

Access to the education of the youth at risk in the Western Balkan countries: a collection of policy briefs



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Podgorica, 2023

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About publication

The publication “Access to Education of the Youth at Risk in the Western Balkan Countries – a Collection of Policy Briefs” is developed within a project “ARYSE” which is implemented by NGO Juventas (Montenegro) in partnership with several civil society organizations from Western Balkan, which formed a regional network At-Risk Youth Support Entity – ARYSE (Albania – ARSIS), North Macedonia – HOPS – Healthy Options Project Skopje, Kosovo – NGO Labyrinth and Serbia – Association Prevent), and with the financial support of the Western Balkan Fund. The project aims to provide answers on how to improve access to quality education, as well as to connect regional stakeholders in sharing their experiences in designing and implementing educational reforms concerning the youth at risk. Additionally, this project foresees gathering relevant decision-makers, practitioners, and education experts with the aim of providing space for discussion and setting a basis for joint advocacy.

Many young people, especially most at-risk youth, are highly marginalized and socially excluded in the Western Balkan countries. It is known that access to quality education is one of the most important factors in obtaining a higher living standard and maintaining a quality level of future social interaction. Failure to access quality education may be detrimental to the overall social development of young people. Not only does it significantly affect the prospects for future employment, but also it negatively affects mental health and social integration. Governments of the Western Balkan countries have recognized the need for more inclusive education and have been working on integrating specific target groups. However, the results of the reforms remain limited. Youth at risk are not a homogenous group, but a very diverse one, with each one having specific needs concerning their education. That is why this project aims to provide answers on how to improve access to quality education, as well as to connect regional stakeholders in sharing their experiences in designing and implementing educational reforms concerning the youth at risk.

The publication contains information about the legal and strategic framework that regulates the participation of the youth at risk in the educational system; an overview of the major reform processes focusing on inclusive education and other important aspects and changes that need to be made; and set of recommendations which will be an important product for decision makers and future joint initiatives in the field of protection of the most at-risk youth in the Western Balkan countries.

About ARYSE network

The first At-Risk Youth Support Entity (ARYSE Network) in the Balkans was founded in 2016 within the EU regional project ARYSE (At-Risk Youth Social Empowerment), by six civil society organizations. NGO Juventas from Montenegro had the role of the coordinator, and the partners were Initiative for Social Change ARSIS from Albania, Association Margina from Bosnia and Herzegovina, HOPS - Healthy Options Project Skopje from North Macedonia, NGO Labyrinth from Kosovo, Association Prevent from Serbia and SHL Foundation from Germany. ARYSE Network was founded in order to contribute to the regional achieving of social inclusion of most at-risk youth, by strengthening CSOs capacities, regional/national cooperation, and advocacy actions, and specifically to support equal access to education, employment, justice, and other related fields to most- at-risk young people in Balkan countries, by fostering the level of active participation and inclusion of CSOs representing young people in decision making and reform processes. The network continued to exist thanks to the support of different donors, especially the Balkan Civil Society Development Network and the Western Balkan Fund.

All previous eight years of existence and implemented activities of the ARYSE Network resulted in several recommendations, which are the basis for the organization of all further activities:

- the involvement of CSOs in the process of developing social policies;
- acknowledging the role of CSOs as important social partners in fulfilling the needs of vulnerable populations and as important partners in enhancing social inclusion and human rights protection within the countries;
- providing more sustainable funding for the CSOs services;
- creating more relevant process of licensing of CSOs service providers within the whole social protection process;
- establishing stronger partnerships when it comes to referral systems, sharing of data and monitoring and evaluation between state bodies and CSOs;
- establishing string service provision partnerships on the local level between local institutions and CSOs;
- creating qualitative preconditions for decentralization of social care;

- state authorities in the region should cooperate more closely in social care reforms;
- finding ways to fund civil society organizations that provide social services to vulnerable populations, as their work cannot be dependent on available project funds;
- finding ways to recognize and include CSOs in providing health care, especially considering that CSOs are already very active in that field, mainly in the preventive stage;
- taking more determined steps by the national governments in supporting the development of social entrepreneurship that can be a good model for providing financial sustainability to organizations active in service delivery as well as undertaking steps necessary for putting the procedures in order so that these funds can be directed toward social care activities.

The Network will continue with its activities in order to contribute to the creation of the supportive environment for civil society organization active in service provision in the Western Balkan, through increasing cooperation between CSOs service providers and state and local authorities and exchanging knowledge on national and regional level, which hopefully will result with increased understanding of the role of CSOs in contributing to social cohesion and creation of supportive policies for the youth at risk.



ALBANIA

Initiative for Social Change (ARSIS)

ACCESS TO EDUCATION OF THE
YOUTH AT RISK ALBANIA

Anduela Valle

Educational System in Albania Overview

The education of youth brings their social and economic empowerment, as an important indicator of their inclusiveness in society, but also as an indicator of the steps that Albania has taken within the framework of meeting the requirements as a candidate country for EU membership in the issues of youth in the country.

Albania has taken important steps in reforming the education system, which has improved access to education and increased learning outcomes, including the decentralization of schools, governance, and the introduction of a competency-based curriculum. These have contributed to the improvement of key indicators of education for youth in the country. Access to compulsory education has increased, and students' performance in international surveys has improved, but levels remain among the lowest in Europe¹.

According to the Albania Institute of Statistics² youth (15–29 years old) account for 22.7% of the country's population. A large number of students of this age finish school without acquiring basic skills. This limits many individuals' opportunities for employment and livelihood and can hinder the country's development. Inequalities in educational opportunities and outcomes still exist in terms of gender, ethnicity, and geographic location. Gender issues are also an important indicator in the registration of girls and boys in education. The gender gap in Albania favors boys in primary education, but this change in higher education, where the number of female graduates is higher than that of male graduates. Access to education and educational results tend to be lower among ethnic minorities compared to the majority of the Albanian population³.

1 Maghnouj S. Fordham E. et al, *Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education*, 2020.

2 <https://www.instat.gov.al/al/statistika-zyrtare-femije-dhe-te-rinj/popullsia/t%C3%AB-rinj-15-29-vje%C3%A7-n%C3%AB-raport-me-popullsin%C3%AB/>

3 Government of Albania, *National Action Plan for Integration of Roma and Egyptians in the Republic of Albania*, 2015–2020. Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth, Tirana, 2015, available at https://www.rcc.int/romaintegration2020/download/docs/2015%20Action_Plan_Albania%202015%20

The National Action Plan for the Integration of Roma and Egyptians (2021–2025)⁴ and the National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities (2021–2025)⁵ aim to remove barriers to general education and promote the integration of marginalized groups into wider Albanian society.

On the other hand, demographic changes and migration are factors that promote the geographical distribution of youth in the country and constitute a dilemma regarding education planning, especially for the distribution of resources, since in some municipalities, some schools remain without students, while others are overcrowded.

The poor infrastructure of roads and transport brings further restrictions on the access of youth to school, especially for girls in remote areas⁶. Meanwhile, the aim for quality and comprehensive education is a key factor in the education of youth and their integration into society.

It is important to make great efforts towards changing social norms, especially when talking about implementing approaches that are based on human rights, which are particularly related to the challenges of changing public attitudes towards the Roma and Egyptian communities, youth with disabilities, and girls in Albania.

4 <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/al/46eb57a0095aac6d46fe42b6cfb302f66368453e0c284a07c0c7c9fd8d43760b.pdf>

5 CIA The World Fact book, *Albania (2019)*, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-worldfactbook/geos/al.html>

6 Barjaba K., Barjaba J, *Embracing Emigration: The Migration-Development Nexus in Albania*, Migration Policy Institute, 2015, available at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/embracing-emigrationmigration-development-nexus-albania>

2.

Key Reforms in Youth Education Access and More

The Albanian education system and its complexity are consequences of a series of historical, political, and social developments and activities. The values, traditions, structures, laws, policies, and practices that have accompanied the Albanian education system in the past have been constantly questioned as a reaction to these challenges. The Right to Education for All, even though it is included in the legislation, seems to create a conflict with practices and entrenched structures in Albanian society. Educational structures and attitudes that have been shaped for more than five decades coexist with new models of inclusion of vulnerable groups in the country's educational system. Various developments, and numerous social, political, and economic problems that are present in everyday life influenced the changes in the educational system. These changes were related to the content, structure, and services offered. Educational institutions have reflected the changes and created opportunities for education for everyone based on their characteristics and capacities. It is still necessary to create a new and modern conceptualization related to the concept of organizing the school as a community center program. The teaching methodology, the adaptation of the environment, and the organization and planning of many educational elements in the education process, so that youth at risk participate fully in the life of the school community as valued members of it.

Of course, comprehensive practices in education for youth are a product of the special development of education in Albania, which preserved positive characteristics, embraced the positive experiences of European societies, and was influenced by international experience.

Inclusive education for youth has a history of development and growth in terms of legislation, organization, management, and development of the curriculum and its content. The picture of comprehensive education today reflects the goals and reality of its implementation in Albanian educational institutions. Albania has significantly increased the access of youth at-risk to all levels of education.

Major and very diverse education reforms have been undertaken in recent years, which have had the effect of increasing the access of youth at risk to the education system, including curriculum reform; improving teacher training; a more equal distribution of resources across counties; improving learning conditions; an increase

in average teacher salaries; and a restructuring of the content and administration of matriculation exams.

Reforms in the education system over the years have increased attention to youth at risk. The Albanian government has made serious efforts to coordinate actions between line ministries and central and local government, bringing more integrated educational policies for youth at risk.

Meanwhile, one-third of Albania's population is involved in the education system, therefore it is understandable that education occupies an important place in the country's political agenda. This is reflected both in cross-sectoral policies and in the government's legislative agenda, but not necessarily in budget plans.

Those, public expenditures for education in 2022 constituted only 3% of GDP, which is below the level of most countries in the Region. The 2022 budget gave special attention to the growing demand for quality and inclusive education for their early development, providing free textbooks to 236,000 students attending basic education, as well as free textbooks for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds in education. middle and high; providing transportation for students in rural areas. Social policies that support youth at risk, ensuring conditions for stability and regular attendance of the educational system.

The framework of state policies for education in the Republic of Albania consists of sectoral and cross-sectoral strategies, as well as other policy documents related to the development of education, such as the National Strategy for Development and Integration 2015–2020, National Agenda for Children's Rights 2021–2026, National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities 2021–2025, National Action Plan for the Integration of Roma and Egyptians 2021–2025, Digital Agenda of Albania 2015–2020, Medium-Term Budget Program (PBA) 2021–2023, Economic Reform Program 2021–2023, Pre-University Education Development Strategy 2014–2020, National Action Plan for Youth 2015–2020, National Strategy for Gender Equality 2016–2020.

In Albania, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MES) is responsible for education as a whole, while the Ministry of Finance and Economy is in charge of vocational education. The national vision for education will be set out in the National Education Strategy 2021–2026. The overall aim of the government remains to ensure education for all, including fairness, equality, and non-discriminatory access for children with disabilities and children belonging to national minorities.

The government has assigned responsibility to the Local Administrative Units regarding school infrastructure (construction, infrastructure, maintenance, and services).

Albania's current curricular framework envisages a student-centered, coordinated approach to teaching and learning. It emphasizes the key competencies for lifelong learning that all students are expected to acquire by the end of upper secondary education.

MES's vision for the education sector aims to build a comprehensive education system that successfully addresses the individual needs of youth by treating them equally and with respect for diversity. Inclusion and equality are necessary prerequisites to ensure the quality education of all individuals and to narrow the educational achievement gap between different social groups. The new education strategy is based on the lifelong learning paradigm, which includes all stages of learning, starting from preschool education to post-retirement, and covers all forms of learning: formal, non-formal, and informal.

National Education Strategy 2021-2026⁷ is in full coherence with four strategic objectives of the Education & Training 2020 framework for cooperation between the countries of the European Union in the field of education and training: 1) Making lifelong learning a reality 2) Improving quality and efficiency of education and training; 3) Promotion of equality, social cohesion, and active citizenship; and 4) Increasing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

One of the specific objectives of this strategy foresees the improvement of the social-economic status of youth through the provision of quality services and various forms of financial assistance, mainly in the cycle of secondary education and the higher cycle.

As mentioned above, several inter-institutional policies are coordinated to ensure the education and inclusiveness of youth at risk while attending the education system in the country. Among the main social policies, which have an impact on the reform of the educational system and the support of the youth at risk, we will single out: National Strategy for Development and Integration 2015-2020 is the basic strategic document that combines the agenda of integration into the European Union with the sustainable economic and social development of the country, including the connection with

⁷<https://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Draft-Strategjia-per-Arsimin-2021-2026.pdf>

the Sustainable Development Goals, which has several objectives that guarantee comprehensive education for all, increase the interaction between the central and local government on the issues of education of groups at risk and ensure a professional education, which guarantees the fulfillment of the needs of the labor market.

National Strategy for Development and Integration 2015–2020⁸ is the basic strategic document that combines the agenda of integration into the European Union with the sustainable economic and social development of the country, including the connection with the Sustainable Development Goals, which has several objectives that guarantee comprehensive education for all, increase the interaction between the central and local government on the issues of education of groups at risk and ensure a professional education, which guarantees the fulfillment of the needs of the labor market.

Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development⁹. In September 2015, Albania adopted the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. The 2030 Agenda is a 15-year global framework focused on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), one of which relates to education: SDG4 – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote opportunities for learning throughout life for everyone. SDG4 has 7 main goals on education issues, such as its free provision, equal access to professional education and higher education; development of employability skills; inclusiveness and elimination of gender disparity; training youth in reading-writing and numeracy; education for sustainable development and global citizenship.

National Agenda for Children’s Rights 2021–2026¹⁰ is a cross-sectoral strategy aimed at the effective protection and promotion of children’s rights in the Republic of Albania. In the framework of strategic field 3 – “Systems and services friendly to children and adolescents/field of development and education” – the following four objectives are presented: Improving the quality and access to education for children in basic education; Improving mechanisms for inclusive environments in pre-university education; Improving democratic processes in schools.

National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities 2021–2025¹¹ aims to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in Albanian society, prevent discrimination and

8 <https://www.ips.gov.al/en/the-national-strategy-for-development-and-integration-nsdi/>

9 <https://albania.un.org/en/sdgs>

10 https://www.unicef.org/albania/media/4396/file/NARC%202021-2026_ENG.pdf

11 https://shendetesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Plani-Kombetar-PAK-_2021-2025_AL.pdf

eliminate obstacles to accessing public services and the realization of their rights. This plan brings a strategic goal for the education of persons with disabilities (“To ensure quality and comprehensive education for all children with disabilities”).

National Action Plan for the Integration of Roma and Egyptians 2021–2025¹²

aims to remove the obstacles faced by Roma and Egyptians in terms of accessing services and improving their living conditions through integration and promoting intercultural dialogue. One of the six policy areas of this Plan is “Education and promotion of intercultural dialogue”. The strategic objectives of this field are related to increasing the number of Roma and Egyptian girls and boys who complete all levels of education; Promotion of intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding through the development of school-based communities; strengthening the school’s cooperation with social services, for dealing with the cases of Roma and Egyptian children with social-economic problems.

National Strategy for Gender Equality 2016–2020¹³ is conceived as a guide towards a society of equal opportunities and without violence, in which: the needs of women and men are taken into consideration and treated equally. Some of the specific objectives related to the field of education are as follows: the improvement of school curricula in pre-university education, based on their gender analysis, aiming at the involvement of men and boys in the prevention of gender-based violence and violence against children, the improvement of the professional capacities of teachers and school psychologists for the practical application of improved curricula, prepared for the engagement of men and boys against violence, the addition of specific awareness courses, the improvement of the capacities of health professionals, education and police officers for identifying vulnerable cases (in the framework of prevention and information).

Draft-National Action Plan for Youth 2022–2029¹⁴ aims to develop and coordinate cross-sectoral youth policies in education, employment, health, and culture and strengthen the participation of youth in social life and decision-making processes. One of the strategic objectives of this plan is the “Education of youth”. This strategic objective is divided into six specific objectives: 1. Improvement of school subjects/ curricula and the learning process; 2. Promotion of Excellence and capacity building;

12 <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/al/46eb57a0095aac6d46fe42b6cfb302f66368453e0c284a07c0c7c9fd8d43760b.pdf>

13 https://shendetesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/WEB_Strategjia-Kombetare-EN.pdf

14 https://konsultimipublik.gov.al/documents/RENJK_500_I.%20Strategjia%20Kombetare%20e%20Rinise%202022.pdf

3. Supporting young scientific researchers; 4. Improving the infrastructure of schools and the teaching environment; 5. Strengthening of Vocational Education Schools; 6. Education programs for youth outside the education system and those from minority/vulnerable groups.

The National Strategy for Employment and Skills 2019 - 2022¹⁵ aims to have a competitive economy and an inclusive society that relies on “Higher skills and better jobs for all women and men”. Providing quality vocational education and training for youth and adults; Promotion of social inclusion and territorial cohesion; and Strengthening labor market governance and professional qualifications systems.

The National Social Protection Strategy 2020-2023¹⁶ The vision of the strategy is “Building a social protection system that fights socio-economic inequalities, envisioning a system that has the policies and mechanisms to protect all individuals in need or excluded through preventive programs and social re-integration alternating with employment schemes”. The increase of cooperation with educational structures will aim at the mutual exchange of information for youth to carry out a fair assessment of the skills for performing basic life activities, by the age group, as well as to ensure the identification and completion of the training needs of these youth in the framework of the comprehensive and special education system.

15 https://www.financa.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Publikim_EN_Strategjia-Komb%C3%ABtare-p%C3%ABr-Pun%C3%ABsim-dhe-Aft%C3%ABsi-2019-2022.pdf

16 https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-06/Evaluation%20on%20the%20approach%20and%20household%20use%20of%20social%20protection%20transfers%20_2022%20Eng_0.pdf

3.

Alternative learning opportunities to vulnerable youth

Intervention programs for youth at risk and their involvement in education are mostly initiatives of national and international non-governmental organizations operating in Albania, as well as interventions by the local government and local educational units. These programs are mainly social, so they address the problems of socialization and integration of youth with socio-economic difficulties, youth from Roma and Egyptian communities, youth in street situations, young victims of trafficking or possible victims of trafficking, youth in conflict with the law, youth returned from migration, or as an asylum seeker with the rest of society by working with communities and in joint projects with local and educational institutions.

Intervention programs for the inclusion of youth at risk in the education of non-government organizations show a growing tendency to actively involve youth in policy-making or important issues related mainly to their rights, advocacy, and active citizenship. However, these efforts are general and are not specifically addressed to the target-group – certain groups with all the diversity of their profiles and the complexity of the phenomenon.

Over the years, the main efforts to provide learning alternatives and inclusion in the school system have been mainly for the youth of the Roma and Egyptian communities. The reform of the social protection system and mainly the protection of children (defined in Albania according to the Convention on the Rights of Children, 0-18 years old) after 2014 brought increased attention to the provision of alternative education opportunities for target groups of youth in street situations.

Between 2014-2016, Albania was involved in a large wave of departures from the country, thousands of youth, aged 15-29 left the country to seek asylum in one of the EU countries. Most of them were refused asylum and returned to Albania. Occurring in these conditions, mobilization of the structures of social and educational services as needed, which realized the identification of a new target-group in need, the retunes youth. This target group faced shortcomings in the provision of school support in the country. Many of them had lost years of schooling and needed their recovery.

A continuous effort of the central and local government in close cooperation with the sector of non-profit organizations in the country is offering alternative opportunities for education and education of this target group, adapting educational curricula, after-school support programs and setting up individual educational plans and offering opportunities for inclusion in professional education.

The legal framework for youth in Albania underwent important changes about five years ago with the adoption of Law 75/2019 ON YOUTH, the objective of this law is to protect the rights of youth comprehensively, to create the necessary conditions for activation, the participation and support of youth, the determination of the functions and competences of institutions at the central and local level, as well as cooperation with organizations that exercise activity in the field of youth.

The law supports informal education for youth, as an activity organized and adapted for youth, outside the formal education system, based on the needs and interests of youth, the principles of volunteering and active participation of youth in learning processes, through which they acquire necessary competencies for the development of personal potential, active participation in society and access to the labor market.

Meanwhile, the coordination of actions between the local government and the sector of non-profit organizations, which identify, provide services, and manage the cases of youth in vulnerable situations, orient these youth mostly towards non-formal education and vocational training. This is for several basic reasons, which are mainly related to early school dropout by these youth; lack of basic skills in writing, reading, and mathematics; facing stigma and prejudice for returning to school when there is a big age difference with the rest of the class; stigma and prejudice from engaging in early marital relationships, etc.

Occurring in these conditions, the orientation toward professional training is one of the forms that has been effective in the education of vulnerable youth. Information about the importance of acquiring a profession from the programs of non-governmental organizations in conjunction with the social services of the local government has increased attention to the vocational training of vulnerable youth.

Meanwhile, the system of education and professional training in the country received a boost and special attention with the design and implementation of the Employment and Skills Strategy 2014-2022, within which the training and qualification

of the future workforce and its integration under the needs of a developing labor market received special emphasis in public policies. As a result, during the last few years, important steps have been taken in the consolidation of the regulatory and institutional framework, in the further development and implementation of the Albanian Qualifications Framework, which was referenced with the European Qualifications Framework¹⁷.

Also, the main efforts of the responsible institutions were focused on the reorganization and optimization of the network of public VET providers, a process which is expected to have a significant impact on the expansion of the VET offer, in the context of lifelong learning.

The “Second Chance” program presented by the Ministry of Education and Sports has been positively evaluated by Roma and Egyptian organizations and it has been recommended to extend it to all schools that have a large number of Roma children. At the same time, continuous monitoring and improvement will be necessary to prevent isolation and facilitate the transition of Roma and Egyptians into the mainstream system. The Action Plan for the Integration of Roma and Egyptians 2021–2025 includes the review of the “Second Chance” program, to facilitate the transition of its students to regular classes and to find other means to prevent isolation.

The “Community Centre School” program, a friendly school for all, is an approach (promotional and developmental movement) to turn the school into a place where the school–family–community partnership is built and cooperates for the development of the full potential of each student.

On the other hand, the sector of non–profit organizations in Albania has for years held the main weight in providing alternative forms of education for vulnerable youth. It is precisely this sector, which serves as a promoter in the identification of direct cases by fulfilling their needs for informal education, and it is this sector that has an extraordinary influence in lobbying and advocacy to change and reform the education situation of vulnerable youth in our country.

Among the alternative forms of learning offered mainly by the sector of non–profit organizations in Albania within the framework of social and empowering services that this sector offers for vulnerable youth, we will highlight:

¹⁷ Law 10247 dated 4.3.2010, amended "On the Albanian framework of qualifications" and Order 99 of the MFE dated 25.05.2021 "On the approval of the national catalog of professional qualifications"

Accelerated models of education include programs that aim to provide essential knowledge and skills from the elementary and secondary curricula over an accelerated period to school-aged youth who are out of school for an extended period, usually more than one school year. These programs should lead to the same certification as formal education.

Catch-up programs are designed to provide short-term support to youth who were out of school for a short time or the learning gap is not extensive, and the aim is to re-engage them in formal education as soon as possible. Community centres, both within their premises, but also in school premises, usually offer these programs.

Bridge programs are usually short-term courses on language, or specific needs or preparation to re-enroll youth in an education system, mainly for young returnees and asylum seekers.

Remedial education are activities designed to usually support students with learning gaps in a given subject and/or to improve transferable skills in order to succeed in the regular formal system. There are usually after school programs and they are taught to prevent dropouts.

Other flexible modalities include programs that adapt curricula (primary or secondary education for flexible time frames and use pedagogy and materials that require a reduced number of teachers. This type of program is usually offered in rural areas due to the lack of formal provision and services of transportation, for delinquent youth, youth placed in juvenile detention facilities, youth with disabilities, etc. These programs attempt to replace formal education.

4.

Enhancing Youth Inclusion: Policy Change Recommendations

- Although Albania has made significant progress in the education sector, there are still many issues to improve. Some of the main issues that need to be improved are related to the lack of equality and the existence of discrimination against youth coming from low-income groups and social difficulties, discrimination against minorities (such as Roma and Egyptians), and youth with disabilities.

Despite the progress, there are still significant barriers that need to be eliminated, especially toward equality and inclusion in the education of Roma and youth with disabilities. A large number of Roma students drop out of compulsory education not only as a result of discriminatory attitudes, lack of support, and bullying at school but also due to the need to help their parents in income-generating activities. Parents who are often uneducated themselves cannot help their children with lessons, give them instructions or share their personal experiences from this period. Subsequently, the inability to pay living expenses becomes a barrier to the pursuit of higher education by young Roma and Egyptians.

Government policies for providing free schoolbooks and transport should be accompanied by other projects, which offer a more social approach to cases, sustainable programs are needed at the local level, which monitor the situation at home, and follow the cases during school attendance. In this direction, coordination of actions is needed through service providers, specifically the NGO sector, Roma organizations that offer scholarships and services for this target group, and state service providers at the level of local government units.

- Although the overall goal of the government continues to be the provision of education for all, including justice, equality, and non-discriminatory access for youth with disabilities, there are still gaps in their education. Data from studies in this field show that a very small percentage of youth with disabilities over 16 attend education in the country. In this direction, it is necessary to improve the infrastructure of the school, to create suitable conditions for the movement in

the premises of the school of this group. Even though the reimbursement of the public transport fee is realized, it is still quite difficult to attend this service, so it is necessary to re-evaluate the way of movement for this target group, taking into consideration the remote and rural areas.

Raising social services at home (near housing) at the local level should combine health, psycho-social and educational approaches.

- However, the increase in national income has not translated into improvements in education, health, or social protection, and successive governments have not invested enough in youth services. Public spending on education reached only 3 percent of the GDP in Albania in 2022. The values of basic education in promoting equality, prosperity, well-being, and social development should be concretely recognized, significantly increasing the percentage of the national budget that goes to education, to bring it at least to the EU average level. An independent review of the disparities in education services between municipalities is needed, which can guide the review of existing formulas and processes for granting grants, to guarantee a quality and comprehensive education for every individual, through the optimal distribution of resources.
- The government has assigned responsibility to the Local Administrative Units regarding school infrastructure (construction, infrastructure, maintenance, and services). In addition, further capital investments are needed to ensure that the school's facilities and infrastructure meet contemporary standards. Many schools, especially those in rural areas, struggle to meet basic infrastructural and operational needs, such as heating. Some of them are overcrowded and lack laboratory equipment, furniture, and environments, including Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) infrastructure, to support high-quality learning.

Local Administrative Units and other local stakeholders should be trained in the preparation of evidence-based plans that address the needs of youth and their families; in the implementation, coordination, and supervision of plans for the provision of local services; as well as in the development and execution of efficient, effective, and equal local budgets.

- A proactive comprehensive assessment of youth-centered legislation is needed to identify gaps and ensure compatibility with and between international instruments

The new National Agenda for Children's Rights (0-18 years), Youth Law, Education Strategy, and Local Youth Plans should address key interventions from the point of view of cross-sectoral cooperation to achieve results for vulnerable youth. Strengthening governance mechanisms for the implementation of human rights and capacities to produce and use quality data at the national and local levels should be the main pillars of the design of new policies in the framework of youth empowerment in the country.

Albania's National Strategy for Employment and Skills calls for investment in VET and extensive human capital development. The National Education Strategy 2021-2026 foresees the improvement of the quality of pre-university and university education through the reorganization and expansion of study programs by adapting them to market requirements, the modernization of infrastructure, and the introduction of financial schemes. The role of the local government and the NGO sector is to fulfill the objectives of these policies and to realize the pro-active identification of youth in need on the ground.

- Although NGOs at the local level are seen as important partners in providing social services to youth with their social programs, the incomplete legal framework continues to limit their access to local government funds. Generally, these organizations find it impossible to provide sufficient services to all who need them and cannot recover the costs of providing services. Many beneficiaries are unable to pay for services and NGOs have insufficient access to other sources of financial support to cover the costs of service delivery. Meanwhile, the interest of donors to support the provision of services is declining. The number of NGOs engaged in service delivery, including welfare, education, and health has gradually increased and now offers diversity. Although state structures at the central and local levels appreciate the role that NGOs can play in providing services, especially those aimed at vulnerable groups and individuals, limited progress has been made in terms of providing real financial support and stability from them, so a quick reassessment of the situation is needed. In this way, more services and access to education can be provided for vulnerable youth.

5.

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KOSOVO

NGO Labyrinth

ACCESS TO EDUCATION OF THE
YOUTH AT RISK KOSOVO

Premtim Fazliu

1.

OVERVIEW

In Kosovo, the legal and strategic framework for the participation of youth at risk in the educational system is primarily governed by the Law on Education¹⁸ and other related regulations. The Law on Education provides for the inclusion of children and youth with special needs in education, including those at risk, regarding to Article 4, of the Law of Education; Protection of vulnerable groups, which includes physical punishment or other forms of punitive punishment, pain/hurt or abusive, bully, discrimination, etc. in the education system, and emphasizes the need for tailored educational programs to meet their needs.

Additionally, the National Strategy for the Education of Children and Youth with Special Needs for the period 2016-2020 (Plani Strategjik per Organizimin e Arsimit gjitheperfshires me nevoja te vecanta ne arsimin parauniversitar ne Kosove, December, 2015)¹⁹ and its accompanying Action Plan aim to improve access to education for vulnerable children and youth, including those at risk (Article 4 of the Law of Education) The strategy emphasizes the importance of providing support services and developing inclusive curricula that meet the specific needs of these students.

The Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2017-2021²⁰ also recognizes the importance of providing equitable access to education for all, including youth at risk of social inclusion, and aims to address the social and economic barriers that can prevent their participation in education, For instance, the process of transferring the responsibility of finances/budget to the schools has faced obstacles or barriers in doing so. Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians community has faced a lot of barriers in raising awareness of the importance of registration of the school, with special emphasis on females. The mismatch between the needs of the labor market and the knowledge acquired in higher education has been identified as one of the main obstacles to employment growth and economic development in the country, and so on. Furthermore, the Kosovo

18 <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=2428>

19 <https://www.scribd.com/document/398293119/Plani-Strategjik-Per-Gjitheperfshirjen-e-Nxenesve-Me-Nevoja-Te-Vecanta-2016-2021-1-1> (Plani Strategjik per Organizimin e Arsimit gjitheperfshires me nevoja te vecanta ne arsimin parauniversitar ne Kosove, December, 2015)

20 https://masht.rks-gov.net/plani-strategjik-i-arsimit-ne-kosove-2017-2021/?fbclid=IwAR0p3yeZ_XNN1wNhCSC6c1vBaEVdICkvwIG8-VAszqQrccZ3SkVP7Pykhxo (Plani Strategjik i Arsimit ne Kosove 2017-2021)

Education and Employment Strategic Plan 2021–2025²¹ highlights the importance of reducing the risk of exclusion from the education system for disadvantaged youth and emphasizes the need for targeted support to improve their educational outcomes. It regards the 5 strategic objectives of the document, which include 1. Early childhood education. 2: Pre-university education. 3: Education, vocational training, and adult education. 4: Higher education. 5: Digitization of education. Article 8, Action Plan of the Strategic of Education 2022–2026.²²

Overall, the legal and strategic framework in Kosovo emphasizes the importance of inclusive education and tailored support for youth at risk to ensure their full participation and success in the education system, which I refer to the legislative aspect of how it is regulated and emphasize that the implementation of the strategies and action plan is a good omen that it will be successful or have a direct impact.

Referring to youth at risk and inclusiveness in education which refers to the right of every child and youth to equal inclusion in quality education. Guided by this principle, the school enables equal access and inclusion, contributing to the full realization of the individual potential of each child/young person. This principle should guide the school's approach to the school community and beyond, and especially to children who are in and out of the learning process. The performance of the school is not only evaluated based on the level of achievement of the students who attend the school but also based on the degree of involvement of children in the locality in which it operates., the most marginalized ones are youth with poor or unfavorable social and economic conditions, youth with disabilities, children and youth in conflict with the law, children and youth who are using drugs, etc.

Kosovo's educational system has made significant headway since its independence in 2008. Nevertheless, the country faces challenges in providing access to education for youth at risk. These vulnerable young people are often subject to poverty, discrimination, social exclusion, and lack of access to education due to factors such as economic status, disability, gender, language, and ethnicity. Ensuring access to quality education for this population is vital to achieving social justice, inclusive education, and sustainable development. Therefore, this policy paper offers recommendations for developing a policy brief that addresses this issue.

21 <https://masht.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/03-Strategjia-e-Arsimit-2022-2026-Alb-Web.pdf> (Strategjia e Arsimit 2022–2026)

22 <https://masht.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/03-Strategjia-e-Arsimit-2022-2026-Alb-Web.pdf> (Strategjia e Arsimit 2022–2026)

Current data reveals that Kosovo has a primary school enrolment rate exceeding²³ 95% and a secondary school enrolment rate of around²⁴ 80%. However, enrolment rates for children from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly lower. For instance, children from Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities have much lower enrolment rates than the national average. Similarly, children with disabilities, especially those in rural areas, face numerous education barriers, including inaccessible infrastructure, lack of special needs education, and stigmatization. Cultural and economic obstacles to education, such as early marriage, domestic duties, and poverty, hinder girls' education, particularly those in rural areas.

Access to education encompasses not only enrolment but also quality education. In Kosovo, the quality of education raises concerns, particularly in terms of curricula, teaching methods, and assessment. Poor quality education significantly impacts student retention and dropout rates, especially for youth at risk of social exclusion, such as Accessible Infrastructure, with special emphasis on disabilities. Raising the awareness of early childhood education and implementing the new curriculum for mandatory early education. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated existing educational inequalities and affected the mental health and well-being of youth at risk of social exclusion.

23 <https://masht.rks-gov.net/statistikat-e-arsimitne-kosove-2022-2023/>

24 <https://masht.rks-gov.net/statistikat-e-arsimitne-kosove-2022-2023/>

2.

Educational system in Kosovo – Overview

The educational system in Kosovo is currently facing several challenges, despite ongoing reforms aimed at improving the quality of education and increasing access to education. Here is a brief overview of the current situation in Kosovo²⁵:

Access to education: Access to education has improved in Kosovo, particularly for disadvantaged groups such as Roma children. However, there is still a need to improve access to education in rural areas, where infrastructure and resources are limited.

Curriculum: The curriculum in Kosovo is in the process of being updated to better meet the needs of students and prepare them for the changing demands of the workforce. This includes a focus on modernizing the curriculum, as well as introducing new subjects such as digital literacy and entrepreneurship.

Teacher training: Kosovo faces a shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in rural areas. To address this, the government is working to improve teacher training programs and provide ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers.

Funding: The education system in Kosovo is underfunded (82 million euros per 2023. Around 5% of the total GDP), which has a negative impact on the quality of education and access to resources. The government is working to increase funding for education, but this remains a challenge due to the country's limited resources.

Technology: The use of technology in education is limited in Kosovo, with many schools lacking access to modern educational technology such as computers and the internet. ²⁶In 125 public schools of Kosovo, they do not have access to the Internet (not because of the technical impossibility of accessing the Internet, but because of the monthly cost of it). In schools that have access to the Internet, in most cases they do not offer Internet in the entire school space, but only in certain staff offices

25 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung et. al, Analysis of Educational System in Kosovo <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kosovo/15187.pdf>

26 Kosovo Education Center, Effects of Pandemic COVID-19 in pre-university education in Kosovo, 2021, p. 22-23. <https://kec-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Ndikimi-i-COVID19-ne-Arsimin-Parauniversitar-SHQIP.pdf> (Kosovo Education Center)

and eventually in the ICT cabinets. This limits students' opportunities to engage with technology and prepare for the digital workforce.

Despite these challenges, the government of Kosovo is committed to improving the education system, This is mostly regarding the legal framework changes that have been made in recent years. The conclusion was/is that besides that government is committed (regarding the changes and some improvements to the education system) there's a lot to do, concrete examples are mentioned within the whole document. Progress is being made in increasing access to education and improving the quality of education for all students. However, more work is needed to address ongoing challenges such as inadequate funding, a shortage of qualified teachers, and limited access to technology.

3.

Key Reforms in Youth Education Access and More

In Kosovo, there have been several major reform processes aimed at improving access to education for youth at risk, as well as addressing other important aspects of the education system. Some of the key initiatives include:

Inclusion of marginalized groups: Kosovo has made efforts to include marginalized groups such as Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities in the education system through the development of inclusive education policies and programs.

Curriculum reform: The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology has been working on revising the curriculum to make it more relevant to the needs of the country and to prepare students for the 21st-century workforce.

Teacher training: Kosovo has been implementing teacher training programs to improve the quality of education and to support teachers in meeting the needs of diverse student populations.

Infrastructure development: Kosovo has been investing in the development of new schools and the renovation of existing ones, as well as in the provision of modern educational technologies and equipment.

Support for at-risk students: To assist at-risk students, the government has established various programs and services, including counseling, mentoring, and after-school activities. These resources are vital in helping students improve their academic performance, demonstrated by increased attendance rates, elevated grades, and deeper engagement in their studies. Effective implementation involves the establishment of support teams, community involvement, and regular monitoring and evaluation. The Social Center of Work and other mechanisms play a critical role in facilitating these efforts.

Quality assurance and accreditation: Kosovo has established a quality assurance and accreditation system to monitor and evaluate the quality of education at all levels and to promote continuous improvement. In practice, this is accomplished by developing accessibility tests for students and preparing them for upcoming

schooling. These tests play an important role in developing and raising the capacities and knowledge of students since Kosovo aspires to do well in the PISA tests. Plus, monitoring and accrediting private colleges in Kosovo are essential for ensuring educational quality, protecting students, promoting innovation, and raising the overall education level in the country. Accreditation benefits the colleges themselves by motivating them to continuously improve and adapt to changing educational needs. It also benefits students, the workforce, and society at large by providing a reliable measure of educational quality.

Overall, these reforms are aimed at ensuring that all students in Kosovo have access to quality education that prepares them for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

4.

Alternative Learning Opportunities

Providing alternative learning opportunities to vulnerable youth in Kosovo can be an important step towards improving the prospects of those who may face barriers to education and employment. There are several ways in which this can be achieved:

Non-formal education programs: This includes programs that provide education outside of the traditional school system, such as vocational training, apprenticeships, and community-based education programs. These programs can help young people acquire the skills they need to succeed in the workforce. A very good practice is the MoU signed between the University of Pristina with public institutions in paid vocational training, paid practice, and community-based education (The daily centers for elderly). Another good example is the platform for employment of the Ministry of Finances (SUPER PUNA (Super JOB) PLATFORM).

Distance learning: With the rise of technology, distance learning has become an increasingly popular option for youth who cannot attend traditional schools. Online courses, virtual classrooms, and remote tutoring can help young people access educational resources from anywhere, at any time. The COVID-19 pandemic has been the best example of the use of technology and the importance of digitizing education, training, and similar activities. During this time, thousands of technological devices have been donated (especially to people who have been in difficult socio-economic conditions). The equipment with these devices can now be used by the same persons to attend trainings, sessions, conferences, and professional development at the international level, as long as it is impossible to develop physically. Targeted individuals can seek online courses, for instance (<https://www.coursera.org/stanford>; <https://www.udemy.com/>; <https://academy.hubspot.com/>).

Youth-led programs: Involving young people in the design and implementation of alternative education programs can be an effective way to engage them and provide them with meaningful learning opportunities. By taking ownership of their education, young people can develop the skills and confidence they need to succeed in the future. Taking ownership of one's education is a powerful and transformative approach that empowers young people to develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary for success in the future. In conclusion, taking ownership of one's education is a pathway to empowerment, personal growth, and success. It instills the values of autonomy, adaptability, and a love for learning, which are vital not only for academic achievement

but also for thriving in an ever-evolving world. Encouraging young people to become self-directed learners is a valuable investment in their future.

Mentorship and coaching: Providing vulnerable youth with access to mentors and coaches who can offer support, guidance, and encouragement can be a powerful way to help them overcome the challenges they face and reach their full potential.

Collaboration with local organizations: Working with local organizations that serve vulnerable youth, such as NGOs, can help ensure that alternative learning opportunities are tailored to the specific needs of young people in Kosovo and are culturally appropriate.

It's important to remember that every young person is unique and may require a different approach to alternative learning. However, by providing a range of options and creating a supportive environment, it's possible to help vulnerable youth in Kosovo overcome the barriers they face and achieve their goals. Recognizing the uniqueness of each young person and tailoring alternative learning approaches to their individual needs is essential when addressing the challenges faced by vulnerable youth in Kosovo. Here are key points to consider in creating a supportive environment and offering diverse options to help these young people overcome barriers and achieve their goals, such as individual learning plans, holistic support, alternative education pathways, recognition and inclusivity, building resilience, and so on.

By taking these approaches, Kosovo can create a nurturing and inclusive educational environment that empowers vulnerable youth to overcome barriers, pursue their aspirations, and contribute positively to their communities and society as a whole. Recognizing and celebrating the uniqueness of each young person is fundamental to this process.

In the points presented as an alternative form of learning opportunity for vulnerable groups, I am listing some concrete examples of which interventions are adequate and necessary for change (referring to generic points).

1. Dropout rate of rural areas – Reorganization of the schools. Gathering a specific range of areas into one school – regarding the standard with at least 12 students per class.
2. Kids who are in conflict with the law – First, enforcing the National Council for the Rights and Protection of the child (central and local level – most

municipality haven't created yet the councils as obliged regarding the Law of Protection of the children). Enforcing the role of family (here might be including the founding of the pre-marriage schools for good parenting). Most Social Center of Work have no psychologist employed (a mechanism, which mandate its to provide such a service), especially as a protection measure to delinquent cases.

3. Kids and youth with disabilities: Besides investing a lot in providing physical accessibility to schools, there's a lot to do, as follows: Providing specialized services for youth with disabilities from authorized institutions (now and on contracting via NGO-s or private sector), advocating for adequate solutions to people with disabilities who are under family care – and which are not capable to provide such services, founding and funding community-based centers, raising the number of assistants in schools, raising awareness of the community about the importance of early education, enforcing Social Center with human resources and building/functionalizing special and resource center for this target group (a good example – Center for Down Syndrome and Autism in Pristina).
4. Poor conditions: Raising the subventions from the municipal level. Increasing scholarships and providing materials and goods for each individual in need.
5. Early marriage; Including sexual education as a learning class within primary high schools, reproductive health lessons, dozens of campaigns on providing information about the law of family, civil code, and other qualitative information. Organizing family plan discussions.

5.

Enhancing Youth Inclusion: Policy Change Recommendations

Here are a few concrete recommendations for policy changes that can help provide higher inclusion of youth at risk and strengthen education systems:

Here are some good examples so far; Non formal education – initiated with daily centers of the children in street situations (which none of the beneficiaries knew how to write or reading (at the very beginning). Education programs: Paid practice – MoU with the university and government institutions; Investments in education infrastructure: As mentioned in the document, there are only 51 kindergartens in Kosovo, far from standards.

Investment in education infrastructure: This includes investing in school buildings, classrooms, and educational materials, which can help create a more inclusive and accessible learning environment for youth at risk.

Implementation of inclusive education policies: Governments can work towards the inclusion of youth at risk by implementing policies that promote equality and non-discrimination in education. This can include measures to prevent bullying and harassment, as well as policies that encourage the participation of students with disabilities.

Expansion of non-formal education programs: Providing youth at risk with access to non-formal education programs, such as vocational training, apprenticeships, and community-based education programs, can help them acquire the skills they need to succeed in the workforce.

Support for distance learning: Governments can support distance learning programs, such as online courses, virtual classrooms, and remote tutoring, which can provide young people with access to educational resources from anywhere, at any time.

Teacher training and professional development: Governments can invest in teacher training and professional development programs to help educators better understand and support the needs of youth at risk. This can include training on inclusive teaching practices, as well as programs that help teachers develop the skills they need to engage and support youth at risk.

Collaboration with local organizations: Governments can work with local organizations, such as NGOs, that serve youth at risk to ensure that education programs are tailored to the specific needs of young people and are culturally appropriate.

Financial support for education: Governments can provide financial support to youth at risk, such as scholarships and bursaries, to help cover the costs of education and remove barriers to participation.

Strengthening education systems

Monitoring and evaluation of education programs: Governments can establish systems for monitoring and evaluating the impact of education programs on youth at risk, which can help ensure that programs are effective and are making a positive difference in the lives of young people.

Implementing these policy changes can help create a more inclusive and supportive education system that meets the needs of youth at risk and provides them with the skills and opportunities they need to succeed.

Additional Recommendations

Reorganization of the school: The evolution of educational infrastructure reform is a critical consideration, particularly concerning the great migration and displacement of individuals living in rural areas or smaller towns. It's vital to reorganize schools to comply with the standards and regulations governing the number of students per school.

Investment in Education Infrastructure: Allocating resources to improve school buildings, classrooms, and educational materials to create an inclusive and accessible learning environment for youth at risk.

Implementation of Inclusive Education Policies: Enforcing policies that promote equality and non-discrimination in education, including measures to prevent bullying and harassment, and encourage the participation of students with disabilities.

Expansion of Non-formal Education Programs: Offering youth at risk access to non-formal education programs such as vocational training, apprenticeships, and

community-based education to equip them with the skills needed for success in the workforce.

Support for Distance Learning: Promoting distance learning programs, including online courses, virtual classrooms, and remote tutoring, to provide young people with access to educational resources from anywhere, at any time.

Teacher Training and Professional Development: Investing in teacher training and professional development programs to help educators better understand and support the needs of youth at risk. This includes training on inclusive teaching practices.

Collaboration with Local Organizations: Collaborating with local organizations, such as NGOs, to ensure that education programs are tailored to the specific needs of young people and are culturally appropriate.

Financial Support for Education: Providing financial support to youth at risk, such as scholarships and bursaries, to help cover the costs of education and remove economic barriers to participation.

Monitoring and Evaluation of Education Programs: Establishing systems for monitoring and evaluating the impact of education programs on youth at risk to ensure their effectiveness and positive impact on students' lives.

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ВНИМАНИЮ ВСЕХ УЧАЩИХСЯ
И НАСТАВНИКОВ
ВНИМАТЕЛЬНО ПРОЧИТАЙТЕ
ПОСЛАНИЕ КОТОРОЕ МЫ
НАПИСАЛИ ВАМ В НАЧАЛЕ
ЭТОГО ГОДА И ОН ПОМОЖЕТ
ВАМ СДЕЛАТЬ ЭТО ГОД
ПО-НОВОМУ



MONTENEGRO

ACCESS TO EDUCATION OF THE YOUTH AT RISK MONTENEGRO

Milica Pušonjić

Overview

The position of young people in education represents the cornerstone of planning and creating all strategic documents and public policies of a modern society. As one of the foundations upon which every developed society rests, a quality educational system of a country should provide equal opportunities for realizing the full personal potential of every individual. In Montenegro, the legislative and strategic framework that regulates issues of importance for young people, including education and its accessibility, is very broad. Apart from the set of laws in the field of education: General Law on Education and Upbringing, Law on Primary Education, Law on Vocational Education, Law on Gymnasium, Law on Education and Upbringing of Children with Special Educational Needs, The Law on Higher Education, Law on Vocational Training of Persons with Higher Education, two most significant documents dealing with youth issues are the Youth Law and the National Youth Strategy. The Law on Youth²⁷ prescribes ways for making and implementing policies for young people, as well as concrete measures and activities, to be taken in order to improve the social position of young people and achieve intersectoral cooperation of all institutions focusing on youth action.

The Law on Youth²⁸ does not specifically address vulnerable categories of young people at risk but prescribes general measures of support for youth that can contribute to better youth status in various areas. One of the principles on which the law is based is – equality. Article 8 stipulates that all young people are equal in exercising their rights, regardless of age, physical ability, physical appearance, health status, disability, national, racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation, gender, language, political orientation, social origin and property status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other personal characteristics. Article 4 further defines the concept of youth work and envisages activities that are carried out in cooperation with and for young people, aimed at their independence and transition to adulthood, learning, personal and social development, in accordance with their needs and possibilities, and based on methods of non-formal education.

27 Službeni list Crne Gore, *Zakon o mladima*, br. 025/19, 30.04.2019, <https://www.gov.me/>

28 Službeni list Crne Gore, *Zakon o mladima*, br. 025/19, 30.04.2019, <https://www.gov.me/>

The directions for the development and improvement of youth policy are established by the Youth Strategy²⁹. The Strategy is adopted by the Government, on the proposal of the Ministry, for a period of at least four years, while an action plan for a period of up to two years is adopted for the implementation of the Strategy. The last strategy is related to the period from 2017 to 2021, and the new strategy is still being developed. The Strategy defines six key priorities – key outcomes – when it comes to young people in Montenegro, and one of the outcomes is providing quality access to education. The Strategy is based on inclusiveness, which means that special attention is paid to the population of young people at risk. It is emphasized that special measures are envisaged that enable equality in the availability of rights and equal opportunities for all young people. Measures are particularly emphasized for overcoming barriers and including vulnerable groups in community life, as well as strengthening the civic activism of all young people. The Strategy envisages measures to create better access to education, including support for the development of non-formal learning and the improvement of mechanisms for verifying informally acquired knowledge, improving the quality of organization, implementation, and evaluation of practical education in vocational schools and universities, promoting educational mobility of young people, preventing and reducing early school leaving, and developing socio-emotional skills of young people.

Data from a UNDP survey³⁰ conducted in 2022, which included 1,818 young people from 15 municipalities in Montenegro, indicate that over two-thirds of the respondents (68%) did not participate in any form of non-formal education. They cited the reasons for this as the lack of such educational opportunities in their municipality or the belief that it was unnecessary. The reason behind this finding can be attributed to the fact that 70% of unemployed young individuals surveyed believe that additional education cannot help with employment or career advancement because “people are hired through connections rather than qualifications.” However, those who have experienced some form of non-formal education emphasize its exceptional importance. Young individuals believe that the formal education system does not sufficiently encourage, reward, or understand the interest and orientation of young people towards non-formal education.

29 Ministarstvo prosvjete Crne Gore, Ministarstvo Sporta Crne Gore, *Strategija za mlade 2017–2021*, <http://www.strategijazamlade.me/>

30 UNDP, *Istraživanje i procjena lokalnih politika koje se odnose na mlade i potrebe mladih u 15 lokalnih samouprava*, 2022.

The field of inclusive education is regulated by the Law on Education of Children with Special Educational Needs³¹, as well as the Inclusive Education Strategy³² for the period of 2019–2025. Over the past two decades, numerous reform initiatives have been designed and implemented to improve the significance, quality, and inclusivity of education in Montenegro. Despite this, there are still challenges in terms of ensuring greater coverage of children enrolled in regular educational institutions. Children from marginalized groups are at a greater risk of being denied the right to access quality education, which can lead to a higher degree of poverty, unfavorable living conditions, and social exclusion.

31 Službeni list RCG, *Zakon o vaspitanju i obrazovanju djece sa posebnim obrazovnim potrebama*, 80/04 i broj 45/10, <https://www.gov.me/>

32 Ministarstvo prosvjete, *Strategija inkluzivnog obrazovanja, 2019–2025*. 2018.

2.

Educational system in Montenegro – Overview

Although significant progress has been made in some segments of the education system, such as increased coverage of preschool education, increased inclusion of children with developmental disabilities, the development of strategies to prevent early school leaving, and the development of information technology in education, the previous education reform in Montenegro has failed to ensure decentralization and the application of meritocracy principles.

In order to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the education system and obtain a clear assessment of its strengths and weaknesses for the purpose of creating quality policies in the future, UNICEF Montenegro, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, conducted an Education Sector Analysis³³ in 2015–2020. The following are the key findings and recommendations regarding access to education for various marginalized groups of youth.

In the time interval from 2015 to 2020, the value of the primary education completion rate varied. This rate represents the ratio between the total number of students who successfully completed the ninth grade of primary school and the total number of children in the population who are of age to complete this level of education. After an increase in 2016, this percentage declined in 2017 (88.8%), then rose again in 2019 (95.5%), but experienced a slight decrease in 2020, the year of the pandemic and online education (93%).⁶ Although the fluctuating values of this percentage might suggest an increase in the number of children attending and successfully completing primary school, the displayed improvement is actually a result of a decrease in the absolute number of children belonging to this age group. Additionally, the proportion of students leaving education has decreased from 2015 to 2019. Although there are still children who drop out of school during primary education, their number has decreased. The first year to experience an increase in the dropout rate was 2020, which is most likely explained by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

³³ EF&Ministarstvo Prosvjete Crne Gore, *Analiza sektora obrazovanja*, UNIC, 2022, <https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/>

In secondary education, there are similar positive trends regarding the availability of education and the percentage of expected duration of schooling. However, the percentage of students who complete high school is lower compared to primary school. The availability and successful completion of high school for Roma and Egyptian students is still very low (15–36%)³⁴. Dropping out of primary education in Montenegro is present in only 1% of cases. In relation to the total number of children dropping out of primary education, the highest dropout rates are in the fourth (2.2%) and ninth grades (4.1%). The children who drop out of primary education are predominantly boys, from urban areas and from the poorest families, who attend the third education cycle. Among the children dropping out of primary education, the boys' rate is 54 percentage points higher than the girls' rate (77% compared to 23%). There are differences according to area type in the number of children dropping out of primary school. In urban areas, the percentage of children who drop out of primary school is more than 50 percentage points higher than in rural areas. Children from poorer families are at higher risk of dropping out of primary school than children from wealthier families.

The access to regular schools for children with special educational needs has increased at all levels, and trends show positive effects of inclusive education policy. However, a part of children with special educational needs still attend resource centers, and statistical indicators cannot be accurately calculated because the number of children with disabilities and developmental difficulties at the national level is not available.

³⁴ Savićević, M. *Položaj NEET mladih u Crnoj Gori*, 2021.

3.

Key Reforms in Youth Education Access and More

The main changes implemented so far in terms of inclusive education include: enabling regular education for children who require additional support and a higher percentage of these children enrolling in regular schools; introducing individual development and educational plans (IROP) for children who require additional support (educational and developmental goals are set and methods for achieving them are defined for each child with special educational needs), as well as individual transition plans (ITP) to assist with the transition of children to the next level of education or employment; introducing mobile teams funded by the Institute of Education to assist schools and teachers in organizing inclusive education; transforming special schools into resource centers (there are three such centers in the country) along with seven regular schools with integrated classes - for students who due to the severity and type of their disabilities cannot be fully included in regular classes; introducing modular programs in vocational education; introducing teaching assistants to ensure access to education and educational achievement: technical assistance during class attendance for children with severe physical disabilities, moderate intellectual disabilities, complete visual impairment, complete hearing loss, and autism in accordance with the placement decision.

Montenegro participates in the PISA study³⁵ (Programme for International Student Assessment), which assesses the key knowledge and skills of fifteen-year-olds that enable them to fully participate in society. Results are evaluated in reading, mathematics, and natural sciences. The results of the PISA testing of Montenegrin fifteen-year-olds indicate the influence of all previous education reforms. The results are positive when it comes to mathematics but not as good in the areas of reading and natural sciences. In the 2018 testing, Montenegrin students achieved lower results than the OECD average for all subjects. It is worrying to find that between 40% and 50% of students in Montenegro do not possess functional literacy (below level 2) in three different subject areas. Although the 2018 PISA testing results show that generally, students who have better socio-economic conditions achieve higher results, this difference is even more pronounced when it comes to at-risk youth (especially those living in poverty as well as Roma and Egyptian students). They are

35 Dmitrović D. *Rezultati PISA testiranja iz 2018. godine*, 2019.

in a disadvantageous position to access education, and in practice, these obstacles relate to costs related to purchasing textbooks, clothing, and transportation.

Obstacles in achieving adequate education for children in conflict with the law are largely reflected in the absence of adequate social support. Children and young people from these at-risk groups are often exposed to various forms of abuse, neglect, and inadequate parenting practices. They are mostly marginalized and labeled as delinquents, with reduced chances of being given a “second chance.” In young people who are preparing for or have left institutional care, there is low motivation for education, which can be explained by the strict, rigid organization of communal living, where they are not encouraged or sufficiently involved in decision-making processes regarding their own education and ways of acquiring knowledge. The choice of secondary education is often determined by their low academic achievement in primary school.

In order to enable equal access to education for a larger number of children under institutional protection, the non-governmental organization Juventas is implementing a project that provides support for equal access to education, vocational training, and employment opportunities for beneficiaries of the “Mladost” Children’s Home in Bijela and the “Ljubović” Center in Podgorica. Facilitators work with children and young people, providing them with additional support in learning.

4.

Alternative Learning Opportunities

The state of Montenegro has implemented a series of measures in the previous period to increase access to schools for marginalized groups of students. Social inclusion associates (mediators) have been engaged for children from Roma and Egyptian communities who provide additional support to these students and their families in accessing education. There is also a protocol for preventing early school dropouts, which provides for multi-sectoral cooperation and increased monitoring in order to reduce dropouts for these students. Scholarships have been provided for all Roma students enrolled in secondary and higher education, as well as accommodation in student dormitories. A subject/course of the Montenegrin language has been introduced as a form of additional education for Roma students who need it. An affirmative action has been established for enrollment in secondary and higher education by adding 6 points to the results of the entrance exam. Qualification courses for future teachers of Roma language and culture in schools are being prepared to be introduced as an elective subject.

For migrant children, as well as for the majority of children from vulnerable and marginalized groups, barriers to accessing education relate to a lack of capacity to enroll in the nearest school, distance from school, lack of transportation and/or safety on the way to school, lack of information about enrollment procedures, language barriers, psychosocial problems, and a lack of support for non-academic needs of these students. In addition, barriers to achieving educational outcomes can also include differences in the teaching curriculum compared to the country of origin, as well as insufficient competencies of teachers in working and teaching in a multicultural environment.

There is a lot of evidence that young people who are at risk and outside of the formal educational system are more likely to experience the negative effects of incomplete education in their adult life. Many of them could have a “second chance” to reconnect with the educational system and find ways to be productive and realize their potential if they are given the opportunity through alternative education models.

It is clear that the traditional education system does not meet the needs of at-risk youth. The average structured school environment can be an extremely difficult experience for these individuals. The challenges that these young people face in their

daily lives limit their ability to achieve academic success in a traditional classroom. Many countries around the world are creating alternative education models for at-risk youth. All of these models aim to help at-risk youth become successful and active citizens and adults. They are often much more than just collecting information, as they focus on learning life strategies for overcoming challenges in everyday life and developing mechanisms for overcoming and coping with unfavorable life events.

There is no alternative education model for at-risk youth in Montenegro. Various strategic documents describe the current situation and provide measures and recommendations for reducing barriers that at-risk youth face in accessing basic education. In most documents, there is a need to ensure greater inclusiveness of education and to promote lifelong learning for all. Emphasis is placed on comprehensiveness, inclusiveness, and quality education, so in that sense, all educational institutions should adapt the infrastructure of their facilities to accommodate people with disabilities, ensure gender equality, and provide a safe, non-violent, inclusive, and stimulating learning environment.

To create adequate conditions for the implementation of alternative education models for at-risk youth, schools, and classrooms should be of the highest quality, inclusive, child-focused, and tailored to the individual needs and skills of each child. The curriculum should be multicultural. Enrollment of students whose native language is not the language of instruction should be open and accessible, with additional language learning classes provided. Schools should be safe environments, adapted to children's needs, with developed programs for violence and unacceptable behavior prevention, while promoting and enhancing tolerance, diversity, and acceptance. It is necessary to develop a mechanism for the recognition and validation of knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal learning programs. Within various programs at the national and international levels organized by different stakeholders, which promote personal development as well as social inclusion and employability, it is important to develop educational programs that lead to the acquisition of key skills and the enhancement of key competencies. These programs should focus on acquiring knowledge and skills related to civic democracy, environmental protection, sustainable development, family life, successful social integration, improving quality of life, health education, social skills, and more.

In order to increase the coverage of children and youth at risk through compulsory education and reduce early school dropout, there are local strategies that provide numerous measures and activities. Most of them are aimed at parents, employees in the education system, analysis of the characteristics of the curriculum and educational content, as well as material and financial aspects of education. All these strategies include work on empowering and motivating parents to raise awareness of the importance of education for better social status and their children's lives; educating parents about the necessity of including all children in the regular education system and completing their education; reducing prejudices against marginalized groups of students and increasing the index of inclusiveness of schools; strengthening the cooperation between schools and parents, and more.

5.

Enhancing Youth Inclusion: Policy Change Recommendations

- Continue to increase the coverage of early childhood education, which will contribute to better preparedness of children for primary school and reduce the delay in enrolling children from deprived categories of the population;
- Implement continuous campaigns for the entire population to raise awareness of the importance of early education and completed secondary education, which are specifically designed for parents to promote the start of education at the right age;
- Explore the possibilities of making secondary education mandatory;
- Explore alternative measures of social and financial support, such as scholarships and student loans, to ensure funds to compensate for the losses that families may incur if a child continues their education;
- Support intersectional cooperation and strengthen the links between the social care, health, and education systems in terms of the support they can provide;
- Analyze the quality, effectiveness, and impact of mechanisms already implemented for the integration of Roma and Egyptian communities, with support for completing education;
- Proactively analyze, formulate, and implement more effective, sustainable, and predictable measures to support the education of Roma and Egyptian students;
- Strengthen the focus on inclusive education measures, implement continuous campaigns to raise awareness, and ensure full inclusion of all students with special educational needs at all levels of education, including secondary education; additionally, systemically connect relevant resource services, initial health, and social services;
- Implement smart integration of digital tools and technologies in education and leverage their potential to improve the quality, relevance, inclusiveness, and flexibility of the education system.

- Monitor the well-being and mental health of students (sense of belonging to the school community, possession of a positive self-image, self-respect, and self-efficacy, developmental thinking style, high expectations regarding further education, etc.) and develop support measures for their social and emotional development.
- Target investments in ICT infrastructure and specialized subject classroom infrastructure and develop digital competencies of teachers.
- Improve the school culture by creating more opportunities for meaningful student engagement, supporting the developmental thinking style of students, and developing multicultural collaboration.
- Increase the level of parental involvement in decision-making at the school level and strengthen their role in advising on education policy, including parents from vulnerable groups.
- Support student self-organization and enable greater student influence on school life through their involvement in the decision-making process regarding matters important to their education.
- Stronger and more substantial, rather than formal, support from educational institutions are needed for various forms of associations in which young people are already active, such as student parliaments. Additionally, support and initiation of forums, lectures on various topics, and content that will be presented to young people in the most appealing way in specific environments are necessary.

6.

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NORTH MACEDONIA

ACCESS TO EDUCATION OF THE
YOUTH AT RISK NORTH MACEDONIA

Vlatko Dekov

1.

Educational system in North Macedonia – Overview

The educational system in the Republic of North Macedonia comprises of preschool, primary (6 -14 years), secondary (15-17/18) and higher education. The duration of primary education is nine years, it is mandatory and free for all pupils. There are a total of 347 primary schools in the country, with a very high literacy rate amounting to 98.8% for men and 96.8% for women (2015). In the 2020-2021 school year, 90.8% of the children were enrolled in the primary education (90.6% male, 91% female) and 78.9% in secondary school (79.8% female, 78.1% male).³⁶ The secondary school, also mandatory and free, is divided into four types: gymnasium, vocational secondary school, art education and education for pupils with special educational needs. Of the 124 secondary schools, 108 are public, with the remaining 16 being private.

According to the Ministry of Education and Science, in the 2016/2017 school year, 725 pupils with special educational needs were included in the regular teaching at the primary schools and 230 in the regular teaching at the secondary schools.³⁷

According to the Law on Primary Education, pupils with special educational needs are: disability pupils, i.e. pupils with physical, mental, intellectual and sensory impairments, which in the interaction with various social barriers could limit their full and effective participation in society equally with others, – pupils with behaviour disorders or emotional problems or with specific learning difficulties and – pupils from low socio-economic, cultural, and/or linguistically deprived environments.³⁸

Since the introduction of the nine-year duration of primary education in 2007 until today, there have been attempts to pursue the contemporary educational trends, as well as raise the quality of teaching and learning. The 2018-2025 Educational Strategy

36 European Commission, *Report for North Macedonia*, European Commission, 10, 2022, p. 10

37 Ministry of Education and Science of Republic Macedonia , *Education Strategy 2018-2025*, MES, 2018, p. 14

38 Macedonian Parliament, *Law on Primary Education*, Official Gazette of RNM, 229, 2020, p. 14

was developed, establishing the key activities to be implemented in the next few years in order to improve the teaching and learning.

According to the 2019 OECD Review of Evaluation and Assessment in Education in North Macedonia, the country made remarkable progress in expanding access to education and strengthening institutional capacity. Yet, the majority of youth finished school without mastering basic competences for life and work, and students' socio-economic background continues to influence learning outcomes. The education sector in North Macedonia requires strong and strategic reform in order to improve quality and equity, so that all young people in the country reach their full potential and realise their aspirations.³⁹

Homeless children are excluded from the primary education system, resulting with an obstacle to their integration in society. No efficient system for education, coordination and activities, and for monitoring these categories exists.

Children in conflict with the law are placed in small group homes where they receive their primary education, while children enrolled in secondary education are part of the regular education. Children with educational-social problems used to be placed in special educational-correctional homes, but are currently placed in small group homes and participate in the regular educational system as well.

A big percentage of Roma pupils do not participate in the educational system. There is also a large rate of dropout and a low literacy rate among Roma children. Among the most common reasons for this situation are: insufficient knowledge of the Macedonian language, low level of education among parents and the poor socio-economic state. Children with special educational needs are not sufficiently included in the regular primary education. Their inclusion in regular schools is not properly regulated, without special mechanisms to handle it. In addition, parents, teachers and students have prejudices towards these children. Also, teachers do not possess sufficient competences to work with this category of pupils.⁴⁰

39 OECD, *Review of Evaluation and Assessment in Education in North Macedonia*, OECD, 2019, p. 10
40 Ministry of Education and Science of Republic Macedonia, *Education Strategy 2018-2025*, MES, 2018, p.37

2.

Key Reforms in Youth Education Access and More

Several strategic documents aiming to reform the educational system and improve inclusion in education have been adopted in the last 10 years. Consequently, the 2018–2025 Education Strategy was adopted in 2018, establishing the key activities to be implemented in the next years in order to improve teaching and learning. One of the main goals is “adjustment and consistent implementation of the inclusive and multicultural education concept with a focus on democratic values, human rights, gender equality, and respect for diversity on any ground as well as ensuring full coverage of all learners with special educational needs in the education system by adjusting the curricula to their needs and abilities, and strengthening competencies of teachers and expert staff.”⁴¹ The Strategy for Education of Roma and the Strategy of Integrated Education were also adopted.

Bearing in mind that inclusive education considers the individual needs for pupils development, offering equal opportunities for realization of the basic human rights to development and education, 2021 saw the development of the Concept for Integrated Education. It offers guidelines on inclusion, development and education for different groups of pupils. According to the Concept on Inclusive Education, the school undertakes activities to alleviate the inclusion of pupils not attending school for longer periods, pupils who have left school or have failed to enrol in primary school on time.⁴² Essential inclusion is provided through inclusion of all pupils in all school activities according to their abilities, needs and interests. This is ensured by offering different optional subjects and adjusting extracurricular activities according to all pupils’ opportunities. Inclusion is provided also by adjusting space and providing access to the facilities (removing physical barriers, adjusting toilets, lifts, signs) and to teaching tools (sufficient space for movement, easy access to books and learning materials, visible and comprehensible signs), and by adjusting the teaching tools and materials to pupils with special educational needs and providing assisting technology. For pupils unable to physically attend school due to certain reasons (chronic or long-term disease), the school organizes distance learning and provides the support of

⁴¹ Ministry of Education and Science of Republic Macedonia, *Education Strategy 2018–2025*, MES, 2018, p.18

⁴² Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of North Macedonia, *Concept for Inclusive Education*, MES, 2021, p. 3

schoolmates. Inclusivity is also provided by creating a school climate in which all pupils feel accepted and supported. The implementation of programs for protection against violence and discrimination, for personal growth and development, for assistance and support of pupils from socially vulnerable groups ensures the protection of pupils at schools, focusing on their maximum inclusion in the school life. Schools ensure the inclusion of parents/guardians from vulnerable groups in their bodies and organs (School Board, Parents' Council) in order to represent the interests of pupils in need of special attention due to an expulsion possibility.⁴³

A new Law on Primary Education was adopted in 2019, accenting that primary education is organized in terms of institution, staff and content in such a manner to support inclusion of all children in regular primary education.⁴⁴ In addition to schools, the Law prescribes that primary education takes place in health institutions, punitive-correctional and educational-correctional institutions, as well as domestic circumstances as a special type of a job position for pupils on long domestic recoveries.

Children not included in the teaching, too old to be included in the proper class in the primary education, have the right to primary education under equal conditions as other children. The Law prescribes developing adjusted curricula for these children in order to provide enrolment in the proper grade in primary education.

The Bureau for Educational Development issued Guidelines for Work of the School Inclusion Team, once such teams were prescribed with the new Law on Primary Education, which made them an important element of the inclusion process. According to the Law, the school inclusion team has a three-school year mandate, and is comprised of seven members as follows: a pedagogue, a psychologist, a social worker at the school, two teachers from the school (one teacher from 1 to 5 grade and one teacher from 6 to 9 grade), two parents/guardians, special educator and rehabilitator and the principal. There are two types of inclusive teams – one at a school level, and the other individually for the pupils.⁴⁵

From 2018, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy started the process for deinstitutionalization by relocating all children placed in educational-correctional institutions in small group homes, thus making these children also part of the regular educational system.

43 Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of North Macedonia, *Concept for Inclusive Education*, MES, 2021, p. 11-15

44 Macedonian Parliament, *Law on Primary Education*, Official Gazette of RNM, 229, 2020, p. 4

45 Macedonian Parliament, *Law on Primary Education*, Official Gazette of RNM, 229, 2020, p. 6

Children in conflict with the law aged 14 and below are placed in two small group homes in which primary education takes place, while children enrolled in secondary school become a part of the regular education. Children above 14 years of age are placed in educational–correctional homes, with the Ministry of Justice becoming the competent institutions regarding related issues. According to the last 2022 Report on North Macedonia issued by the European Commission: the detention conditions for boys in the juvenile educational–correctional near Tetovo have improved. However, between September 2021 and June 2022 they did not have access to education. The facility is in a remote location, making it unfit for resocialisation and rehabilitation purposes. Girls have been detained for one year in the educational correctional facility in the female ward of Idrizovo, a prison which did not allow for appropriate care, education, resocialization and rehabilitation support.⁴⁶

The annual dropout rate per grade for Roma children in primary education is 4% and for secondary education is 5%. No measures were taken to prevent irregular attendance of Roma children in primary education, to reintegrate children who are not enrolled in education on time or have left education without completing it. There are no systematic measures to address the issue of street children.⁴⁷

The Law on Primary Education ensures that Roma pupils from socially endangered families and/or who have been outside the educational system for a longer period are entitled to educational mediators. Educational mediators undertake activities to better inform on opportunities and access to schools, schedule regular meetings to sensitize the population and faculty at the primary school on the specifics and needs of vulnerable groups, regularly collaborate with experts and teachers to improve pupil’s achievements, and conduct activities to decrease leaving the educational process of pupils.⁴⁸

46 European Commission, *Report for North Macedonia*, European Commission, 10, 2022, p. 40

47 European Commission, *Report for North Macedonia*, European Commission, 10, 2022, p. 42

48 Macedonian Parliament, *Law on Primary Education*, Official Gazette of RNM, 229, 2020, p. 13

3.

Alternative learning opportunities

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that online teaching, i.e. teaching via the internet as an opportunity for alternative learning is not accessible to many pupils and students, mostly to pupils from groups at risk or marginalized groups. These young people already find themselves in a highly unfavourable condition in comparison to their peers during the educational process, but also life in general, and adequate attention is necessary in order to consider their requests and needs. The COVID-19 should serve as a reminder, or at least teach us to solidarity for all citizens and members of our communities, particularly those belonging to various marginalized and vulnerable groups, included in the educational process and experiencing various additional difficulties.

Until recently, equal access to quality education was taken for granted, while the pandemics served as the perfect indicator that in such extraordinary circumstances completely equal access to education for all youth in the state cannot be expected, nor is it possible to provide and maintain the necessary quality.

A good example of alternative learning is the reform implemented by the Ministry of Labour and Social Politics, allowing all children in conflict with the law aged 14 and below to acquire primary education in the small group homes in which they were placed. This opportunity is a step forward in providing primary education for each child and will affect the resocialization of this category of children.

The previous system provided the opportunity for night school, an option intended for young people and adults attending curricula at night. This option is no longer available. There are no other forms for alternative learning in the Republic of North Macedonia. It can only be mentioned that pursuant to the Law on Secondary Education, individuals who have not completed primary education are included in the two-year duration vocational secondary education, since the individuals graduate from the prescribed primary education program along with their vocational training. This circumstance is beneficial mostly for children and young people living on the streets or in conflict with the law, who have failed to complete their primary education.

4.

Enhancing Youth Inclusion: Policy Change Recommendations

- Mapping and inclusion of children outside the educational system. Primary and secondary education are mandatory for all citizens in the country, however, many children are still outside the educational system. The Ministry of Education and Science should, in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and Social Politics, make a detailed analysis and map these children, in order to have their precise number according to which it could create policies, solutions and measures to (re)include them in the educational system.
- Undertake proper measures to decrease the number of Roma children not included in education as well as measures to prevent irregular school attendance of Roma children in primary education.
- Adopting affirmative measures to better reintegrate children not enrolled on time in schools or who have left left education without graduating.
- The Ministry of Education and Science, in cooperation with competent institutions should create a proper mechanism to include children with special educational needs in the regular primary and secondary education. Additionally, conduct proper campaigns and activities to surpass prejudices which parents, teachers and students have against these children. Also, additional training of teachers is necessary in order to improve their knowledge and skills for working with this category of pupils and students.
- The Ministry of Labour and Social Politics, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science and other competent institutions, should develop a proper mechanism to include homeless children in the educational system, bearing in mind their specifics.
- The Ministry of Education and Science should provide equal access to the online educational process for all pupils and students in the state. A big number of families still do not have internet access or to a sufficient (somewhere even at all) number of electronic devices to follow the curricula. It is necessary to provide internet vouchers and temporary leasing of unused computers from schools.

- The educational content should be provided in all languages to all communities living in North Macedonia. The educational contents created on the National Distance Learning Platform are not available in the native languages of some communities in the country and the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Labour and Social Politics should solve these deficiencies and improve accessibility to educational platforms in order to increase and improve inclusion in the education system.
- Digitalization of educational contents. Important educational contents such as textbooks and teaching aids in primary, secondary and higher education should be digitally available, on the websites of institutions or those created for distance learning. This would ensure easier access of pupils and students to teaching contents. We recommend that the Ministry of Education and Science should ensure the necessary copyright to textbooks in order to create an online data base to educational contents, and, in cooperation with state universities make a data base to educational contents in higher education.
- Continuous training and support for teachers and professors regarding online teaching and grading. It is necessary to provide the technical requirements necessary for online teaching to the faculty facing the same problem in terms of fast and stable internet, but also educate and support them for online teaching, particularly individuals who lack sufficient or proper experience and knowledge to use contemporary technologies.
- Additional and supplementary programs to help pupils and students facing difficulties in overcoming the subject materials, through online teaching.

5.

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SERBIA

Prevent Association

ACCESS TO EDUCATION OF THE YOUTH AT RISK SERBIA

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Educational system in Serbia – Overview

In the Republic of Serbia, the education system includes: preschool education, primary education, secondary education and higher education.

Preschool education includes children of preschool age, that is, a period of at least 6 months before starting elementary school, and it is mandatory for all children, as well as elementary education.

Basic education is realized in two cycles and is also compulsory. The first cycle represents the period from starting school until the end of the fourth grade, and the second cycle covers the period from the fifth to the eighth grade.

It is not mandatory to enroll in secondary school. In the system of secondary education, there are vocational secondary schools, gymnasiums, art schools, mixed schools and schools for students with developmental disabilities. Requirements for enrollment in certain schools and courses are defined separately.

In the school for students with developmental disabilities, education and training for the appropriate occupations of the students who attend this school is provided based on the opinion of the interdepartmental committee for the assessment of additional educational, health and social support for the student with the consent of the parents or other legal representative.

In the Republic of Serbia, all persons who complete a four-year secondary school have access to higher education. Higher education is divided into three levels: first level (basic studies), second level (master's studies, specialist studies) and third level (doctoral studies).

2.

Key Reforms in Youth Education Access and More

Through the Law on the Basics of the Education System⁴⁹ from 2009 and its subsequent amendments from 2013, several significant changes were established in the regulation of the realization of the right of every child to quality education. Several specific measures have been adopted with the aim of increasing the quality of education for different groups of children, including children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The introduction of inclusive education and additional support for students, affirmative measures for the education of children and youth belonging to ethnic minorities, prevention of early school leaving, the transition of students from one level of education to the next, the introduction of dual education are processes that improve the quality of education and greater inclusion of youth at risk of social exclusion in the educational system.

Inclusive education in the Republic of Serbia was introduced in 2009 by amending the Law on the Basics of Education. The Ministry of Education intensively creates conditions for inclusive education, which includes improved mechanisms for supporting children from vulnerable groups, including students with developmental disabilities, students belonging to the Roma national minority, students from socially deprived areas, migrant students, and all others who are in some need for support. The law sets the key mechanisms for the implementation of inclusive education: inclusive education teams and support teams for children and students; individual educational plans; interdepartmental commissions for assessing the need for additional support at the local level, which include the education, social protection, and health sectors. Interdepartmental cooperation and institutional capacities for management, coordination, monitoring, and implementation of inclusive educational policies have been established. Teacher competencies and the quality of work in educational institutions have increased, as well as the participation of parents in deciding on their child's further education.

⁴⁹ https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/serbia_law-on-primary-education-2009-modif-2011.pdf

In the framework of inclusive education, support measures include the creation of an individual educational plan (IEP)⁵⁰ which, in addition to measures that enable mastering the set outcomes, also includes measures to improve social functioning.

In the area of protection of the rights of national minorities, the Republic of Serbia has passed individual laws to achieve equality of minorities with the majority. In some of those laws, as well as in special practical policies implemented by Serbia, the application of affirmative measures whose beneficiaries are members of minorities is foreseen. In the area of improving Roma education, taking into account the unsatisfactory educational status of the majority of members of the Roma community, compared to the general population in Serbia, the state began to apply affirmative measures in 2003 to increase the availability of educational institutions and programs for the Roma population (preferential treatment of Roma candidates when enrolling in secondary schools and colleges founded by the Republic of Serbia).

Also, in 2006, the state started a project to support Roma children in mastering material in primary schools (“Roma assistants” project).

The strategy for the social inclusion of Roma in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025⁵¹ (Official Gazette of the RS, number 26/16) emphasizes the importance of education for this national community by ensuring the conditions for: full inclusion of children and young people from the Roma community to quality pre-school, primary and secondary education; greater inclusion of Roma men and women in the student population; providing support to the education of youth and adults who did not attend a school or who left school, along with the introduction of effective and efficient mechanisms to fight against discrimination and achieve the conditions for the enjoyment of all minority rights for Roma and Roma women in the education system.

Through the RS 2030 Education Development Strategy⁵², continuity is ensured in improving the quality of education and developing an inclusive culture, policy and practice at all levels of education.

50 <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/ministarstva/pravilnik/2018/74/4/reg>

51 <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2016/26/1/reg>

52 <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2021/63/1/reg>

Youth in conflict with the law

Within the overall reform processes in the Republic of Serbia, which aim to improve the position and rights of children in the field of justice, a special place belongs to the adoption of the Law on Juvenile Perpetrators of Criminal Offenses and Criminal Legal Protection of Minors⁵³, which was adopted in 2005 and entered into force 1.1.2006 years. The adoption of the Law on Minors is primarily the result of efforts to harmonize the legislation in this area with international standards. This includes, first of all, the creation of new alternative measures – special obligations, the introduction of diversionary measures – educational orders and special protection of minors as victims of criminal proceedings. For the first time, this law creates conditions for the application of new approaches in juvenile justice, which affirm the principles of restorative justice. An educational order is a special measure provided by the Law on Juveniles, which does not have the character of a criminal sanction, the purpose of which is not to initiate criminal proceedings against a minor perpetrator of a criminal offense or to suspend proceedings, to use an educational order to influence the proper development of minors and strengthen their personal responsibility and prevent further committing criminal acts. An important result of this approach is the creation of an accredited training program “Day care – a possible response to the needs of children and youth with behavioral problems”⁵⁴.

Education of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees

Regarding access to education, student registration, the principle of equal treatment, and prevention of xenophobia and intolerance, the Republic of Serbia fulfills its obligations in accordance with the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Workers and Migrants and Members of Their Families, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international documents, as well as national. By engaging educational institutions, from the 2015/16 school year. year, 97–98% of children from the migrant population are included in the education system⁵⁵. The professional instruction for the inclusion of refugee students in the education system

53 <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/zakon/2005/85/7/reg>

54 <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2016/26/1/reg>

55 <https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/obrazovanje-ucenika-migranata-izbeglica-nov-2022.pdf>

was adopted in 2017 and is applied in all schools attended by migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Schools are supported by mentors, advisors, external collaborators and maintain regular communication with representatives of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration and representatives of reception and asylum centers in Serbia, which include families with school-age children and unaccompanied minors. To improve the quality of migrant education, 7 translators were hired in the native languages of migrant students, including translation.

3.

Alternative Learning Opportunities

Adult education

Adult education schools enable persons aged over 15 (adults), who do not attend school regularly, to acquire elementary education. Adults can complete primary and lower secondary school by either regularly attending school or taking exams. Primary and lower secondary education of adults is organized by classes from I to VIII and lasts four years. Organizationally, these schools are either separate schools or classes within the corresponding schools. Adults acquire upper secondary education as part-time pupils in upper secondary schools. This is regulated by a special law on adult education⁵⁶ where is written that adults who can complete primary school are aged over 15 and the adults who can complete secondary school in this way have over 17 years. In accordance with the Law on Youth⁵⁷ in the Republic of Serbia, youth are persons aged between 15 and 30 years old, so they can attend schools for adult education if necessary.

Affirmative measures for the enrollment of Roma students in secondary schools and colleges

Pupils of Roma nationality are enrolled in secondary schools in accordance with the Rulebook on the enrollment of pupils in secondary schools, and the so-called criteria for enrolling students of Roma nationality in secondary schools are applied in cases where the student passed the qualification exam and did not enroll in the desired secondary school profile. One student of Roma nationality is assigned to one educational profile in one school according to affirmative action measures.

Affirmative measures for enrollment in higher education institutions are carried out by the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, i.e. The Secretariat for the Roma National Strategy forwarded to the Ministry of Education a list of Roma candidates who passed the entrance exam and who were left out of the list of those enrolled in the

56 <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/zakon/2013/55/3/reg>

57 <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/zakon/2011/50/1/reg>

budget. The Ministry then forwards decisions on financing Roma students to individual faculties of universities in Serbia founded by the Republic.

Pedagogical assistant for children and students of Roma nationality who need additional education support provides help and additional support to a group of children and students in the institution and help and support to teachers, educators and professional associates, in teaching and extracurricular activities, to improve their work with children and students of Roma nationality in the education process. It also actively and continuously cooperates with parents of children and students, i.e. other legal representatives, in order to strengthen the family and improve the social and emotional status of children and students in the institution. The Rulebook on Pedagogical Assistant and Andragogic Assistant⁵⁸ regulates the job description, the training program they must complete, and the type and degree of education. A teaching assistant who provides support to students of Roma nationality achieves the full norm in working with 35 students who need additional education support. In practice, this type of support is usually provided only by schools where the majority of students are Roma.

In institutions for *children and youth without parental care*, support for youth in the education process implies an individual approach, the creation of educational support and an individual plan, in the implementation of which employees are involved, but also other important actors who are recruited from the support network of the wider local community. Individual and individualized support is provided both in the field of motivation and in the acquisition of knowledge and skills needed in educational processes. Another important resource is continuous cooperation with the teaching and professional services of secondary schools, which is working on recognizing the specific needs of the specific child in order to make the school environment a positive and encouraging place for youth to stay. The most common activities in this field are organizing peer support, individual work with teaching staff, and/or professional services. Youth in residential care very often have various difficulties in learning, and a low level of prior knowledge, with pronounced negative consequences of neglecting all, needs at an early age, which indicates that organized individualized support is necessary, both from a new teacher, materials, but also from the class, peer environment in order to prevent the experience of rejection and isolation, i.e. fostered a sense of acceptance and belonging.

58 <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/ministarstva/pravilnik/2019/87/14/reg>

Youth in conflict with the law

In some of the juvenile correctional facilities and county jails, there are opportunities for the education of youth who are serving their sentences. It is not possible in each of these institutions to continue education or to undergo one of professionally certified training for the performance of a certain profession. Certain institutions have cooperation with elementary schools and schools for adult education, and some of them also organize part-time education for persons who have not completed secondary school or higher education.

Certain institutions, within the framework of their post-penal program, instruct and inform persons who are at the end of their prison sentence, how and in what way they should act in the matter of looking for a job after serving a prison sentence, i.e. applying to the records of the National Employment Service.

4.

Enhancing Youth Inclusion: Policy Change Recommendations

It is noticeable that in the Serbian education system, not all categories of youth people at risk of social exclusion are named, which does not mean that they are not provided with additional support at all, but it is based on the competences of the teaching and professional staff to recognize the needs of these youth, knowledge of the family situation and difficulties which they have.

In order to ensure greater inclusion of youth at risk and to improve the quality of their education, it is necessary to:

- establish a system for identifying all categories of youth at risk and include them in the additional support program;
- work on improving inclusive education;
- strengthen the capacities of employees and work on the development of their competencies in order to recognize the needs of youth at risk and to provide quality additional support;
- provide each school with a sufficient number of professional associates who will provide additional support to youth at risk and their families;
- it is necessary to increase the number of pedagogical assistants in the education system of the Republic of Serbia and enable schools to provide this type of support to their students regardless of the number of Roma students;
- it is also necessary to reduce the minimum number of Roma students in one school in order to get the right to hire a pedagogical assistant;
- provide all youth who are serving sentences in penitentiaries and district prisons with further education or training to perform certain occupations while they are serving their sentences;
- involve youth at risk and their families in the identification of real needs;
- formation of a resource center and a support network in local governments for

continuous cooperation and support for youth at risk, which would consist of schools, representatives of relevant institutions (Center for Social Work, Health Center, National Employment Service...), and the non-governmental sector;

- increase the number of non-formal education content that will be available to youth people at risk in the institutions where they receive their education;
- provide additional funds for the implementation of extracurricular activities for the social inclusion of young people at risk.

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