlaws hate speech and any expression of discriminatory views, insults or disparagement based on national affiliation, ethnic origin or any other personal characteristic.

As a society, we should be able to understand that words are not harmless; they carry a specific weight and, when spoken in public, they can have serious consequences, because they can easily become tools for spreading hatred and intolerance.

Discriminatory views and statements, in particular those coming from public figures, must not be tolerated, especially at a time when mutual respect and tolerance are increasingly giving way to violence. Our fellow citizens, members of the Romanian national minority, have an equal and important place in our society and no one has the right to insult and stigmatise them. I am convinced that such unacceptable statements by individuals cannot affect our traditionally good neighbourly relations with Romania, rooted in respect, mutual understanding and cooperation, noted the Commissioner in conclusion.

Four complaints, including three by the same complainant, were filed on multiple discriminatory grounds, including: affiliation with the Croatian national minority, sex, gender, property status, income level, health status and age, and in connection with the exercise of parental rights and the court proceedings conducted pursuant to that matter. The procedures were terminated in accordance with the law, since the matter is being decided in a court proceeding.

A complaint on the grounds of affiliation with the Croatian national minority was filed against an employer in connection with the celebration of a religious

holiday, namely the Catholic Christmas. In the course of the procedure, it was determined that the complainant had not been denied the right to celebrate the religious holiday and that the employer's acting or failure to act in connection with the granting of paid leave on days which are not religious holidays in accordance with the Law on Public and Other Holidays was not causally related to the complainant's national affiliation or religious beliefs. It was also determined in the course of the procedure that she had, upon her request, always been granted additional days off immediately after the religious holiday in previous years. Employees have the right not to work on the days of religious holidays, which are set by the law, and the day of celebration of the Catholic Christmas according to the law is the 25th of December as the first day of the holidays, regardless whether the day is otherwise a week day or a day when businesses are normally closed.

The Commissioner condemned the graffiti against the Jewish community which,



according to media reports, appeared on several locations in Belgrade, noting that such symbols constituted a serious violation of the law and of universal principles of human rights. She stated any graffiti that incited hatred or violence should be condemned, whether they are racist, fascist, xenophobic or an individual act of intolerance.

In connection with the International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which is marked on the 27th of January, the Commissioner said we as a society had the duty to preserve the memory and pass it over to the new generations, to avoid a repetition of the horrors of World War II. This is not only a responsibility we owe to the past, but also the cornerstone of the future, because it is incumbent upon each and every one of us to oppose all ideologies that threaten human rights and freedoms.

In a conference on online hate speech, the parties underscored the importance of combating antisemitism, especially in the digital space. The Internet, as a virtually uncontrolled space, often enables the spreading of hate speech and antisemitism, which calls for an urgent response and engagement by the society, institutions and individuals in the fight against such negative phenomena. Accordingly, the incumbent Commissioner participated in the



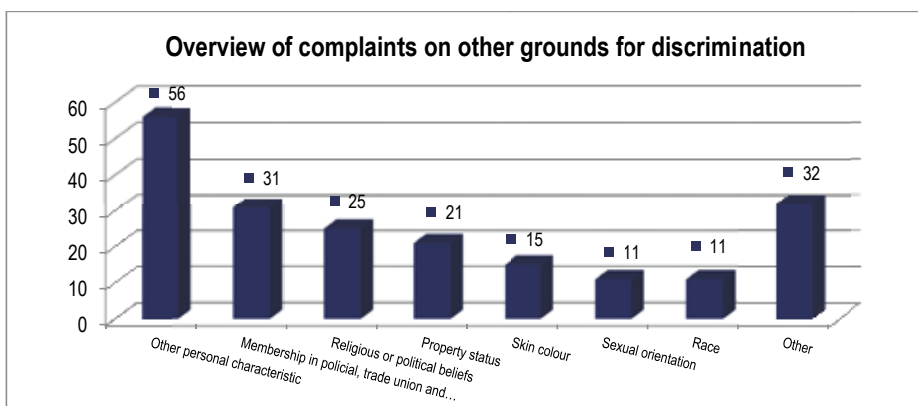
international panel and exhibition “Countering Antisemitism Online – Challenges and Opportunities”, which was part of a broader international event on the digital space and antisemitism, after which she met with the European Commission’s Coordinator on Combating Antisemitism, Katharina von Schnurbein.

The Commissioner’s work has also been recognised internationally, as demonstrated by the invitation for the incumbent Commissioner to be a cofounder of a new global UNESCO network of officials to combat racism and discrimination.

Based on the examined state of play and issues in the achievement of equality and protection against discrimination on the grounds of national affiliation or ethnic origin as a personal characteristic, we issued the relevant recommendations presented in the summary section of this Report.

COMPLAINTS CONCERNING OTHER PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

After the detailed presentation of the individual personal characteristics which accounted for the highest number of filed complaints, the following section provides a cumulative overview of the personal characteristics stated as discriminatory grounds in fewer complaints. In terms of frequency of complaints, the next most common discriminatory grounds were membership in political, trade union and other organisations (31), religious or political beliefs (25), property status (21), skin colour (15), sexual orientation (11), race (11), gender identity (9), appearance (8), previous criminal conviction (7), followed by fewer complaints on the grounds of citizenship, language and birth, as shown in the graph below. There were also a number of complaints on the grounds of some other personal characteristic,



i.e. a personal characteristic not explicitly listed in the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination (such as place of permanent or temporary residence, different treatment of educational institutions depending on the form of property of their owners or asylee, refugee or internally displaced person status).

Discrimination on the Grounds of Membership in Political, Trade Union and Other Organisations and on the Grounds of Religious and Political Beliefs

In 2024, we formed 31 cases pursuant to complaints on the grounds of membership in political, trade union and other organisations and 25 on the grounds religious or political beliefs, in most cases relating to discrimination in the area of labour and employment, as well as in other areas, such as public information and the media, procedures before public authorities and activities in trade unions, political parties, NGOs and other organisations.

This situation is understandable, as the right to work is crucial to one's livelihood. People are particularly sensitive with regard to this area of social life, and it is in this area that all other injustices or violations of rights are perceived as discrimination. It is therefore essential to continue efforts to improve the knowledge about protection mechanisms, and also the very concept and forms of discrimination, not only among employees, but among employers as well.

In the course of presentation of evidence in certain procedures pursuant to complaints, it has been observed that complainants or witnesses often identify as a major issue party-political hiring or preferential treatment in the hiring process for members of ruling political parties, claiming that they fear the consequences of reporting and therefore choose not to file complaints or withdraw from the procedure because it cannot be conducted pursuant to anonymous reports. For the same reason, it is not uncommon for witnesses proposed by the complainants to refuse to testify.

The Commissioner's practice suggests that, with complaints on these grounds, the complainants usually consider they were disadvantaged for being or not being members of a particular trade union or political party and believe they were prevented from exercising a right for that reason. Y In some cases, they also claimed they were unable to find employment because they were not politically active and were not members of any political party or were members of a political party that was not in power, and were demoted or even dismissed because of their dissenting positions or opinions or because of how they voted.

This situation is best illustrated by an example from the Commissioner's practice. Our interviews with citizens have confirmed there have been numerous other similar cases. What lends gravity to this particular case is the fact that the City Administration failed to comply with the recommendation even after being issued with a warning, unlike many other cases involving public authorities, as such action engenders the feeling of resignation and may deter citizens from seeking protection. Such behaviour sends the message that those who have the power of decision-making and management are untouchable and protected, so they can break laws at will.

In the procedure pursuant to a complaint filed by the Association of Free and Independent Trade Unions against the City Administration of the City of Kragujevac for discrimination on the grounds of membership in political, trade union and other organisations, the complainant stated he was a trustee of this trade union organisation and that, after refusing to sign up as a capillary voter for the political party in power, he had been reassigned three days later to guard and handle the seal of a local community in which there were no basic working conditions and in which no one had worked for many years – there was no drinking water, no toilet facilities, the ceiling was collapsing, there was no heating and the premises were difficult to access. After conducting the procedure and finding facts, having established that the competent inspectorate had determined that the premises to which the complainant was assigned were unfit for use, the Commissioner issued the opinion that the City Administration of the City of Kragujevac had breached the provisions of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination. It was recommended that it should undertake urgent measures and activities to enable the complainant to perform his duties without hindrance on his previous post and on the premises where he previously worked, to issue a written apology to the complainant and to refrain from breaching the anti-discrimination legislation in the future.

Since the City Administration of the City of Kragujevac failed to comply with the recommendation, even after a warning, within the statutory period of 30 days, the incumbent Commissioner informed the public of the matter.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/rs/1226-23-misljenje-povodom-prituzbe-aa-protiv-gradske-uprave-grad-a-kragujevca/>
<https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/rs/obavestenje-za-javnost-9/>

The Commissioner's practice shows that, in some cases, the parties who show up for interviews do not wish for the case to be forwarded to the competent authorities, although some of the cases involved violations of other rights, rather than discrimination.

In a complaint filed by the representative of one non-governmental organisation against another it was alleged that the complainant had been denied the possibility of receiving project support pursuant to a public call because of his membership in the political organisation Green-Left Front. In the course of the procedure it was determined that an identical decision had been made in the case of another non-governmental organisation, whose representative was not a member of the same political organisation as the complainant. It was determined in the course of the procedure that the decision had been made because performing multiple activities/holding multiple positions and acting as a representative for associations which were in a relationship that could compromise the person's unbiasedness in decision-making and the results of the project as such was an exclusionary requirement for the award of support, regardless of the actual association. The Commissioner's opinion stated that provisions of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination had not been breached.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/604-24-misljenje-u-postupku-po-pritužbi-zbog-diskriminacije-na-osnovu-clanstva-u-politickoj-organizaciji/>

To introduce as many workers as possible to the antidiscrimination legislation, in 2024 we continued implementing the International Labour Organisation project entitled "Access to Grievance Mechanisms for Workers in Automotive, Electrical and Textile Industry in Serbia", which is part of the "Global Solidarity Initiative" and is implemented by the German organisation for international cooperation (GIZ). As part of the project, we participated in the development of the Manual for Internal Complaint Mechanisms, an integral part of which is a guide for employers and employees "How to achieve Equality in the Workplace", which explains in detail the mechanisms of protection against discrimination in the field of labour and employment and provides a set of recommendations to employers on how they can improve their business by implementing inclusive policies in this area. We also took part in training sessions in Belgrade and in educational workshops intended for workers in the automotive, electrical and textile industries.



Workshops for workers in the automotive, electrical and textile industries, Kragujevac, 2024

In addition, we have started implementing the project “Advancing Equality in the Field of Work and employment - Joint Initiative for Equality in the Workplace” by signing the Charter Partnership for Equality with the German Development Agency, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia and the German-Serbian Chamber of Commerce, with the aim of encouraging the creation of a business environment free from discrimination which guarantees equal treatment and fosters mutual trust and cooperation based on respect for rights.

We are also making intensive efforts to expand the network of companies and build their capacities through the Partnership for Equality which we initiated in 2017, when the first edition of the Equality Code was prepared. This issue will remain in our focus, with the aim of reinforcing cooperation with employers to develop preventive measures to counter human rights violations and discrimination in the workplace. For this reason we have prepared the amended and supplemented edition of the Equality Code, as discussed in more detail in the previous section of this Report. This effective internal mechanism for recognising and preventing cases of discrimination in the workplace, improving knowledge on prevention of and protection against discrimination and introducing the legislation and good practice examples has been presented at regional meetings and in a series of workshops.

Complainants against discrimination on the grounds of membership in political, trade union and other organisations often state in their complaints that they were also discriminated on the grounds of their political or religious beliefs as personal characteristics, as evidenced by the examples from this institution’s practice shown above.

Complaints filed on the grounds of religious belief mostly concerned the area of labour and employment. Thus, complaints were filed towards the end of the year against a preschool facility because it had refused to accept a student wearing a hijab for an internship, while another complaint stated that a teacher wearing a hijab who had applied for a job at the same preschool facility had also been rejected. Since the complaints did not contain all necessary elements on which to act, supplementation was requested in accordance with the law.

We received a complaint filed against an employer for discrimination on the grounds of religious affiliation because the complainant had not been allowed a day off for his family patron saint’s day (“krsna slava”). In the course of the procedure it was found that the complainant had taken a day off for the Christian religious holiday of St. George’s Day, which is celebrated on the 6th of May. The employer’s communication stated that the day off can be used only on the specific religious holiday, specifically the first day of the family patron saint’s day, and was not transferrable to other religious holidays. In view of these facts, the procedure was terminated, because it was obvious that no violation of rights had occurred.

During the reporting year, the incumbent Commissioner had two meetings with representatives of churches and religious communities, in which the parties agreed Serbia had a sound legislative framework for the protection of religious rights and freedoms. In the meeting with the Archbishop of Belgrade, Cardinal Dr. Ladislav Nemet, the parties concluded it was necessary to find a way to contribute to the creation of a world of equal people in today's highly complex circumstances. It was also underscored that everyone, including clergy, needed education on the importance of respect for human rights and dignity. The incumbent Commissioner discussed the same topic also with the Belgrade Mufti of the Islamic Community of Serbia, Mustafa Jusufspahić. The two parties also discussed the challenges arising as a result of discrimination, intolerance and disrespect for others and those who are different. Much of the prejudice can be eliminated through open dialogue, by listening to and understanding one another, while the complex circumstances of the present day make it incumbent upon us to make additional efforts to ensure respect for human rights and dignity of every individual.

At the ODIHR Warsaw Human Dimension Conference, which addressed human rights and fundamental freedoms in the OSCE area, as well as the implications of current events and trends for the security of the region, a representative of the Commissioner and member of Serbia's official delegation acted as a rapporteur. In the thematic sessions related to fundamental freedoms – including national human rights institutions, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of religion or belief – and confronting racism, xenophobia, discrimination and intolerance was an opportunity to present this institution's antidiscrimination and equality promotion activities.



Commissioner's address at the Human Dimension Conference, Warsaw, 2024

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), set up by the Council of Europe, is a unique human rights monitoring body which specialises in questions relating to the fight against racism, discrimination (on grounds of "race", ethnic/national origin, colour, citizenship, religion, language, sexual orientation,

gender identity and sex characteristics), xenophobia, antisemitism and intolerance in Europe. As part of its statutory activities, ECRI monitors countries, which involves analysing the situation closely in each of the member states and making recommendations for dealing with any problems of racism and intolerance identified there. The sixth cycle of country monitoring focuses on three topics that are common for all member states: (1) Effective equality and access to rights, (2) Hate speech and violence hate-motivated violence; and (3) Integration and inclusion, as well as a range of topics that are specific to each country. In its most recent, sixth report on Serbia⁹⁹, ECRI noted that progress had been made from the previous report, but it reiterated its call for implementation of two specific recommendations as a matter of priority, namely that the Commissioner should be granted the prerogative to conduct inquiries into cases of discrimination *ex officio* and that the authorities should provide sufficient budget for the Commissioner's institution to fill all planned staff positions and ensure full independence in the management of its budget and the recruitment and deployment of its staff. A process of interim follow-up for these two recommendations will be conducted by ECRI no later than two years following the publication of this report.

Discrimination on the Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

In 2024, out of the total number of communications received from citizens, 11 complaints on the grounds of sexual orientation and 9 complaints on the grounds of gender identity, in the areas of health care, procedures before public authorities, the public sphere and in the provision of services. Some of the complaints related to discrimination on both grounds. The complaints were mostly filed by natural persons, predominantly men, while civil society organisations filed a smaller number of complaints.

Complaints on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity tend to be filed for discrimination in the areas of health care, provision of services, procedures before public authorities, the public sphere and the media, the employment process, private relations etc. As regards the position of the LGBT+ population in 2024, members of this



⁹⁹ *ECRI Report on Serbia*, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2024, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/fourth-ecri-report-on-serbia-translation-in-serbian-/1680b06415>

community continue to face social distancing, as well as different forms of violence and discrimination. The Pride March held in September in Belgrade went without incidents, although attacks on the offices of the Pride Info Centre in Belgrade were once again reported. In this regard, the incumbent Commissioner issued a public warning in which she condemned the attack, noting that security camera footage had been captured and that an efficient and timely response from the competent authorities was necessary and crucial. Furthermore, the media situation has remained unchanged from the previous year and is characterised by often inappropriate reporting, which deepens prejudice and stereotypes and thus violates the dignity and integrity of LGBT+ persons.

The existence of further cases of violence and discrimination against LGBT+ persons in 2024 was also confirmed by the European Commission in its *Serbia 2024 Report*, noting that, during the reporting period, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) found breaches of the European Convention on Human Rights relating mainly to the right to respect for private and family life, to the right to a fair trial and the general prohibition of discrimination. The Report states that there are currently 23 cases under enhanced supervision by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, some of which concern ill-treatment by police. The Commission also underscores in the report that hate speech, threats and violence continued to target human rights defenders, the Roma community, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ), and migrants. Centralised official data on hate crimes, broken down by bias motivation, is still lacking.

In a communication submitted by an association and two young LGBT persons it was stated that those persons had been subjected to police brutality during the search of their apartment on 14 February 2024. The association “Da se zna!” stated the attacked persons had contacted it two days later for legal and psychological support, after which they filed complaints with the Ministry of the Interior against the work of the police officers, and the Ministry of the Interior notified the public prosecutor’s office, the Internal Control Department and the Chief of Police. In their communication they stated the whole case had caused a public outcry, and that threats to the staff of the association “Da se zna!” continued even after the young woman who had been subjected to violence was summoned to the Ministry of the Interior to make a statement. As stated in the communication, they were threatened they would all be detained, arrested and prosecuted for going to the media, accusing the police and causing panic and disorder. They also stated that, after the protest they had held in connection with this on 10 March 2024, two tabloids launched a brutal campaign against the Association, accusing its staff of dealing drugs from their offices, which was why they decided to temporarily move out of the office and continue working from home. In conclusion, they noted they had been turning to the Commissioner for all forms of support and that any message, announcement or words of support meant a lot to them. The Commissioner

condemned both the attacks on social networks and those in the media, noting that all violence was prohibited under the Criminal Code, and in particular violence resulting from discrimination against any social group, in this case LGBT persons.

The *European Commission's Serbia Report 2024* notes that there were no developments on the draft law on same-sex partnerships, nor on regulation of legal gender recognition, as already planned in the previous anti-discrimination strategy. Difficulties remain, especially in smaller municipalities, in implementing amendments to the Law on birth registry, which enable data on gender changes to be entered into the registry. As an observer to the work of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Serbia was covered by the III LGBTIQ Trust Survey, which found that overall, in Serbia in 2023, 45% felt discriminated against in at least one area of life in the year before the survey (for the EU-27 it was 37%). The implementation of hate crime legislation, including on grounds of sexual orientation, remains inadequate. The premises of the Pride Info Centre in Belgrade were subject to multiple attacks and in September 2024 the Centre closed due to lack of financial and institutional support. The criminal complaint into this case is pending with the prosecution office. Due to a lack of trust in institutions and fear of secondary victimisation, cases of violence and discrimination towards LGBTIQ persons are often unreported. Intersex persons remain invisible both socially and legally.

The published *Rainbow Map 2024*¹⁰⁰ shows that Serbia has made only slight progress in the area of respect for human rights and the legal status of LGBT+ people in 2024, ranking 26th out of 49 European countries. According to this map, Serbia has an index of 35.96% for the period from January to December 2024, which means it meets slightly more than a third of the criteria that ILGA Europe considers relevant for assessing the position of the LGBT+ community. Serbia scored best, 83.33%, on the criterion of existence of legal frameworks and practices that guarantee the freedom of assembly, association and expression for members of the LGBT+ community, while the country's lowest score of 0% was assigned for the criterion regarding the fulfilment of the criterion of bodily integrity of intersex persons, i.e. the prohibition of any surgical or medical intervention on a minor before they have the right to give their informed consent. Serbia has met 64.17% of the criteria relating to the existence of legal provisions against discrimination which make explicit reference to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression as discriminatory grounds. The recommendations advise Serbia to reform its legal framework to make the process of legal recognition of gender identity fair and transparent and based on free will and consistent implementation of and compliance with the existing laws.

100 *Rainbow map 2024*, ILGA-Europe, available at: <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/countries/serbia/>

These findings are supported by the analysis of the results of the seventh *Survey on the Attitudes of Citizens towards Discrimination*¹⁰¹ (previous such surveys were conducted in 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2016 and 2019) presented by the Commissioner. The results of this survey show that, as regards the perception of affiliation of citizens with groups at risk of discrimination, 2% of the respondents stated they were members of the LGBT+ community. In terms of perception of prevalence of discrimination in relation to personal characteristics, 59% of the respondents believe discrimination is the most prevalent in relation to sexual orientation, gender identity or sexual characteristics. Furthermore, as regards perception of the role of the media in combating discrimination, 28% of the respondents believe the media pay too much attention to LGBT+ persons. A third of respondents agree with the view that homosexuality is a disease that needs to be treated, while 48% believe that LGBT+ persons should not enjoy the same rights as heterosexual persons. Also, two-thirds of the respondents state they would not feel comfortable if LGBT+ persons expressed their emotions publicly, while 45% of the respondents do not agree at all that same-sex partnerships should be allowed in Serbia. The groups which the respondents perceive as the most responsible for their own disadvantaged position and social exclusion are LGBT+ persons, migrants and Roma. With regard to hate speech, a majority of the respondents believe that this kind of speech is very common and pervasive on social networks (74%), in political speech (72%), on television and on internet portals (67% each), while in terms of specific groups, the respondents believe that hate speech is directed in particular at Roma (66%), LGBT+ persons (64%), migrants (59%), Albanians (52%) and Croats (51%).

Furthermore, based on an analysis of the position of LGBT+ persons in Serbia, the *Recommendations of the Universal Periodic Review regarding the position of LGBT+ persons*¹⁰² state that, in the last 20 years, progress has been made in Serbia in terms of reducing discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons. However, the recommendations call for Serbia to take more extensive action to combat discrimination, social stigmatisation and violence against the LGBT+ community. Serbia has also been commended for enabling the freedom of expression and peaceful assembly of the LGBT+ community. Inappropriate statements about the LGBT+ community made by the country's highest-ranking officials, as well as inadequate efforts to prosecute attacks on the Pride Info Centre, are also recognised as serious obstacles.

101 *Survey on the Attitudes of Citizens towards Discrimination in Serbia*, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/izvestaj-o-percepciji-gradjana-i-gradjanki-o-diskriminaciji-u-srbiji/>

102 *Recommendations of the Universal Periodic Review regarding the position of LGBT+ persons*, Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights, 2024, available at: <https://www.yucom.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Preporuke-Univerzalnog-periodi%C4%8Dnog-pregleda-u-vezi-s-polo%C5%BEajem-LGBT-osoba-2.pdf>

This year, the Commissioner also presented the results of the third *Survey on the Attitude of Representatives of Public Authorities to Discrimination in Serbia*¹⁰³ (the previous surveys were conducted in 2014 and 2018). Looking at the responses of those who consider discrimination to be very and mostly present, the groups perceived by the respondents as the most discriminated groups in Serbia are persons with disabilities (50%), members of national/ethnic minorities (48%) and LGBT+ persons (36%). The respondents were also read several statements relating to LGBT+ persons, to assess their attitudes towards members of this group. Thus, in response to the question who they would feel if they saw the following persons displaying mutual affection in public, 72% replied they would be comfortable with a man and a woman displaying such affection, 33% would be comfortable in the case of two women, while 30% would be comfortable in the case of two men. As regards heterosexual couples, as many as 75% of citizens support public displays of affection between a man and a woman, which is slightly higher than the corresponding share of representatives of public authorities. If we compare this to the results at the EU level, where 53% of respondents feel comfortable when two women publicly display tenderness, and 49% when two men do so, it can be concluded that citizens and representatives of public authorities in Serbia show an even greater degree of intolerance and disapproval when it comes to public manifestations of intimacy between same-sex couples. Furthermore, 73% of the respondents among representatives of public authorities agree (fully and mostly) that members of the LGBT+ population should have the same rights as heterosexual persons, 71% believe that there is nothing wrong with a romantic relationship between two people of the same sex, while 49% agree that same-sex partnerships should be allowed in Serbia.

The results of this survey suggest it is necessary to increase the number of activities aimed at informing and training representatives of public authorities to prevent indirect discrimination, as such situations are still not sufficiently recognised as discrimination. These activities should focus in particular on combating stereotypes and prejudice against LGBT+ persons.

The Commissioner has prepared the *Collection of Opinions, Recommendations and Warnings* issued from 1 January 2018 to 30 June 2024 concerning discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, which will be presented in 2025. The Collection includes summaries of opinions and recommendations issued pursuant to complaints (listed by prevalence in specific areas of social life), recommended measures for public authorities and other persons to achieve equality and protect against discrimination, opinions on draft laws, exam-

103 *Survey on the Attitude of Representatives of Public Authorities to Discrimination in Serbia*, December 2023, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/izvestaj-o-odnosu-predstavnika-i-predstavnica-organa-javne-vlasti-prema-diskriminaciji-u-srbiji-nelektorisana-verzija/>

ples of strategic lawsuits, criminal charges, as well as public warnings about the most common, typical and severe cases of discrimination. Although the Commissioner has not been receiving a significant number of complaints on the grounds of these personal characteristics and such complaints are as a rule mostly filed by civil society organisations, the Collection may help the professional community and the wider interested public gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of discrimination and the response to it, as well as insights into the real-life challenges faced by some citizens.

During the year, the Commissioner also issued opinions which found that discrimination had occurred due to speech in the public space which offends dignity and influences degrading attitudes in the public opinion towards LGBT+ persons.

In 2024, the Commissioner issued an opinion in the procedure pursuant to a complaint filed by the association “Da se zna!” against Miša Đurković, author of the text “Genderization of Serbia: Violence against the Majority”, and determined that provisions of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination had been violated. The text criticised Serbia’s ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) in 2013 and stated, among other things, that it was the product of a new gender, transgender or queer ideology which aimed to undermine the biological distinction of the sexes in humans, i.e. the distinction between men and women, and, by popularising intersexuality, freedom of sexual choice and identity, encouraged young persons in particular to experiment with various forms of sexuality and change identities. A recommendation was issued to the author of the text to issue a public apology for the views expressed and to comply with the antidiscrimination legislation in the future. The recommendation has not been complied with.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/1235-23-prituzba-zbog-diskriminacije-na-osnovu-roda-rodnog-identiteta-i-seksualne-orijentacije/>

The Commissioner’s practice in 2024 also includes cases of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in the provision of services in hospitality establishments.

In the procedure pursuant to a complaint against a restaurant, it was established that two girls had been practically thrown out of the restaurant after a short kiss on the premises, following protestations by another patron and a reproach by a waiter. It was determined that the waiter who talked to the complainant and her partner was employed at the restaurant, the restaurant was his employer at the time of the incident and the waiter was not warned against inappropriate and discriminatory behaviour after the incident, which is why the restaurant is objectively liable for the actions of its employees. The restaurant was recommended to issue a written apology to the complainant and refrain from breaching antidiscrimination legislation in the future. The restaurant complied with the recommendation and issued a written apology. For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/rs/70-23-prituzba-zbog-diskriminacije-na-osnovu-seksualne-orijentacije-prilikom-pruzanja-usluga/>

Transsexual and transgender persons face numerous problems such as rejection, discrimination and violence, as well as problems in the process of medical transition. A communication filed by citizens pointed out that the National Health Insurance Fund and the Ministry of Health had failed to act for some time to resolve the issue of shortage of the medicinal product Testosterone Depo. This medicinal product is crucial because the body of a trans male is not capable of endogenously producing this hormone, which is why the medicinal product is needed. It was stated that the pharmaceutical company Galenika d.o.o. had stopped producing the medicinal product in January 2024 without explanation, thereby putting the lives of its users at serious risk and seriously reducing their quality of life. The complaint also states the medicinal product is needed not only for trans males undergoing medical transition, but also for some oncological patients.

The Commissioner issued **recommended measures to the Ministry of Health and the National Health Insurance Fund**, advising them to undertake all necessary measures without delay to ensure the medicinal product Testosterone Depo, or a replacement thereof, is available to the persons who need it, taking due consideration of the required urgency of such action and the need to make the medicinal product available as soon as possible, since it is included in List B (medicinal products used in the outpatient or hospital treatment in medical institutions), which lists medicinal products the prescription and issuing of which is covered by compulsory health insurance.

The Commissioner has been informed that the National Health Insurance Fund procures this medicinal product in a centralised public procurement procedure, exclusively for the purposes of health care institutions, because the applicable dispensing regime determined by the marketing authorisation for the medicinal product, as issued by the Medicines and Medical Devices Agency (3 – Medicine authorised for use at health care institutions), allows only for its use at health care institutions. It is further stated that, according to the data available to the National Health Insurance Fund, the total available stocks of this medicinal product at health care institutions is sufficient to last about 2 months, based on the average monthly consumption. It is claimed the supply of this medicinal product at the level of health care institutions has been regular. It is also stated that the company Galenika a.d. Beograd, as the marketing authorisation holder, announced new quantities of the medicinal product would be available in mid-August and will be sufficient to cover the market demand for this medicinal product for several months. For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/547-24-preporuka-mera-republickom-fondu-za-zdravstveno-osiguranje-povodom-problema-nestasic-leka-testosteron-depo/>

The Commissioner's practice to date has shown that the role of the media is crucial both in terms of dissemination of hate speech and intolerance against certain social groups, and as a mechanism to promote tolerance and examples of good practice that contribute to elimination of stereotypes and prejudice. This is exactly why we have been implementing numerous activities both through the annual tolerance award presented to journalists for articles and reports that promote equality and through handbooks and trainings for journalists and editors on non-discriminatory reporting. Because of the importance of the Commissioner's trainings on the fight against discrimination and hate speech, with a special focus on the situation and rights of LGBTI+ persons, for the representatives of the media, they implementation was continued, as well as the preparation of a new qualitative and quantitative analysis of the frequency of hate speech and forms in which it occurs in Serbian offline and online media, through the third stage of the project entitled "Combating Discrimination and Promoting Diversity and Equality in Serbia", which is a part of the European Union and Council of Europe programme entitled "Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Turkey 2023-2025".

The second qualitative and quantitative analysis of prevalence of hate speech and its manifestations in Serbian offline and online media, *Prevalence of Hate Speech in Serbian Media*¹⁰⁴, also comprehensively addresses this phenomenon. The first such analysis was conducted in late 2020, at a time marked by the global crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Four years on, Serbia and the world face new global crises, which can give us good insight into how individuals behave and communicate in circumstances of fear and rising political tensions. The document presents and analyses the international – primarily European – standards regarding the prohibition of hate speech, which makes it a valuable resource for journalists who aim to report in accordance with these standards. It also presents the national legal and strategic framework, to identify potential legal and practical limitations that lead to ineffectiveness of the system of protection against hate speech in the media in Serbia.

As a reminder, the proceeding is pending pursuant to a lawsuit filed by the Commissioner against a university professor for discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, because of hate speech committed during a television appearance. More information on this strategic lawsuit is presented in the section of this Report which discusses **strategic lawsuits**. In this procedure, the defendant brought a counterclaim against the Commissioner because this institution exercised its powers under the law. Such lawsuits constitute an abuse of rights, as well as a specific form of pressure on the work of the court with the aim of stalling the procedure.

In the analysed period from 6 May to 2 June 2024, notwithstanding certain progress from the previous reporting period, similar problems persisted. Namely, this reporting period was marked by several events which largely shaped public opinion, including the Eurosong music contest. Media coverage of members of the LGBTI+ population during the reporting period focused on non-binary participants in this music festival. Although the reporting on non-binary persons was fair and did not include hate speech, certain comments by celebrities were quoted which did include hate speech; these were used by journalists to convey a message, without any reservations about such inappropriate choice of words. Although journalists mostly tended to use sensationalist headlines, the articles were written in compliance with the reporting standards. Nevertheless, journalists tended to convey the views of others, especially public figures, without any reservations about inappropriate speech, which constitutes an abuse of the code of ethics and runs contrary to the positions taken both in national practice and in the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. Extremely negative comments about non-binary persons stood out in particular.

104 *Prevalence of Hate Speech in Serbian Media*, prof. Ivana Krstić, Ph.D., Belgrade, July 2024, available at: https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/PRISUTNOST-GOVORA-MRZNJE-U-MEDIJIMA-U-SRBIJI_2024_print.pdf



Training on discrimination and hate speech for journalists, 2024

In 2024, the Commissioner also held two two-day trainings for members of the media (radio journalists and journalists of the media in national minority languages) on human rights, discrimination and hate speech, which focused on the portrayal of gender, gender identity and sexual orientation. This was an activity implemented withing the framework of the project “Combating Discrimination and Promoting Diversity and Equality in Serbia”, which is a part of the European Union and Council of Europe programme entitled “Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Turkey 2023-2025”. The second training event, which was held in Mokrin, included a presentation of the principles of and guidelines on a comprehensive approach to combating hate speech: the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states, the normative antidiscrimination framework and the Report on Hate Speech Monitoring in Serbia (2024).

Discrimination against Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, Migrants and Asylum-seekers

Numerous studies also suggest that refugees, internally displaced persons, migrants and asylum seekers are one of the most vulnerable groups in all areas of social life. With regard to this group of persons, it should be borne in mind that, unlike other foreigners, they are fleeing armed conflict, persecution or other forms of violence, which further exacerbates their position. The term “migrants” has become common in everyday use to denote all people on the move, including refugees, asylum seekers and economic and other migrants. The distinction is not merely a terminological one; rather, it also determines the different legal status of all these people, indicates the various reasons why they fled their countries and determines the different international conventions that apply to them, and consequently countries have different obligations according to those conventions and national regulations. Many of them do not hold valid documents or their documents have

expired, because of the circumstances under which they left their country of origin. They are frequently subjected to labour exploitation, various forms of discrimination, harassing or degrading treatment, violence and even human trafficking.

Furthermore, these persons are unable to formally prove their previous work experience and qualification level. Possible linguistic and cultural barriers should also be considered, as most of them do not speak Serbian, which further complicates their opposition and suggests the focus should be on education and training programmes to facilitate communication and employment. Although various surveys show refugees and migrants are not overly interested in regulating their status and settling in Serbia, they should be provided with legal assistance and support in their everyday lives.

The Commissioner is a local partner in the MILAGRO project, which is implemented in Italy, the Netherlands and the Republic of Serbia with the aim of creating tools and opportunities to build intercultural dialogue between the local population and migrants and develop competences for positive and lasting relationships, based on mutual understanding, respect and solidarity. This project is jointly implemented by University Library “Svetozar Marković” and its partners from other countries, with which it has had the opportunity to share knowledge and experiences, especially considering the diverse circumstances of this group of people in different countries. A number of workshops have been scheduled to take place within the framework of this project in connection with achievement of equality and antidiscrimination mechanisms.

According to official data provided by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia, in 2024 there were 19,483 migrants registered at reception and asylum centres, which was a significant decline from 2023 by 82.1%, and this has also had a significant effect in terms of the occupancy rate of Serbia's accommodation facilities for this group of people.¹⁰⁵

As in previous years, complaints to the Commissioner were mostly filed by civil society organizations and rarely by individuals, which is understandable considering the language barrier, the short duration of their stay in the country, the lack of information about the competences of public authorities etc. Following a communication by BG Centre submitted on behalf of refugees in connection with the problems they face when opening bank accounts, we issued recommended measures to banks in which we advised them of the differences regarding the documents and the competent authorities issuing them, which are not the same as in the case of

¹⁰⁵ This figure includes migrants registered at the centres managed by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, rather than all migrants who transited through Serbia. For more information, see: <https://kirs.gov.rs/cir/aktuelno/saopstenje-za-javnost/5570>

foreigners who are subject to the Law on Foreign Nationals. Namely, the communication by BG Centre stated that bank employees often failed to make a distinction between the foreigners who are subject to the Law on Foreign Nationals and asylum seekers, persons granted temporary protection and refugees, who are subject to the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection. In practice, difficulties stem from the requirement that persons applying to open an account are requested to provide a photocopy of their passport and registration of temporary residence, which these persons do not have because their passports have expired and they only have identity cards issued by the Asylum Office of the Ministry of the Interior. In addition, it is also common for banks to demand the presentation of an employment contract or an official document issued by state authorities or international organisations, as proof of the reason for opening a bank account. As employers almost always sign fixed-term employment contracts with asylum seekers, given that the duration of such contract is dependent on the validity term of their identity cards, which are valid for six months, no asylum seeker is able to meet this requirement.

Access to financial products for refugees is a gateway to participation in economic life and a prerequisite for ensuring financial stability for themselves and their families, since without basic bank accounts they are unable to receive wages, social welfare assistance, scholarships or other benefits provided by the state.

Banks were recommended to enable refugees, persons granted subsidiary protection and asylum seekers access to bank products and services (such as opening and using a basic payment account) without discrimination on the grounds of any actual or assumed personal characteristic, taking into account the specific nature of the refugee status in terms of residence, the right to work and the form of the identity card and the documents issued in the asylum process.

Although the recommendation was issued at the very end of the year, banks quickly informed the Commissioner of their compliance with the issued recommendations.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/578-24-preporuka-mera-bankama-povodom-pristupa-finansijskim-uslugama-izbeglicama-i-traziocima-azila/>

These problems have also been confirmed by the findings of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, whose experiences also suggest that most of the challenges with access to bank accounts and other financial products concern primarily the non-recognition of identity documents held by refugees and asylum seekers, as well as risk management by banks. At the conference “Account Access Essential for the Economic Survival

and Integration of Refugees”¹⁰⁶ held in November 2024, the UNHCR, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia and the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality jointly addressed financial institutions to enable and improve access to payment accounts for refugees and asylum seekers in Serbia.



Conference “Account Access Essential for the Economic Survival and Integration of Refugees”

In addition to cases from national practice, the conference also presented good practice examples from European and other countries, including the guidelines of the European Banking Authority and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which state that providing access to at least basic financial products plays an important role in the fight against money laundering and terrorism financing, as lack of access can lead to transactions in the “grey area”.

The recommendation was preceded by acting pursuant to complaints against certain banks, when the Commissioner underscored each individual case should be assessed and considered on its merits, instead of resorting to refusal by default because of the fact of citizenship or the place of birth of such persons. The National Bank of Serbia previously clarified that the fact that a refugee comes from a country of origin that has strategic deficiencies in the system for preventing money laundering and terrorism financing does not exclude the possibility of establishing a business relationship with these persons; instead the bank is obliged to apply enhanced customer due diligence and monitoring measures in such cases.

At the conference “FOR REFUGEES - Private Sector Support - from the Refugee Perspective”, also organised by the UNHCR, the Commissioner pointed out that business and human rights were mutually supportive, rather than mutually

106 For more information, see: <https://www.unhcr.org/rs/28251-mogucnost-otvaranja-racuna-od-sustinske-vaznosti-za-ekonomski-opstanak-i-integraciju-izbeglica.html>

exclusive. The most successful companies take care of their employees, fully aware that a good and harmonious environment is essential.



Several panel discussions were also held, and the conference was concluded with recommendations for the private sector, which underscored that employers should be better informed about the living conditions, status and personal documents of refugees and urged them to respect refugees' labour rights in terms of

equal, regular wages, contracts and conditions, as well as the right to health insurance, transportation and opportunities for advancement.

Together with prominent experts on migration policy and interreligious dialogue, representatives of the Council of Europe, the University of Belgrade and other experts, the incumbent Commissioner participated in the conference "University Conversations with KAICIID: Migration in the Western Balkans - Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue for an Inclusive Region". The participants underscored that ways in which local governments can harness the economic and social potential of migrants were key for economic and social migration and shared views of good practices to date.

In the school years 2023/24 and 2024/25, there were on average 250 pupils from the refugee population enrolled in educational institutions. These pupils are enrolled in 33 primary and 16 secondary schools.

To empower employees in the education system to early detect risk factors in pupils that may lead to human trafficking and act in situations of suspicion or knowledge of potential involvement of pupils in the trafficking chain, with a focus on the migrant population, a remote training session was held for 1,200 participants. Other activities included 15 two-day professional development training sessions to prepare employees to implement the Technical Guidance on the Inclusion of Migrant/Asylum-seeker Pupils in the



Education System and prepare a Support and Didactic Materials Plan for working with migrant pupils. These trainings involved 400 participants.¹⁰⁷

The particularly difficult situation of migrant women and girls was discussed at the event “Migration and Gender”, which was organised as part of the “16 Days of Activism” to raise awareness about the importance of implementing a gender-responsive approach in the context of migration, draw attention to the fact that migrant women are often subjected to violence, human trafficking and other forms of crime and focus on the need to for creating and implementing gender-responsive migration policies.

Discrimination on Other Grounds

In terms of frequency of alleged grounds for discrimination, the next groups of most common complaints concern property status (21), skin colour (15), race (11), appearance (8) and previous criminal conviction (7). Below are also addressed individual cases relating to discrimination on the grounds of permanent place of residence and other cases of discrimination of relevance to review the situation in the field of the achievement of equality and the protection against discrimination.

Property status is one of the key factors that affect the quality of life of every individual and also of the society as a whole, and determines to a large extent whether an individual will face obstacles in life, and even discrimination. Poverty and unfavourable property status are one of the key causes for inequality and social exclusion. Having in mind that poverty has a long-term negative effect on every aspect of an individual’s life, we in the institution dedicate special attention to the protection of rights of this population group.

According to the most recent data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia¹⁰⁸, the at-risk-of-poverty rate was RSD 29,100 on the average monthly for a single person household in 2023. The at-risk-of-poverty threshold was RSD 52,380 for a household with two adults and one child aged below 14, while for a four-member household with two adults and two children aged below 14, it was RSD 61,110. The at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate shows the share of individuals who are at risk of poverty or are severely materially and socially deprived or live in households with very low work intensity. The at-risk-of-poverty

107 Data provided to the Commissioner by the Ministry of Education in connection with compliance of state authorities with the recommendations for achieving equality set out in the Regular Annual Report of Commissioner for the Protection of Equality for 2023

108 Announcement of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia – *Poverty and Social Inequality 2023*, published on 15 October 2024, available at: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2024/HtmlL/G20241285.html>

rate was 19.9% in 2023, and compared to 2022, it was lower by 0,3 percentage points. The at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate was 27.2%, and it was lower by 1,8 percentage points compared with 2022. Observed by age, individuals aged 65 and over were the most exposed to the poverty risk – 23.5%, as well as individuals aged from 55 to 64 – 23%. The lowest at-risk-of-poverty rate was recorded for the group of persons aged from 25 to 54 – 16.8%. According to the type of household, the highest at-risk-of-poverty rate was recorded for households with two adults with three or more supported children – 34.7%, while the lowest at-risk-of-poverty rate was for households with three or more adults – 13.3%.

The fight to end poverty is the first Sustainable Development Goal under the UN Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, which pertains to future social and economic development in line with the sustainability principles. The *Report on Progress in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals until 2030 in the Republic of Serbia*¹⁰⁹ provides an overview of data on a number of indicators to monitor the progress in achievement of these goals. Sustainable Development Goal 10 implies reduction of inequality, while work on social inclusion of the poor requires sound links between all care systems and improved coordination among all stakeholders, at all levels and across all sectors (social and health services, education and culture, security, pension and disability insurance, labour market etc.) and cooperation with civil society and volunteer organisations. The legal duty of public authorities to assess the impact of regulations when they are being passed on socially and economically vulnerable persons and the impact of regulations on the achievement of the principle of equality is also very important, which was introduced by amendments to the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination in 2021 and which the Commissioner has consistently underscored as vital.

Also, according to results of the Commissioner's *Report on Citizens' Perception of Corruption in Serbia*¹¹⁰, two groups mostly discriminated against according to the opinion of participants in the survey include the Roma and persons who are poor, in all fields (labour and employment, education, procedures of public authorities, health care, the judiciary...). It is important to note that as regards the introduction of special measures to improve the position of certain social groups, only up to 1/3 of respondents considered such measures to be justified for any of the groups offered to them, except for persons with disabilities (35%),

109 *Report on Progress in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals until 2030 in the Republic of Serbia*, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2023, available at: <https://sdg.indikatori.rs/media/1621/izvestaj-o-napretku-u-ostvarivanju-ciljeva-odrzivog-razvoja-do-2030-godine-u-srbiji-2022.pdf>

110 *Report on Citizens' Perception of Corruption in Serbia*, 2023, Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, available at: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/izvestaj-o-percepciji-gradjana-i-gradjanki-o-diskriminaciji-u-srbiji/>

the poor (34%), the youth and women (29% each). Also, illustrative data is that the respondents mainly answered to a question how the media report on certain groups that such reporting is negative in relation to the poor, persons with HIV/AIDS, persons with disabilities, the elderly and. What is important for social cohesion is the fact that there is a very low social distance towards the poor, because only 5% of respondents would not like to have them as close or distant relatives (4%), or would not like them to occupy managerial positions in Serbia (3%). At the same time, the lowest number of citizens would not like to socialise with poor citizens (only 1%).

In the *Serbia 2024 Report* mentioned above, the European Commission states that public expenditure on social protection and budget transfers as a share of GDP continue to decrease. Concerns remain on the impact of the Social Card on Roma and other vulnerable individuals who risk being unduly excluded from the benefits if their specific circumstances, in addition to the raw data automatically processed by the social card register, are not sufficiently assessed by social welfare staff before a decision being made. A new strategy for social protection and amendments to the law on social welfare are increasingly delayed, while social assistance programmes do not sufficiently reach the poor; a large share of children living in poverty are not covered by any benefit, and the social welfare system remains understaffed. The system of earmarked transfers to the local level is still not implemented systematically and transparently.

In connection with the application of the Law on Social Card, the Initiative for Economic and Social Rights A11 submitted complaints to the Commissioner because of the data registered with the Social Card Register, which affect the exercise of the right to financial social assistance. In that regard, a response was requested from the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs and social work centres before which a procedure for the exercise of this right is conducted. Procedures are ongoing.

Complaints also pointed to insufficient capacities of shelters, as well as the procedure to prevent and eradicate coronavirus infection, which should be amended and harmonised with the applicable recommendation.

Recommended measures were issued to a shelter for adults and the elderly stating that it should undertake measures within its powers and, in coordination with the City Institute for Public Health of Belgrade, amend the part of the Procedure on the Conduct of Employees and Users of the Shelter to Prevent and Eradicate Coronavirus Infection relating to movement of users and their placement in the isolation block after they return to the Shelter and harmonise it with recommendations by the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs. The recommendation has been complied with.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/1040-23-prituzbavise-udruzenja-zbog-diskriminacije-na-osnovu-zdravstvenog-stanja/>

Bearing in mind the poverty statistics, and also the fact that citizens often contact the Commissioner stating that financial benefits for the poor are insufficient, the Commissioner issued to the competent Ministry an initiative relating to amendments to the Law on Social Welfare.

The **Initiative for amendments to the Law on Social Welfare** stated that, in addition to the increase of the landholding ceiling when deciding on the right to financial social assistance, the quality of land, the possibility of its processing, leasing or selling must also be taken into account. The reason for launching of this initiative was primarily the fact that elderly family households are often at risk that exceed landholding ceiling. The initiative states that it is necessary to undertake measures to relax property requirements taken into account when exercising the right to financial social assistance, primarily the landholding ceiling depending on the land quality, particularly in elderly households, which was also emphasized in the Employment and Social Policy Reform Programme in the EU Accession Process. It is also necessary to determine the actual possibility to generate income from land in one's ownership in situations when it exceeds the property census laid down by the law, because ownership over neglected land in remote areas, particularly in modern conditions of agricultural production, does not mean that such land can provide adequate income for normal and decent life. The initiative also pointed to additional support proposed by the Fiscal Council relating to the abolition of the duty to pay pension and disability insurance contributions for agricultural households that own less than 10 hectares of land, stating that the introduction of the social card system ensures for state administration to efficiently implement the improved social welfare system for elderly households with small additional expenses of only several billion dinars annually.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/894-24-inicijativa-za-izmene-i-dopune-zakona-o-socijalnoj-zastiti/>

The fact is that poor citizens rarely contact the Commissioner in connection with property status, and the number of complaints on these grounds remains rather low. It should be noted that people who are poor and financially vulnerable are not a homogeneous group; instead, among them are people of different sex, age, national affiliation, marital or family status, religious and political beliefs, etc. The practice of this institution has shown that complaints on the grounds of property status are usually filed by individuals, mostly in the areas of social welfare or in procedures before public authorities, which suggest there is ample scope for human rights organisations to become involved in various ways as crucial partners in human rights protection. The reason why poor citizens file complaints less often mainly stems from the fact that in the struggle for existence they are not familiar with the protection mechanisms, they are ashamed of their situation, or they blame themselves because they did not ensure a better life. To ensure timely and adequate response to citizens' needs, primarily public services of social welfare, health care, child protection, education and free legal aid services, will need both quantitative and qualitative capacity building, as we have pointed out on numerous occasions over the years in our reports on the state of play regarding the achievement of equality.

Recommended measures were issued to the New Belgrade Department of the Belgrade City Centre after citizens contacted the Commissioner and pointed to the fire that occurred in the informal settlement in Bežanijska kosa, where a number of families with small children were left homeless and without adequate accommodation. Particular attention was paid to the poor health condition of a one-month-old baby. The Center was requested to respond urgently, conduct a needs assessment and take adequate measures in the field of social welfare.

The Centre informed us that one-time financial assistance of RSD 100,000.00 was approved and paid to all families, that the Red Cross was contacted, that clothing, shoes and personal hygiene products was provided to them, as well as that it will continue to assess the needs in order to undertake adequate measures.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/582-24-preporuka-mera-gradskom-centru-za-socijalni-rad-u-beogradu/>

When adopting regulations and public policies, it is necessary to conduct regulatory impact assessments to determine the impact of regulations or policies on socioeconomically vulnerable persons or groups and to assess their compliance with the equality principle. A case from the Commissioner's practice shows that such assessment was not performed in certain cases.

Since poverty is a significant limiting factor for full inclusion in social flows, the Commissioner submitted in May **the Initiative to amend Articles 18 and 25 paragraph 1 of the Law on the Procedure of Registration with Real Estate Cadastre and Infrastructure Cadastre.**

Namely, according to the provisions of the Law on the Procedure of Registration with Real Estate Cadastre and Infrastructure Cadastre, as well as based on the acting of the Republic Geodetic Authority, a possibility was denied for citizens to directly contact the Real Estate Cadastre Service in person on their counters or by mail; instead, they have to contact this authority exclusively through the e-Counter, where the correctness of enclosed documentation must previously be verified by professional users (lawyers and geodetic organisations). In case this procedure is not followed, citizens' requests are rejected. In this manner, due to property status and/or lack of technical means and required digital knowledge and skills, citizens are virtually prevented from registering their real estate in the Cadastre, particularly having in mind that in addition to republic administrative charges, they also have to pay for the services of lawyers and geodetic organisations, which cost more than RSD 20,000.00, while according to the lawyers' tariff, the price of a submission for registration with the cadastre is RSD 24,750.00.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/385-24-inicijativa-za-izmenu-zakona-o-postupku-upisa-u-katastar-nepokretnosti-i-infrastrukture/>

After completed analysis of the provisions of this regulation from the aspect of the application of anti-discrimination regulations, the Commissioner submitted to the Constitutional Court the **Proposal for a review of constitutionality and legality of Articles 18 and 25 paragraph 1 of the Law on the Procedure of Registration with Real Estate Cadastre and Infrastructure Cadastre** to advance equality and protect against discrimination citizens with poor property status and persons with low income level, the elderly and persons with disabilities.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/332-24-predlog-za-ocenu-ustavnosti-zakona-o-upisu-u-katastar/>

In addition, the Republic Geodetic Authority was informed about a complaint by the Serbian Bar Association stating that, contrary to the provisions of the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance, statistics for March 2024 – lists of professional users, including lawyers, with the highest number of resolved cases, submitted and rejected requests were published on the official website of this authority and on social networks and by other means of providing information to the public, with a note that each piece for information is for reference only and that this would be regular practice every month in the future. The Serbian Bar Association emphasized that such acting of the Republic Geodetic Authority is unlawful and harmful for the legal profession which is defined by the Constitution

of the Republic of Serbia as autonomous and independent service, and thus no one must evaluate the work of lawyers, and in particular must not publish ranking lists determining lawyers as successful or unsuccessful under their full name and surname, which is also not in accordance with one of the basic rules of the Law on Legal Profession and the Professional Code of Ethics for Lawyers that prohibit advertising of lawyers.

As already stated, poor citizens are not a homogeneous group, and it is necessary to take special care of this when creating public policies. Thus, for example, the poorer economic situation of women, because they are mainly not property owners, have lower wages or are unemployed, can lead to their financial dependence on partners or family members.

Last year, we also pointed to the Ministry of Finance that female hygiene products are a necessity in the lives of girls and women, as well as a basic need due to their sexual characteristics, which is why we submitted this ministry an initiative for exemption from taxes on female menstrual hygiene products. Since the elections were scheduled in the meantime and a new Government had to take office, the Commissioner repeated the previously submitted initiative.

During the year, the Commissioner repeated the **Initiative to exempt female hygiene products from VAT** to the Ministry of Finance, stating that reduction of or exemption from VAT for female hygiene products would contribute to the achievement of several strategic objectives the Government of the Republic of Serbia recognised as very important, such as reduction of poverty, improvement of sexual and reproductive health, as well as equality of women and girls, particularly those who are already at higher risk of discrimination (living below the poverty line, women with disabilities, women living in rural, remote and underdeveloped areas, Roma women etc.).

The necessity of the introduction of the measure to exempt female hygiene products from VAT is reaffirmed by data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. Namely, in 2023, the at-risk-of-poverty rate was 19.9%, while the social exclusion risk rate was 27.2%. This rate does not show how many persons are actually poor; instead, it shows how many of them have income below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. Since VAT for female menstrual hygiene products is 20%, they become luxury, although they are a basic need.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/521-24-inicijativa-ministarstvu-finansija-za-oslobodjenje-od-placanja-pdv-a-na-proizvode-za-zensku-higijenu/>

The Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination defines more than 20 personal characteristics, or grounds of discrimination, however, this list is not exhaustive. Namely, under the Law, discrimination can also be based on other personal char-

acteristics because some situations cannot be foreseen in advance. The legislator took a wider approach in the anti-discrimination framework in accordance with international standards. Thus, the Commissioner received a complaint from the Faculty of Law of the Union University in Belgrade, as well as individuals, against the Bar Association of Belgrade because of discrimination against graduate lawyers who completed their studies at this Faculty.

In the procedure pursuant to a complaint by the Faculty of Law of the Union University in Belgrade against the Bar Association of Belgrade, an opinion was issued that the Bar Association violated the provisions of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination. It was recommended to the Chamber, immediately after it receives the opinion, and as soon as possible, to decide on already submitted requests by persons who acquired the title of graduate lawyer at the Union University for registration with the Directory of Trainee Lawyers and Trainee Lawyers who are Volunteers, equally as it acts on requests by persons who acquired their titles at faculties of law founded by the Republic of Serbia; to decide in the future in a non-discriminatory manner on requests filed by all persons, regardless of the fact whether they acquired their diplomas at private faculties of law or those founded by the Republic of Serbia if these faculties comply with the requirements in terms of relevant accreditation and licences for work for the study programme law in accordance with the law and secondary legislation governing higher education; to inform the Bar Association of Serbia about the Commissioner's opinion, as well as to respect regulations on the prohibition of discrimination in the future.

The recommendation was not complied with.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/424-24-diskriminacija-diplomiranog-pravnika-koji-je-stekao-zvanje-na-fakultetu-ciji-osnivač-nije-rs/> and <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/150-24-diskriminacija-diplomiranog-pravnika-aa-koji-je-stekao-zvanje-na-fakultetu-ciji-osnivač-nije-republika-srbija-prilikom-upisa-u-imenik-advokatskih-pripravnika-volontera-akb/>

Citizens also contacted the Commissioners because of other personal characteristics, such as **appearance**, as the grounds for discrimination. With the spread of social media, the visual experience has become so important that it often seems to be the only thing that matters. At the same time, the “security” of social media users’ anonymity creates a feeling that they are untouchable and gives some people the freedom to, among other things, comment on someone else’s appearance, often in an inappropriate manner, just because he or she does not fit into some imagined norms and desired ideals. On the other hand, a certain physical appearance is sometimes required to perform a certain job so that a person can adequately perform their duties or jobs. The Commissioner received 8 complaints this year, in which the complainants complained about discrimination on the grounds of appearance.

Namely, students of the Basic Police Training Centre in Sremska Kamenica and employees of the Ministry of the Interior complained to the Commissioner that they were discriminated because of tattoos on visible parts of their bodies. Also, two years ago, a professional police association sent a submission to the Commissioner, pointing to the provisions of Articles 25 and 27 of the Bylaw on the Conduct and Personal Appearance of Police Officers and Other Employees of the Ministry of the Interior and their non-compliance with anti-discrimination regulations.

The Commissioner submitted the Initiative to amend certain provisions of the Bylaw on the Conduct and Personal Appearance of Police Officers and Other Employees of the Ministry of the Interior and their harmonisation with anti-discrimination regulations.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/670-24-inicijativa-za-izmenu-clana-25-stav-5-clana-27-stav-1-i-clana-28-stav-2-pravilnika-onacinu-ponasanja-i-licnom-izgledu-policijskih-sluzbenika-i-drugih-zaposlenih-u-mup-u/>

During the year, the Commissioner also received 7 complaints on the grounds of *previous criminal conviction* as a personal characteristic. To review and improve the position of this social group, the Commissioner cooperates with public institutions and non-governmental organisations engaged in the protection of rights of persons with previous criminal conviction who face numerous obstacles with integration in the society, and they mainly face prejudice and stereotypes in the field of labour and employment. The practice shows that former convicts have difficulties with integration in the community and that the reoffend rate is very high. A high percentage of reoffenders is the result of the lack of programmes that would help persons released from prisons reintegrate into society. Persons who served their custodial sentences have extreme difficulties with finding employment, because employers display distrust and prejudice toward them, while the share of those who succeed in finding employment remains negligible. As they are unable to find employment after serving their custodial sentences, they face a whole range of problems, and they expect and receive support primarily from their families, friends or associations, while institutional support is mostly lacking. The purpose of serving custodial sentences is reintegration of former convicts in the society, and the type of support and programmes available to them after they are released is very important for successful reintegration. Also, employment reduces reoffend rates, which is why support should be provided and employers should be incentivised to employ such persons.

Attitudes towards convicts can perhaps best be seen in the results of the survey entitled *Public Attitudes towards Juvenile Perpetrators of Criminal Offences*¹¹¹, which show that more than 25% of respondents partially or fully agree with the statement that juvenile perpetrators of criminal offences do not deserve support from the society, while more than 30% of them partially or fully agree that juvenile perpetrators should be excluded from the society. More than 50% of respondents partially or fully agree that correctional facilities and prison are the most adequate punishment for juvenile perpetrators, while 20% of respondents believe that they do not have the capacity to change, and more than 83% partially or fully agree that minors must be tried as adults for serious and grave criminal offences. This survey shows a high level of citizens' intolerance and hostility towards juvenile perpetrators of criminal offences, that the only manner to address this issue for them are more stringent sanctions, but perhaps the most important conclusion is that there is a lack of understanding of a wider context of juvenile delinquency and that citizens do not perceive rehabilitation as a manner to reintegrate such perpetrators into society so that they can become its useful members. If they have such attitude towards juvenile perpetrators, it is clear that prejudice and negative perception faced by adult perpetrators of criminal offences are even worse.

The Commissioner's practice also shows, year after year, the difficult position of this population group and the need to undertake various activities in that regard, which is why the initiative below was submitted.

The Initiative to amend Article 185 of the Law on Health Care (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia Nos. 25/2019 and 92/2023) inter alia points to the provisions that govern the requirements to withdraw health professionals' licences, based on which the Chamber of Nurses and Medical Technicians ex officio withdraws a licence to a health professional if he/she is convicted by a final and binding judgment of an intentional crime to a prison sentence of six months or a more severe sentence, or if he/has committed a crime against human health. Suspension of a licence for this reason can last until a judgement is deleted in accordance with Criminal Code¹¹².

111 *Public Attitudes towards Juvenile Perpetrators of Criminal Offences*, Centre for Missing and Abused Children, Novi Sad, 2024, available at: <https://cnzd.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/istrazivanje-compressed.pdf>

112 *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* Nos. 85/05, 88/05 - corrigendum, 107/05 - corrigendum, 72/09, 111/09, 121/12, 104/13, 108/14, 94/16 and 35/19

The initiative states that the justification is disputable of very broad requirements for the withdrawal of a license and the purposefulness is also disputable of laying down that a health professional's license will be withdrawn if he/she is convicted by a final and binding judgment of any intentional crime. It is certain that not every criminal offense is equally socially dangerous, and there are groups of offences the commitment of which in no way affects the quality of the health professional's work, expertise and ethics. The withdrawal of a license is certainly justified in case of a criminal offence committed against human health, as well as in case of some other very grave criminal offenses, which should be listed in detail.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/429-24-inicijativa-za-izmenu-zakona-o-zdravstvenoj-zastiti/>

Various problems faced by citizens are also evident from an example from the Commissioner's practice, in which a complainant filed a complaint against discrimination on the grounds of **permanent place of residence**. To improve situation in this field, the Instructions on the Work of Centres for Social Work and Residential Social Welfare Institutions in the Procedure of Registering Citizens' Permanent Place of Residence was adopted during the reporting year. According to these Instructions, centres for social work must inform persons, for whom it learns that they do not have registered place of residence, of the manner to exercise that right and provide them legal assistance to exercise the registration of a permanent place of residence.¹¹³ Registration of a permanent place of residence is a precondition for the exercise of all other rights, such as the right to labour, to various types of assistance, payment of salaries, exercise of the right to education, health care and other rights. Permanent place of residence as a discriminatory ground has become during the years a part of the practice as a relatively frequent discriminatory ground, although it is not explicitly stated and is instead included in the open list of characteristics.

113 Data submitted by the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs to the Commissioner in connection with compliance of state authorities with recommendation for the achievement of equality from the Regular Annual Report of Commissioner for the Protection of Equality for 2023.

MULTIPLE AND INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION

In the legal system of the Republic of Serbia, the concept of multiple and intersectional discrimination is defined as a severe form of discrimination under the provision of Article 13 item 5 of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination. This concept was explained in more detail under amendments to the above Law of 2021, and was defined as a form of discrimination on several grounds, where the impact of individual personal characteristics is undistinguishable. Multiple discrimination is discrimination on the grounds of two or more personal characteristics, where the impact of individual personal characteristics is distinguishable, while intersectional discrimination is discrimination on the grounds of two or more personal characteristics, where the impact of individual personal characteristics is undistinguishable.

During 2024, the Commissioner received 120 complaints which claimed multiple personal characteristics as the grounds for discrimination. However, it should be noted that it has been observed in the Commissioner's practice that complainants tend to list multiple personal characteristics when they are unsure which personal characteristic was the grounds for discrimination, which provides us additional possibilities to establish the legal practice in the application of this concept. The practice shows that women, persons with disabilities, Roma and Roma women, internally displaced persons and LGBTI persons are mainly exposed to the risk of multiple discrimination, and the most frequently claimed grounds of discrimination in complaints include sex and marital and family status, age and disability or age and health status, property status, national affiliation etc.

The Strategy for the Prevention and Protection against Discrimination for the period from 2022 to 2030 pointed to the multiple and intersectional discrimination, and cases from the Commissioner's practice were indicated as examples of this type of discrimination, which best illustrate the complexity of these forms of discrimination. Other strategic and planning documents also include these forms of discrimination, such as the National Youth Strategy, the Strategy for the Prevention and the Fight against Gender-Based Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, the Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia etc.

For example, lay-offs of older women by an employer that employs both women and older men may conceal intersectional discrimination against older women, who are laid off exactly because the two personal characteristics – their age and sex – are inextricably linked. It is only through an analysis of the concept of intersectional discrimination that we are able to understand that, in this specific case, the intersection of both characteristics of a female worker is key. It is therefore neces-

sary to be aware of the cultural and societal aspects which lead to discrimination. Persons with disabilities, members of the Roma national minority and others are often exposed to multiple discrimination.

In the procedure pursuant to a complaint, it was found that a school principal refused to enrol a child of the Roma nationality in school located in the city centre, suggesting that the child should enrol at a school located near a Roma settlement. The Commissioner issued an opinion stating that the school and the principal violated the provisions of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, which is why it was recommended to them send a written apology to the boy's mother, and that the Team for Protection against Discrimination, Violence, Abuse and Neglect should provide to the boy additional support to overcome possible difficulties in educational work resulting from missed classes in the first semester. It was also recommended to the school to organise a training for all its employees on the prohibition of and protection against discrimination, as well as to take account in the future not to violate legislation on the prohibition of discrimination within its regular operations and activities.

For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/1249-23-prituzba-udruzenja-protiv-os-zbog-diskriminacije-ucenika-na-osnovu-pripadnosti-nacionalnoj-manjini/>

Due to the seriousness of multiple and intersectional discrimination, we present, at all trainings that we organise and in which we participate, examples from the practice that best illustrate these forms of discrimination and the resulting harmful consequences. During the course of 2024, as part of the project entitled "Support to Social Inclusion in Serbia", we implemented trainings in 20 local self-government units relating to the recognition and prevention of multiple and intersectional discrimination. It should be taken into account that social groups are heterogeneous and diverse, based on which they can be exposed to inequalities on several grounds.

DISCRIMINATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE - EQUALITY IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE

Safety and respect for human rights on the Internet were in the focus of public policies in the previous year, whether at the level of the United Nations, at the regional level through the activities of the Council of Europe and the EU and, of course, in Serbia.

After a comprehensive consultation process and several revisions, the UN General Assembly adopted the *Global Digital Compact* as a new global framework for multi-stakeholder cooperation for the sustainable and people-centred development of digital technologies. In order to achieve the set goal, it aims to close all digital divides and accelerate progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Activities are aimed at expanding inclusion and making the benefits of the digital economy available to all, prioritising the development of a digital space that is inclusive, open and safe, while respecting, protecting and promoting human rights. It also insists on a responsible, fair and interoperable approach to data management, as well as global governance of artificial intelligence, with the aim of using it for the benefit of humanity.¹¹⁴ Following the adoption of the Global Digital Compact, as of 1 January 2025, the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy for Technology was transformed into the UN Office for Emerging Digital Technologies (ODET), which follows from the decision of the UN General Assembly of December 2024.

In early September, the Council of Europe adopted the first international legally binding document aimed at ensuring respect for human rights, the rule of law and legal standards of democracy in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) systems. The Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law, which is also open to non-European countries, sets out a legal framework covering the entire lifecycle of artificial intelligence systems and addressing the risks they may pose, while promoting responsible innovation. The Convention adopts a risk-based approach to the design, development, use and withdrawal of artificial intelligence systems, which requires careful consideration of all potential negative consequences of the use of artificial intelligence systems.¹¹⁵

The European Union has taken a historic step by adopting the *Artificial Intelligence Act*¹¹⁶, the first comprehensive regulation of its kind in the world. This law aims to ensure that artificial intelligence developed and used in the EU is developed in a trustworthy manner, while protecting fundamental human rights.

The Act distinguishes between four categories of artificial intelligence systems, depending on the risk they pose:

- **Minimal:** This includes systems that are widely used, such as social media recommendations or spam filters. There are no specific regulations for them.

114 *Global Digital Compact*, United Nations, available at: https://www.un.org/global-digital-compact/sites/default/files/2024-09/Global%20Digital%20Compact%20-%20English_0.pdf

115 *Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law (CETS 225)*, Council of Europe, 2024, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/1680afae3c>

116 *European Approach to Artificial Intelligence: Regulatory Framework*, European Commission, available at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/regulatory-framework-ai>.

- **Limited risk:** These systems, such as chatbots, must inform users that they are interacting with a machine. Also, AI-generated content, such as deep-fakes, must be clearly labelled.
- **High risk:** These are systems that could have a significant impact on the safety or fundamental rights of people, such as those used in employment or the judiciary. They are subject to strict regulations that include risk assessment, transparency and human oversight.
- **Unacceptable risk:** These systems pose a clear threat to human rights and will be banned. This includes systems that manipulate human behaviour or are used to socially rank people.

The Act also introduces rules for general-purpose artificial intelligence models, which can be used for various tasks. The aim is to ensure transparency and accountability in the development and use of these models.

In addition, the Act provides that human rights institutions must be notified by market surveillance authorities of serious incidents involving violations of fundamental human rights and may demand access to any documentation kept in accordance with the Regulation, in an accessible language and format, where necessary for the effective exercise of their mandate. They may also require market surveillance authorities to organise technical testing of high-risk artificial intelligence systems, with the participation of the aforementioned institutions.

Furthermore, human rights institutions must be informed by market surveillance authorities and must cooperate fully in the event of suspicion that an AI system poses a risk to fundamental rights, including in particular any risks to vulnerable social groups. Finally, they may be consulted when market surveillance authorities determine that a high-risk AI system, although compliant with the Act, nevertheless poses a risk to the health or safety of persons, fundamental rights or other aspects of public interest protection.

During the previous year, a new *Strategy for the Development of Artificial Intelligence in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2025-2030*¹¹⁷ was adopted. This strategic document represents a comprehensive plan that will guide the development and application of this technology in Serbia in the coming years. The Strategy focuses on several key areas. One of them is the creation of a legal framework to enable safe and reliable use of artificial intelligence. This involves the adoption of new laws and regulations that will clearly set out the conditions for the development of AI use. Another area of focus is education, as the Strategy provides for the advancement of curricula at all levels to create artificial intelligence experts. The Strategy also underscores the importance of ensuring the broadest involvement

¹¹⁷ *Strategy for the Development of Artificial Intelligence in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2025-2030*, Government of the Republic of Serbia, available at: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/tekst/437277>.

of citizens, which was an issue we specifically highlighted in our opinion on the draft document during the consultation process.

During 2024, a working group was formed to draft the Law on Artificial Intelligence, which included representatives of the Commissioner. The Law is expected to be adopted by the end of 2025.

In the previous year, civil society organisations continued their research and data collection activities relevant to the field of equality and cooperated with our institution in all fields.

The report “*Gender-based Digital Violence in Serbia*”,¹¹⁸ published by Share Foundation, examines trends and challenges associated with this form of violence, which has been on the rise with the spread of digital technologies. Gender-based digital violence includes online harassment, virtual mobbing, sexist hate speech, unauthorized sharing of intimate content, cyberstalking, doxing, sexual shaming, body-shaming and exclusion. These forms of violence are often targeted at women, activists, journalists and members of other marginalised groups.

According to available data, more than half of female secondary school pupils in Serbia have been exposed to sexual comments online, while one in ten have had intimate photos shared without their permission. Apps like Telegram often serve as platforms for groups that share such content. Administrators of these groups are rarely prosecuted, due to the lack of proper legislation.

Another emerging issue is deepfake pornography, where artificial intelligence technology is used to create sexually explicit content without consent. Factors which encourage violence include online anonymity, lack of legislation and algorithm structures that perpetuate gender stereotypes. Consequences include psychological trauma, violation of privacy, self-censorship and isolation of women from the digital space. Although the Criminal Code offers some basis for protection, it does not yet recognize “revenge pornography” as a separate criminal offense. Victims have to initiate proceedings themselves, which places additional burden on them, as discussed in the section of the report on opinions on draft laws and other regulations.

Civil society organization Partners Serbia published its report “*The Role of Independent Institutions and Civil Society in the Development and Control of the Application of Artificial Intelligence from the Perspective of Human Rights and Freedom of Expression*”.¹¹⁹ The report states that the development of artificial intelligence

118 *Gender-based Digital Violence in Serbia: Overview of Trends*, SHARE Foundation, Belgrade, 2024, available at: <https://www.sharefoundation.info/wp-content/uploads/Rodno-zasnovano-digitalno-nasilje-u-Srbiji.pdf>.

119 *The Role of Independent Institutions and Civil Society in the Development and Control of the Application of Artificial Intelligence from the Perspective of Human Rights and Freedom of Expression*, Partners Serbia, available at: https://www.partners-serbia.org/public/news/Uloga_nezavisnih_ins.pdf.

(AI) has progressed significantly in the last two decades, and its impact on human rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression, has become the subject of an increasingly intense debate. The impact of AI on freedom of expression is often indirect and covert, making it difficult to identify and address. It is therefore necessary to adopt systemic management of AI development and application, with the active involvement of independent institutions and the civil sector.

Based on global trends, the legal framework and experiences in Serbia, the analysis proposes models for involving independent bodies and civil society in the oversight of the use of AI, in order to protect human rights and freedom of expression. The aim is to contribute to the development of media policies and regulatory reforms that respond to the challenges of new technologies.

In the reporting period, we continued our activities aimed at combating discrimination in the digital sphere. The Commissioner submitted to the Ministry of Justice the *Joint Initiative for Amendments to the Criminal Code to amend to Chapter 14. Criminal Offences against Freedoms and Rights of Man and Citizen*¹²⁰, which *inter alia* calls for the introduction of a specific offence of misuse and publishing of recordings of sexually explicit content, by specifically sanctioning the misuse of real or fake recordings of sexually explicit content. The initiative states it is necessary in particular to penalise the distribution of such content to a third party or a larger number of persons, and also the publishing of such content or making it available using computing, information or communication technology or by any other means.

The Commissioner acted in a case pursuant to a complaint of gender-based digital violence. The complaint was filed by the mother of a female secondary school pupil, who claimed the comprehensive secondary school had disadvantaged her child on the grounds of sex by failing to provide a safe environment for her after she had been subjected to third-degree digital violence by her peers. The complainant alleged that this made it difficult for the pupil to follow classes and participate in other educational activities, which constituted a breach of Article 12 paragraph 2 of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination. The procedure pursuant to the complaint was not closed by the end of 2024.

In addition, activities were continued under the BodyRight campaign implemented by the Commissioner jointly with the United Nations Population Fund, which addresses gender-based violence committed through the use of modern technologies. At the Matica Srpska Gallery in Novi Sad, diplomats and partners who

¹²⁰ For more information, see: <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/389-24-objedinjena-inicijativa-ministarstvu-pravde-za-izmenu-krivicnog-zakonika/>

support the initiative to provide better protection for privacy and bodily autonomy in the digital space were introduced to the BodyRight campaign “Your Body is Yours! Both on the Internet and in the Real World!”. The campaign was also presented at the EXIT festival, where visitors and members of the delegation could find more information and personally contribute to the visibility of the BodyRight campaign. Also, a two-day training for peer educators was organized for the members of the Youth Panel, on the subject of prevention of gender-based violence committed through technology, as a continuation of the Bodyright campaign in schools. The training is part of activities under the project “Stop Violence – Achieve Equality”, which is jointly implemented by the United Nations agencies in Serbia (UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women), in partnership with the Government of the Republic of Serbia and with support from the Swedish Government.

The Commissioner has organised and supported numerous activities that contribute to capacity building of employees and the general public in connection with protection from discrimination in the development and application of artificial intelligence, and in the digital sphere in general. For example, the incumbent Commissioner took part in the panel discussion at the World Economic Forum in Davos on the subject “Artificial and Collective Intelligence for Inclusive Action and Impact”. The Commissioner was also a partner of the Privacy Week, an event organised by the CSO Partners Serbia. The incumbent Commissioner said the right to privacy was one of the fundamental right, which aim to protect the moral and mental integrity of every human being, noting that the Commissioner’s practice included a number of examples where violations of different aspects of the right to privacy also constituted an act of discrimination. Discussions with experts from the civil, private and public sectors put the issues of privacy and personal data protection in focus, and a representative of the Commissioner took part in the panel discussion “Cost of Privacy”.

Recognising the importance of multistakeholder dialogue on Internet governance issues, last year the Commissioner supported the organisation of the Serbian Internet Governance Forum, which was held in mid-2024 under the auspices of the Foundation “National Internet Domain Registry of Serbia”. The event brought together representatives of numerous relevant national and international institutions and organizations. In addition, the Commissioner supported the organisation of the Regional Internet Governance Forum in South-East Europe, which was held in Belgrade at the end of the year and was attended by a representative of the Secretary-General of the Global Internet Governance Forum and relevant organisations from the region.



Presentation of the Commissioner's activities at the Regional Internet Governance Forum, 2024

The eleventh Moot Court competition was also held at the end of the year. The case examined by the participants concerned discrimination on the grounds of national affiliation committed online using a communication app.

MEDIA REPORTING

In 2024, the media continued reporting on the work of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, and their topics often included recommendations, warnings and statements issued by the incumbent Commissioner Brankica Janković. An analysis of media content reveals the most common topics were violence against women, discrimination, human rights, equality, violence against children and peer violence, as well as hate speech, while an analysis of frequency of coverage of these topics by different media outlets shows that online portals most frequently reported on them.

For the institution of the Commissioner, education of children and youth and the problem of discrimination and violence among pupils and peers were important topics which we addressed throughout the year. Recognising it was necessary to raise awareness of the importance of educating children and youth on discrimination and the unacceptability of all forms of violence, we dedicated the Annual Conference held to mark the International Day for Tolerance to young people. This was followed by educational and interactive workshops for primary and secondary school pupils which addressed these topics. A conference entitled "Everyone should know what Equality Means" was broadcast live by the Radio

Television of Serbia and also covered by numerous other media outlets. It began with a minute of silence to mourn those killed in the railway station canopy collapse in Novi Sad and to send the message that their memory must be preserved and those responsible must be punished, as the incumbent Commissioner said. The Novi Sad tragedy was the defining moment of the year in every aspect, and young persons were in the focus and garnered huge public attention in the days of immense sorrow and pain, when they made their voices heard and clearly demonstrated their disapproval of certain phenomena and things in the society. The end of the year was also marked by blockades of universities, as a form of protest. Public discourse became polarised and increasingly hostile, rife with discriminatory and offensive speech.

Bearing in mind this institution's obligation to improve the equality of citizens and the important role the media play in this process, the incumbent Commissioner had a number of television appearances, statements and interviews for the press and for online portals during the year, drawing attention to prevalent forms of discrimination, presenting initiatives to improve equality and promoting the importance of tolerance and respect for human rights. The Commissioner also had media appearances in connection with the exhibition "The Greats of Serbian Culture and Science", which was opened in anticipation of the International Day for Tolerance, which presented illustrious women whose works contributed to the development of Serbian thought, culture, science and society. An event that caught media attention before that was the exhibition "Rights of Women in Serbia's Cultural Heritage", which included a Wiki Marathon and brought together participants to create Serbian-language Wikipedia pages dedicated to women's rights which included a Wiki Marathon and brought together participants to create Serbian-language Wikipedia pages dedicated to women's rights, and continued promotion of the campaign "Your Body is Yours! Both on the Internet and in the Real World!" at the Exit festival.

In 2024, media coverage of violence against women was for the most part professional and responsible, with full awareness of the extent of the problem. In



this context, the incumbent Commissioner had a number of television appearances, while her statements to radio stations, printed media and online portals continually underscored the need to improve the effectiveness of prevention and support and implementation of laws in the protection against violence. The incumbent Commissioner also spoke to the media about deeply rooted prejudice regarding the gender roles of men and women and

their position in the public media space, noting that nothing reflected the position of women better than the space they were given in the media – generally in the second or even third segment of the content, in both digital and traditional media, as a rule in entertainment, showbusiness, cooking and recipes, fashion and red carpet sections. Talking about the phenomenon of dissemination of traditional behaviour models through new communication channels, she repeatedly underscored the danger of subtle mechanisms of patriarchy, which uses very effective tools to pervade all areas.

In the first half of the year, news that a baby had died after birth at a maternity hospital in Sremska Mitrovica, and the mother accused the gynaecologist of obstetric violence, garnered much attention from the media and the public. Confessions of nursing mothers on social media caused a strong public outcry, with many women contacting this institution, prompting the incumbent Commissioner to issue recommended measures to all gynaecology and obstetrics clinics to improve the health care provided to women during pregnancy and childbirth, as already discussed in previous section of this Report. As always, the media were interested in the topic of gender-based violence and gave it significant coverage in November and December, in connection with the campaign “16 Days of Activism to combat Violence against Women”, within the framework of which the Commissioner’s institution organized a performance of the monodrama “Abuse” based on a story by Ivo Andrić. Noting that we must not stand idly by while violence is being committed, because it concerns all of us, and we must resolutely stand up for the right to life and dignity of every girl and woman, the incumbent Commissioner also supported the premiere of the theatrical play “Prima Faciae”, which also garnered media attention.

The Commissioner spoke about activities aimed at supporting and improving the position of women and girls in rural areas, empowerment of female entrepreneurs and the survey on the perception of equality and the survey conducted as part of the project “Fair Inheritance – a Step towards Women’s Empowerment” at various meetings from which journalists reported, primarily for printed and online media outlets, as well as during her appearances on various news programmes.

The media were also interested in reporting on the presented results of the surveys “Perception of the Roma Community on Discrimination” and “Perception of Women at Increased Risk of Discrimination on Gender Equality”, which were presented at special events in the second half of the year, and also on the traditional action “Equally to the Finish Line” at the Belgrade Marathon. It is especially praiseworthy that editors and journalists recognised the importance and reported on the Guidance on Reasonable Adjustments to Workplaces and Jobs for Persons Disabilities, and also on the new edition of the Equality Code.

Journalists were active participants in the conference “Gender Equality – from Priority to Identity Crisis”, which was held ahead to the International Women’s Day. The panel discussions “Law and Practice – the Results of our Fight”, which involved female journalists, and “Gender Equality – Apple of Discord?”, in which male journalists participated, revealed their views on these issues, highlighting the similarities and differences in the perspectives of women and men on gender equality.

The prevalence of sensationalist, indeed even inaccurate and unprofessional media reporting on serious crimes, as well as violations on the right of privacy of the victims, witnesses and families, presumption of innocence of the suspects and neglect of the public interest – all these were best illustrated in the case of a disappeared girl which caused outrage across the general public. This institution’s attention was drawn to the fact that media reporting on the tragedy in Banjsko Polje included repeated and unnecessary references to the ethnicity of the persons suspected of committing and being complicit in this act. Because negative characteristics and a tendency towards illegal behaviour were attributed to all Vlachs, the incumbent Commissioner issued a warning, which received significant media attention.

Out of the numerous events and topics on which this institution worked during the year, attention of the press was drawn to the conference “Fighting Hate Speech – Through the Promotion of Dialogue and Tolerance towards Eliminating the Causes”, at which analyses of the use of hate speech and the (mis)use of sensitive terms in the media were presented. On that occasion, it was once again reiterated that this subject as a phenomenon warranted greater attention, but should be dealt with properly, in a responsible and dedicated manner, shedding light on causes and looking for ways to overcome the consequences and the ensuing problems. At the conference, renowned journalists who participated in the panel “Do the media ‘like’ hate speech?” gave their views on the prevalence of hate speech in the public space, which had a significant impact, especially in electronic media.

The Commissioner’s meetings with representatives of all national councils of national minorities in Serbia, the aim of which was to strengthen their capacities for recognition and protection from discrimination, received appropriate media coverage, in particular by the public service broadcasters of Serbia and Vojvodina, local media outlets and national minority publications. An analysis of media content reveals that Roma and Roma women, understandably, received more media attention during the year than other national minorities, although the coverage of them was at times still not appropriate, which contributes to deepening of prejudice and stereotypes, while at the same time thwarting efforts to raise public awareness of the unacceptability of discrimination. A recording of member of parliament Branimir Nestorović commenting events in the National Assembly by referring to “Gypsies” and “gypsyism” prompted the Commissioner to issue a public warning and reiterate that degrading and offensive speech that insults the dignity of any person on the

grounds of any personal characteristic of his or hers was prohibited under the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination and absolutely condemnable. On that occasion, she underscored that all public officials and public figures had a particular responsibility for their public utterances and should have a heightened awareness of the fact that they must refrain from perpetuating prejudice and stereotypes by their statements. Public interest was also aroused by an Instagram post by singer Jelena Karleuša, which called for the denial of the right to equality to a member of the Romanian national minority and incited hatred, which was why the Commissioner warned that linking the work of state authorities, police, prosecutors and courts to the nationality of a person or group of persons, calling for different treatment, hatred and labelling based on nationality, ethnic origin or any other personal characteristic was dangerous and prohibited by the Constitution and laws.

A press announcement warning of growing discrimination and the need for equal treatment of all citizens was issued in connection with the International Human Rights Day. On that occasion, the Commissioner expressed concern about the conduct of the police and judicial authorities in the exercise of their powers towards various participants in public gatherings, reminding that state bodies must treat everyone equally. Equal treatment ensures the rule of law, while any unequal treatment creates a sense of injustice and increases tensions in the society, which are reflected in mutual conflicts and attacks on journalists, the offices of institutions and political parties. Whenever citizens' concerns relate to public interest, they must be taken seriously; they must receive a timely response and meaningful dialogue must be ensured in order to deescalate tensions, the Commissioner warned.

The fact that journalists are increasingly interested in, and sensitised to, topics relevant for understanding the importance of equality and the harmfulness of discrimination is supported by the large number of applications for the ninth Annual Media Award, which the Commissioner has traditionally awarded with support from the OSCE Mission to Serbia, and in 2024 also with support from the British Council and the British Embassy in Belgrade. In a democratic society, the media are an important means for receiving and sharing information and ideas. The kind of information they disseminate, whether they ignore existing issues and dwell on less important topics – all this determines whether the role of the media will be conducive to the development, strengthening and protection of human rights, or whether their influence will be negative, because inappropriate and unprofessional reporting and the use of discriminatory words and statements will lead to deepening of prejudice and inciting of intolerance and even hatred of social groups towards which a social distance persists, while also undermining trust in educational and democratic institutions. This is something all media outlets should consider, especially public service broadcasters of Serbia and Vojvodina.



Unfortunately, in 2024 the media space and the public space in general was inundated with content that promoted an atmosphere of intolerance, fearmongering and a hostile environment, exacerbated by numerous inappropriate and degrading comments, disparagement, primitivism, vulgarness, sexism and misogyny on social networks. It is often forgotten that insulting persons with different opinions, targeting of individuals, making claims that contain baseless interpretations and accusations, lack of understanding and absence of reasoned debate affects all citizens of the Republic of Serbia, regardless of their political or religious beliefs or other actual or assumed personal characteristics. An analysis of media content also reveals that the media scene is highly polarised and sensationalist, and all the while we are moving away from the freedom of the press, which is inextricably linked with the right of all citizens to be objectively informed, and also the duty of professional media to avoid being instruments of manipulation and a breeding ground for hate speech; on the other hand, it is equally important that journalists are not subjected to pressure and attacks.

REPORT ON EXECUTION OF THE FINANCIAL PLAN

Under the Law on Budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2024¹²¹, funds were allocated to the Commissioner for the Programme - Promotion and Protection of Human and Minority Rights and Freedoms, in the amount of RSD 146,170,000 with the following structure of funds according to the sources of financing:

– Source 01	97.71%
– Source 06	2.29%

Inclusion of the funds from donations paid in October 2024, available funds for the Programme in the budget increased to RSD 152,361,567, while the share of funds financed from source 06 increased to 6.26%.

In 2024, the Commissioner was involved in the implementation of two new projects financed from donation funds, including:

- GIZ project – Improving Equality in the Field of Work and Employment - A Joint Initiative for Workplace Equality, and
- TEMPUS project – Youth for Equality.

EXECUTION OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES

The following was financed **from Source 01** – general revenues and budget revenues:

- **Programme activity 0012 - Effective Suppression and Protection against Discrimination**

The funds were used to finance the regular activities and performance of expert and other tasks of the Commissioner’s Professional Service of relevance for the exercise of its powers, in accordance with the Financial Plan and the Procurement Plan. The total execution was RSD 130,768,511 or 93.18% of available funds. In the structure of funds spent, expenditures for employees accounted for 88.28%, the use of services and goods for 11.42% (where the majority of costs relate to services of education and professional development of employees, other expert services, administrative material, expert literature for employees’ regular work and fuel costs) and costs of non-financial assets for 0.30%.

121 Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia Nos. 92/2023 and 79/2024

– **Project 4003 - MOOT COURT in the field of protection against discrimination**

As in the previous year, this project was financed from budget funds. The objective of this project is to train students for preparation and defence in legal matters in the field of the protection against discrimination. A total of RSD 414,860 or 70.67% of available funds was spent on implementation of this project for organisation of students' competitions and prizes for the best participants.

– **Project 4005- Equally to the Finish Line**

The objective of this project is to raise citizens' awareness of discrimination against persons with disabilities and to present the work of the Commissioner and institutional mechanisms in the fight against discrimination. The total execution for this project was RSD 186,960 or 60.70% of available funds and includes primarily information services.

– **Project 4006 - Don't Judge a Book by Its Covers - Live Library in Serbia**

The objective of this project is to fight against negative stereotypes and prejudice and discrimination against social groups and individuals and it constitutes an innovative methodology to promote human rights, equality, the fight against racism and xenophobia. Execution of available funds for this project was 65.51% or RSD 222,726 and includes information services.

– **Project 4009 - Youth Panel**

The objective of this project is to ensure conditions to reduce discrimination against children and the youth. During the course of 2024, lectures/workshops were held for pupils on recognition of discrimination and various forms of violence. RSD 465,663 or 93.13% of available funds was spent for this purpose.

– **Project 4013 – A Bridge of Understanding**

A prize-winning competition for the best literary works, photographs and visual art works on the topic of intergenerational solidarity was organised as part of this project for primary school pupils. Funds of RSD 291,000 were available for this project in the budget, of which RSD 269,280 or 92.54% was spent. Costs of organisation of events, jury services and prizes for the best pupils' works were financed.

– **Project 4014 – Visibility Advances Equality**

In 2024, activities were implemented that include presentation of women and their creative works to the general public in the context of advancement of equality and reduction of the existing discrimination through strengthening of women's

visibility as a creative potential and their empowerment. Funds of RSD 450,000 were available in the budget for this project, of which RSD 400,000 or 88,89% was spent. Costs of consultation services were used for preparation of the concept for the implementation of the project and organisation of events where women's creative works were presented.

Other sources 06- donations from international organisations, financed the following projects:

– **Project 4015 – GIZ – Improving Equality in the Field of Work and Employment - A Joint Initiative for Workplace Equality**

The Commissioner and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, the Federal Republic of Germany, concluded on 11 June 2024 the agreement on the award of grant in the amount of maximum EUR 63,879.00 for the implementation of activities under the project in the period from 1 July 2024 to 31 May 2025. The project is focused on additional strengthening of cooperation with employers and strengthening of preventative measures with the aim of developing inclusive labour market. Through specially designed educational workshops, employer will improve knowledge on the prevention of and protection against discrimination in the field of labour and employment, learn about examples of successful business practices and prepare themselves for the development and adoption of internal Equality Codes. In 2024, the first tranche of funds was paid in the amount of EUR 33,752.33 or RSD 3,938,421, of which RSD 3,486,252 or 88.52% of available funds was spent until the end of the year for the implementation of project activities. The project will continue in 2025, when the remaining tranches will be paid until the agreed amount of donor funds.

– **Project 4016 – TEMPUS – Youth for Equality**

The Commissioner and the Tempus Foundation concluded the Contract on the Award of Dedicated Grant for ERASMUS+1 programme, Project – Youth for Equality, worth EUR 60,000, with the duration period of 12 months, from 9 October 2024 to 8 October 2025. Total donated funds in 2024 amounted to EUR 48,000 or RSD 5,600,146, of which RSD 933,346 or 16.67% was spent, in accordance with the implementation dynamics of project activities. The implementation of project activities will continue in 2025.

The structure of budget execution for 2024, both by sources of financing and by programmes, programme activities and projects, is provided in table overviews presented in Annex of this Report.

COMPLIANCE WITH DUTIES UNDER LAW ON FREE ACCESS TO INFORMATION OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

The Commissioner ensures free access to information by honouring freedom of information requests, publishing the Information Directory and other information on the institution's official website, reporting to the National Assembly, informing the public by announcements, publications, press conferences and in other relevant manners.

In 2024, the Commissioner received 12 freedom of information requests, to which she responded within the statutory deadline.

Table overview of submitted requests by categories

No.	Information requester	Number of submitted requests	Number of adopted/ partially adopted requests	Number of pending requests	Number of dismissed requests	Number of rejected requests
1.	Citizens	7	5			2
2.	Media	1	1			
3.	NGOs and other citizens' associations	2	2			
4.	Political parties					
5.	Public authorities	1	1			
6.	Other	1	1			
7.	Total	12	10			2

When providing information, special account is taken of personal data protection, in accordance with the Law on Personal Data Protection. The party in the procedure before the Commissioner has the right to confidentiality of all private data contained in case files and which he/she or other authorised person provides to the Commissioner.

The Commissioner's Information Directory is available at the official website (www.ravnopravnost.gov.rs). To ensure easier exercise of freedom of information, citizens can download at the Commissioner's official website forms with examples for submission of freedom of information requests. Requests can be submitted in

writing, without using the forms. Requests must clearly state which piece of information is requested and/or to what it specifically relates, i.e. as precise as possible description of the requested information. Requests can, but do not have to, contain reasons for their submission, as well as any other data that facilitate finding of the requested piece of information.

The Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance specifies fees for making copies of documents containing the requested information, as well as costs of sending, if any. The amount of fees is calculated in accordance with the Regulation on the Amount of Compensation for Necessary Costs. The insight into documents containing the requested information is free of charge. Freedom of information requests relating to the work of the Commissioner or generated in her work can be submitted in writing to the following address: Bulevar kralja Aleksandra 84, 11000 Belgrade, or electronically to the following address: pov-erenik@ravnopravnost.gov.rs.

ANNEX 1: STATISTICAL OVERVIEW OF COMMISSIONER'S CASES IN 2024

CASES	2024
Complaints	714
Recommended measures	422
Opinions on draft legal documents	26
Initiatives for amendments to regulations	16
Criminal charges	3
Lawsuits	1* + 3
Proposals for review of constitutionality	1
Warnings	12
Announcements	38
Confirmations that no discriminatory acting was identified	2.498
TOTAL number of cases *	3.695

* One strategic lawsuit was initiated in 2024. Three more strategic lawsuits from preceding years are ongoing, in one of which the Commissioner intervenes as a third party.

* Announcements are not presented in the total number of cases

Complainants

Natural persons	Number	%
Men	244	40,7
Women	356	59,3
Total	600	100
Other complainants	Number	%
Natural persons	600	84,0
Organisations	73	10,2
Legal entities	25	3,5
State authorities	12	1,7
Groups of persons	4	0,6
Total number of complainants	714	100

Grounds of discrimination (personal characteristic)

Complaints based on discrimination	Number	%
Complaints stating a personal characteristic	589	82,5
Complaints not stating a personal characteristic	125	17,5
Total number of complaints	714	100

Grounds of discrimination (personal characteristic)

Complaints based on discrimination	Number	%
Complaints stating one personal characteristic	469	79,7
Complaints stating more personal characteristics	120	20,3
Total number of complaints	589	100

Complaints stating a personal characteristic	Number	%
Sex	192	26,0
Disability	78	10,6
Health status	77	10,4
Age	77	10,4
National affiliation or ethnic origin	71	9,7
Other personal characteristic	56	7,6
Marital and family status	37	5,0
Membership in political, trade union and other organisations	31	4,1
Religious and political beliefs	25	3,3
Property status	21	2,9
Skin colour	15	2,2
Sexual orientation	11	1,4
Race	11	1,4
Gender identity	9	1,2
Appearance	8	1,08
Previous criminal conviction	7	1,0
Citizenship	3	0,4
Language	3	0,4
Birth	1	0,1
Genetic characteristics	1	0,1
Total	739	100

* In 120 complaints, several personal characteristics were stated as the grounds of discrimination

Areas of social relations to which complaints relate

Complaints by discrimination fields	Number	%
Procedure before public authorities (courts, municipalities, ministries, commissions)	187	26,1
Health care	180	25,2
In employment procedure or at work	145	20,3
Education and vocational training	57	8,0
In providing public services or using facilities and areas	57	8,0
Public sphere/General public	19	2,7
Public information and the media	18	2,6
Private relations	14	2,0
Culture, arts, sports	11	1,6
Social welfare	8	1,1
Other	7	0,9
Judiciary	5	0,7
Housing	4	0,6
Property rights and relations	2	0,2
Total number of complaints	714	100

Fields of discrimination by complainants

Fields of discrimination by complainants	Natural persons		CSO	Authorities/ institutions	Groups of persons	Legal entities	TOTAL	
	M	F					No.	%
Procedure before public authorities (courts, municipalities, ministries, commissions)	75	69	27	5	1	10	187	26,1
Health care	20	146	10	1	/	3	180	25,2
In employment procedure or at work	54	68	11	4	3	5	145	20,3
In providing public services or using facilities and areas	37	16	3	/	/	1	57	8,0

Education and vocational training	18	33	5	/	/	1	57	8,0
Public sphere/General public	8	6	2	/	/	3	19	2,7
Public information and the media	9	3	5	1	/	/	18	2,6
Private relations	4	8	1	1	/	/	14	2,0
Culture, arts, sports	5	2	3	/	/	1	11	1,6
Social welfare	4	3	1	/	/	/	8	1,1
Other	5	1	2	/	/	1	8	1,0
Judiciary	4	/	1	/	/	/	5	0,7
Housing	1	/	2	/	/	1	4	0,5
Property rights and relations	1	1	/	/	/	/	2	0,2
Total number of complaints							714	100

Procedure before public authorities (courts, municipalities, ministries, commissions...)

Note: Percentages for stated personal characteristics are calculated on the basis the number complainants for complaints where personal characteristics are stated, not on the total number of complaints for the given field.

Complainants in procedure before public authorities (courts, municipalities, ministries, commissions...)	Natural persons		CSO	Authorities/ institutions	Legal entities	Groups of persons	TOTAL	
	M	F					No.	%
Disability	10	12	1	1	/	/	24	13,9
Health status	7	9	2	2	1	/	21	12,1
Other personal characteristic	10	3	4	1	1	2	21	12,1
National affiliation or ethnic origin	7	2	9	1	1	/	20	11,6
Property status	3	2	8	1	/	/	14	8,0
Marital and family status	2	10	/	/	1	/	13	7,5
Sex	4	5	3	1	/	/	13	7,5
Age	1	9	/	2	/	/	12	7,0
Religious and political beliefs	3	5	1	/	/	/	9	5,2
Membership in political, trade union and other organisations	1	5	2	/	/	/	8	4,7

Skin colour	/	6	/	/	/	/	6	3,4
Race	/	4	/	/	/	/	4	2,3
Sexual orientation	1	/	1	/	/	/	2	1,1
Gender identity	1	1	/	/	/	/	2	1,1
Citizenship	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	0,6
Ancestors	/	1	/	/	/	/	1	0,6
Appearance	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	0,6
Genetic characteristics	/	1	/	/	/	/	1	0,6
Total number of complaints							173	100

Complainants in the field of health care

Note: Percentages for stated personal characteristics are calculated on the basis the number complainants for complaints where personal characteristics are stated, not on the total number of complaints for the given field.

Complainants in the field of health care	Natural persons		CSO	Authorities/ institutions	Legal entities	Groups of persons	TOTAL	
	M	F					No.	%
Sex	1	1366	/	/	/	/	137	74,5
Health status	13	4	4	1	2	/	24	13
Age	1	1	2	/	/	/	4	2,16
National affiliation or ethnic origin	3	1	/	/	/	/	4	2,16
Gender identity	1	/	3	/	/	/	4	2,16
Disability	/	/	2	1	/	/	3	1,62
Sexual orientation	2	/	/	/	/	/	2	1,08
Appearance	1	1	/	/	/	/	2	1,08
Language	/	1	1	/	/	/	2	1,08
Other personal characteristic	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	0,54
Race	/	/	1	/	/	/	1	0,54
Marital and family status	/	1	/	/	/	/	1	0,54
Total number of complaints							185	100

In employment procedure or at work

Note: Percentages for stated personal characteristics are calculated on the basis the number complainants for complaints where personal characteristics are stated, not on the total number of complaints for the given field.

Complainants in employment procedure or at work	Natural persons		CSO	Authorities/ institutions	Groups of persons	Legal entities	TOTAL	
	M	F					No.	%
Health status	7	10	/	2	/	/	19	11,4
Other personal characteristic	6	10	1	/	1	1	19	11,4
Sex	5	11	/	/	1	1	18	11
National affiliation or ethnic origin	6	3	5	1	1	1	17	10
Marital and family status	2	14	/	/	/	1	17	10
Disability	6	7	/	1	/	1	15	9,0
Membership in political, trade union and other organisations	5	8	1	/	/	/	14	8,4
Age	7	6	/	/	/	/	13	7,9
Religious and political beliefs	5	4	2	/	/	/	11	6,7
Previous criminal conviction	4	1	/	/	/	1	6	3,6
Skin colour	2	2	/	/	/	/	4	2,4
Race	2	2	/	/	/	/	4	2,4
Appearance	/	2	1	/	/	/	3	1,9
Property status	1	1	/	/	/	/	2	1,2
Citizenship	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	0,6
Sexual orientation	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	0,6
Ancestors	/	1	/	/	/	/	1	0,6
Language	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	0,6
Total number of complaints							166	100

In providing public services or using facilities and areas

Note: Percentages for stated personal characteristics are calculated on the basis the number complainants for complaints where personal characteristics are stated, not on the total number of complaints for the given field.

Complainants in providing public services or using facilities and areas	Natural persons		CSO	Authorities/ institutions	Legal entities	Groups of persons	TOTAL	
	M	F					No.	%
Disability	14	5	2	/	/	/	21	32,3
Age	13	4	/	/	/	/	17	26,6
National affiliation or ethnic origin	3	3	/	/	/	/	6	9,3
Sexual orientation	3	/	1	/	/	/	4	6,2
Sex	2	1	1	/	/	/	4	6,2
Skin colour	3	1	/	/	/	/	4	6,2
Other personal characteristic	3	/	/	/	/	/	3	4,7
Religious and political beliefs	1	1	/	/	/		2	3,1
Health status	1	1	/	/	/	/	2	3,1
Property status	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	1,6
Total number of complaints							64	100

In the field of education and vocational training

Note: Percentages for stated personal characteristics are calculated on the basis the number complainants for complaints where personal characteristics are stated, not on the total number of complaints for the given field.

Complainants in the field of education and vocational training	Natural persons		CSO	Authorities/ institutions	Groups of persons	Legal entities	TOTAL	
	M	F					No.	%
Age	6	19	/	/	/	/	25	34,2
National affiliation or ethnic origin	1	6	3	/	/	/	10	13,7
No grounds	3	7	/	/	/	/	10	13,7
Disability	1	5	1	/	/	/	7	9,6
Health status	1	5	/	/	/	/	6	8,2

Other personal characteristic	3	1	/	/	/	1	5	6,7
Sex	1	2	1	/	/	/	4	5,5
Marital and family status	1	2	/	/	/	/	3	4,1
Appearance	2	/	/	/	/	/	2	2,7
Race	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	1,3
Total number of complaints							73	100

Complainants in the field of public sphere/general public

Note: Percentages for stated personal characteristics are calculated on the basis the number complainants for complaints where personal characteristics are stated, not on the total number of complaints for the given field.

Complainants in the field of public information and the media	Natural persons		CSO	Authorities/ institutions	Legal entities	Groups of persons	TOTAL	
	M	F					No.	%
Sex	2	1	/	/	2	/	5	21,8
National affiliation or ethnic origin	1	2	1	/	/	/	4	17,4
No grounds	1	1	1	/	/	/	3	13
Sexual orientation	1	/	/	/	1	/	2	8,7
Membership in political, trade union and other organisations	1	1	/	/	/	/	2	8,7
Health status	/	1	/	/	/	/	1	4,3
Disability	/	1	/	/	/	/	1	4,3
Age	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	4,3
Gender identity	/	/	/	/	1	/	1	4,3
Race	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	4,3
Skin colour	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	4,3
Other personal characteristic	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	4,3
Total number of complaints							23	100

Complainants in the field of public information and the media

Note: Percentages for stated personal characteristics are calculated on the basis the number complainants for complaints where personal characteristics are stated, not on the total number of complaints for the given field.

Complainants in the field of public information and the media	Natural persons		CSO	Authorities/ institutions/	Legal entities	Groups of persons	TOTAL	
	M	ЖF					No.	%
National affiliation or ethnic origin	4	/	3	1	/	/	8	38,1
Membership in political, trade union and other organisations	4	/	/	/		/	4	19,0
Sex	1	1	1	/	/	/	3	14,2
Age	1	1	/	/	/	/	2	9,5
Religious and political beliefs	/	/	1	/	/	/	1	4,8
Property status	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	4,8
Disability	/	1	/	/	/	/	1	4,8
No grounds	1	/	/	/	/	/	1	4,8
Total number of complaints							21	100

A statistical overview was not provided for other fields of social life because the number of filed complaints is below 2.5%.

Complaints filed against

Complaints filed against	Number	%
State authorities	285	38,5
Natural persons	202	27,2
Legal entities	169	22,9
Authorities / Institutions	65	8,8
Groups of persons	7	0,9
Organisations	13	1,7
Total	741	100

Number of complaints by regions

Number of complaints by regions	Number	%
Belgrade region	284	39,8
Unknown region	162	22,7
Šumadija and Western Serbia region	97	13,6
Vojvodina region	96	13,4
Southern and Eastern Serbia region	72	10
Kosovo and Metohija region	3	0,4
Total number of complaints by regions	714	100

* The region is unknown when the complaint is filed by e-mail and when the complainant does not indicate the municipality of residence.

Outcomes of proceedings

Outcomes of acting on complaints	2024
Complaints where opinions were issued	42
– opinions where violation of rights was identified and recommendations were provided	26
– opinions where no violation of rights was identified and measures recommended	2
– opinions where no violation of rights was identified	14
Criminal charges	3
Lawsuit	1* + 3
Proposal for review of constitutionality	1
Outside the scope of jurisdiction	57
Incompleteness (shortcomings)	184
No violation of rights	124
Court proceedings are being conducted or terminated	22
The Commissioner already acted on a case and no new evidence was provided	165
Complaints withdrawn/ consequences of acting eliminated	14
Pending: submitted for a statement and supplement requested	77

*One strategic lawsuit was initiated in 2024, while three more strategic lawsuits from preceding years are ongoing, in one of which the Commissioner intervenes as a third party.

Compliance with recommendations

Compliance with recommendations in acting on complaints	Number	%
Recommendations complied with	10	71,4
Recommendations not complied with	4	28,6
Total	14	100

*In 12 cases the deadline for compliance with recommendations has not expired

Compliance with recommended measures	Number	%
Recommendations complied with	256	98,4
Recommendations not complied with	3	1,16
Total	259	100

*In 163 cases the deadline for compliance with recommended measures has not expired

Percentage of compliance with the Commissioner's recommendations	%
Recommendations complied with	85,1
Recommendations not complied with	14,9
Total	100

ANNEX 2: BUDGET EXECUTION FOR 2024

BUDGET STRUCTURE BY SOURCES OF FINANCING

Source of financing	Programme	Programme activity/project	Ec. class	DESCRIPTION	*Initial appropriation	**Current appropriation	Budget execution	% (8 : 7)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
01-06	1001			TOTAL BUDGET FOR 2024	134.263.000	152.361.567	137.147.598	90,01
01	1001			TOTAL REVENUES - SOURCE 01	134.263.000	142.823.000	132.728.000	92,93
01	1001	0012	I	TOTAL - PROGRAMME ACTIVITY	131.787.000	140.347.000	130.768.511	93,18
01	1001	0012	411	Salaries, allowances and employee benefits	88.090.000	95.524.000	95.403.595	99,87
01	1001	0012	412	Social contributions at the expense of the employer	13.346.000	14.472.000	14.453.645	99,87
01	1001	0012	413	Compensations in kind	100.000	100.000	69.000	69,00
01	1001	0012	414	Social benefits to employees	1.400.000	1.400.000	1.027.327	73,38
01	1001	0012	415	Employee benefits	3.000.000	3.000.000	2.996.069	99,87
01	1001	0012	416	Rewards to employees	1.300.000	1.600.000	1.489.026	93,06
01	1001	0012	421	Fixed costs	3.413.000	3.413.000	2.585.779	75,76
01	1001	0012	422	Travel expenses	1.590.000	1.760.000	1.488.339	84,56
01	1001	0012	423	Contracted services	9.796.000	9.626.000	6.163.188	64,03
01	1001	0012	424	Specialised services	392.000	392.000	355.560	90,70
01	1001	0012	425	Current repairs and maintenance	1.370.000	1.370.000	823.808	60,13
01	1001	0012	426	Material	4.330.000	4.330.000	3.361.120	77,62
01	1001	0012	462	Grants to international organisations	200.000	200.000	140.846	70,42
01	1001	0012	482	Taxes, mandatory fees, fines, penalties and interest	100.000	100.000	17.850	17,85
01	1001	0012	483	Fines and penalties under court decisions	100.000	100.000	0	0,00
01	1001	0012	512	Machinery and equipment	400.000	400.000	393.360	98,34
01	1001	0012	515	Intangible assets	2.860.000	2.560.000	0	0,00
01	1001	4003	II	TOTAL - PROJECT MOOT COURT - Trial Simulation	587.000	587.000	414.860	70,67
01	1001	4003	423	Contracted services	587.000	587.000	414.860	70,67

01	1001	4005	III	TOTAL - PROJECT <i>Equally to the Finish Line</i>	308.000	308.000	186.960	60,70
01	1001	4005	423	Contracted services	308.000	308.000	186.960	60,70
01	1001	4006	IV	TOTAL - PROJECT <i>Don't Judge a Book by Its Covers – Live Library</i>	340.000	340.000	222.726	65,51
01	1001	4006	423	Contracted services	340.000	340.000	222.726	65,51
01	1001	4009	V	TOTAL - PROJECT <i>Youth Panel</i>	500.000	500.000	465.663	93,13
01	1001	4009	423	Contracted services	500,000	500,000	465.663	93,13
01	1001	4013	VI	TOTAL - PROJECT <i>A Bridge of Understanding</i>	291.000	291.000	269.280	92,54
01	1001	4013	423	Contracted services	291.000	291.000	269.280	92,54
01	1001	4014	VII	TOTAL - PROJECT <i>Visibility Advances Equality</i>	450.000	450.000	400.000	88,89
01	1001	4014	423		450.000	450.000	400.000	88,89
06	1001		VIII- IX	TOTAL REVENUES - SOURCE 06	0	9.538.567	4.419.598	46,33
06	1001	4015-4016	VIII- IX	DONATIONS FROM INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS	0	9.538.567	4.419.598	46,33
06	1001	4015	VIII	TOTAL - PROJECT GIZ <i>Workplace Equality</i>	0	3.938.421	3.486.252	88,52
	1001	4015	411	Salaries, allowances and employee benefits	0	516.803	337.630	65,33
	1001	4015	412	Social contributions at the expense of the employer	0	78.296	51.151	65,33
	1001	4015	422	Travel expenses	0	233.372	233.371	100,00
	1001	4015	423	Contracted services	0	3.049.469	2.804.250	91,96
	1001	4015	426	Material	0	60.482	59.850	98,96
06	1001	4016	IX	TOTAL - PROJECT TEMPUS <i>Youth for Equality</i>	0	5.600.146	933.346	16,67
06	1001	4016	423	Contracted services	0	5.600.146	933.346	16,67

Note to * - The initial appropriation was approved by the Law on Budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2024 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 92/2023 of 7 November 2023)

Note to ** - The current appropriation is the initial appropriation adjusted in accordance with the Law amending the Law on Budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2024 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 79/2024 of 30 September 2024), approvals for change of appropriation of 11 October 2024 and 29 October 2024, as well as by redirecting appropriation in accordance with the Decision by the Ministry of Finance number: 003054715 2024 10520 003 000 427 015 of 4 November 2024.

BUDGET EXECUTION FOR 2024

BUDGET STRUCTURE BY PROGRAMMES, PROGRAMME ACTIVITIES AND PROJECTS

Source of financing	Programme	Programme activity/project	DESCRIPTION	*Initial appropriation	**Current appropriation	Budget execution	% of execution (8:7)
1	2	3	5	6	7	8	9
01-06	1001		<u>PROGRAMME</u> : Promotion and Protection of Human and Minority Rights and Freedoms	134.263.000	152.361.567	137.147.598	90,01
01		0012	<u>PROGRAMME ACTIVITY</u> : Effective Suppression and Protection against Discrimination	131.787.000	140.347.000	130.768.511	93,18
15		4003	<u>PROJECT</u> : MOOT COURT - Moot Court in the field of Protection against Discrimination	587.000,00	587.000,00	414.860,00	70,67
01		4005	<u>PROJECT</u> : EQUALLY TO THE FINISH LINE	308.000	308.000	186.960	60,70
01		4006	<u>PROJECT</u> : Don't Judge a Book by Its Covers LIVE LIBRARY	340.000	340.000	222.726	65,51
01		4009	<u>PROJECT</u> : YOUTH PANEL	500.000	500.000	465.663	93,13
01		4013	<u>PROJECT</u> : A BRIDGE OF UNDERSTANDING	291.000	291.000	269.280	92,54
01		4014	<u>PROJECT</u> : VISIBILITY ADVANCES EQUALITY	450.000	450.000	400.000	88,89
06		4015	<u>PROJECT</u> : GIZ Workplace Equality	0	3.938.421	3.486.252	88,52
06		4016	<u>PROJECT</u> : TEMPUS Youth for Equality	0	5.600.146	933.346	16,67

Note to * - The initial appropriation was approved by the Law on Budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2024 (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* No. 92/2023 of 7 November 2023)

Note to ** - The current appropriation is the initial appropriation adjusted in accordance with the Law amending the Law on Budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2024 (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* No. 79/2024 of 30 September 2024), approvals for change of appropriation of 11 October 2024 and 29 October 2024, as well as by redirecting appropriation in accordance with the Decision by the Ministry of Finance number: 003054715 2024 10520 003 000 427 015 of 4 November 2024.

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CIP – Каталогизација у публикацији
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

342.722

РЕДОВАН годишњи извештај Повереника за
заштиту равноправности за ... годину / уредница
Невена Петрушић. – 2010– . – Београд :
Повереник за заштиту равноправности, 2011–
(Београд : Службени гласник). – 25 cm

Годишње. – Има издање на другом језику:
Regular Annual Report (Commissioner for Protection
of Equality) = ISSN 2217-7302

ISSN 2217-6527 = Редован годишњи извештај
Повереника за заштиту равноправности

COBISS.SR-ID 185798924

