

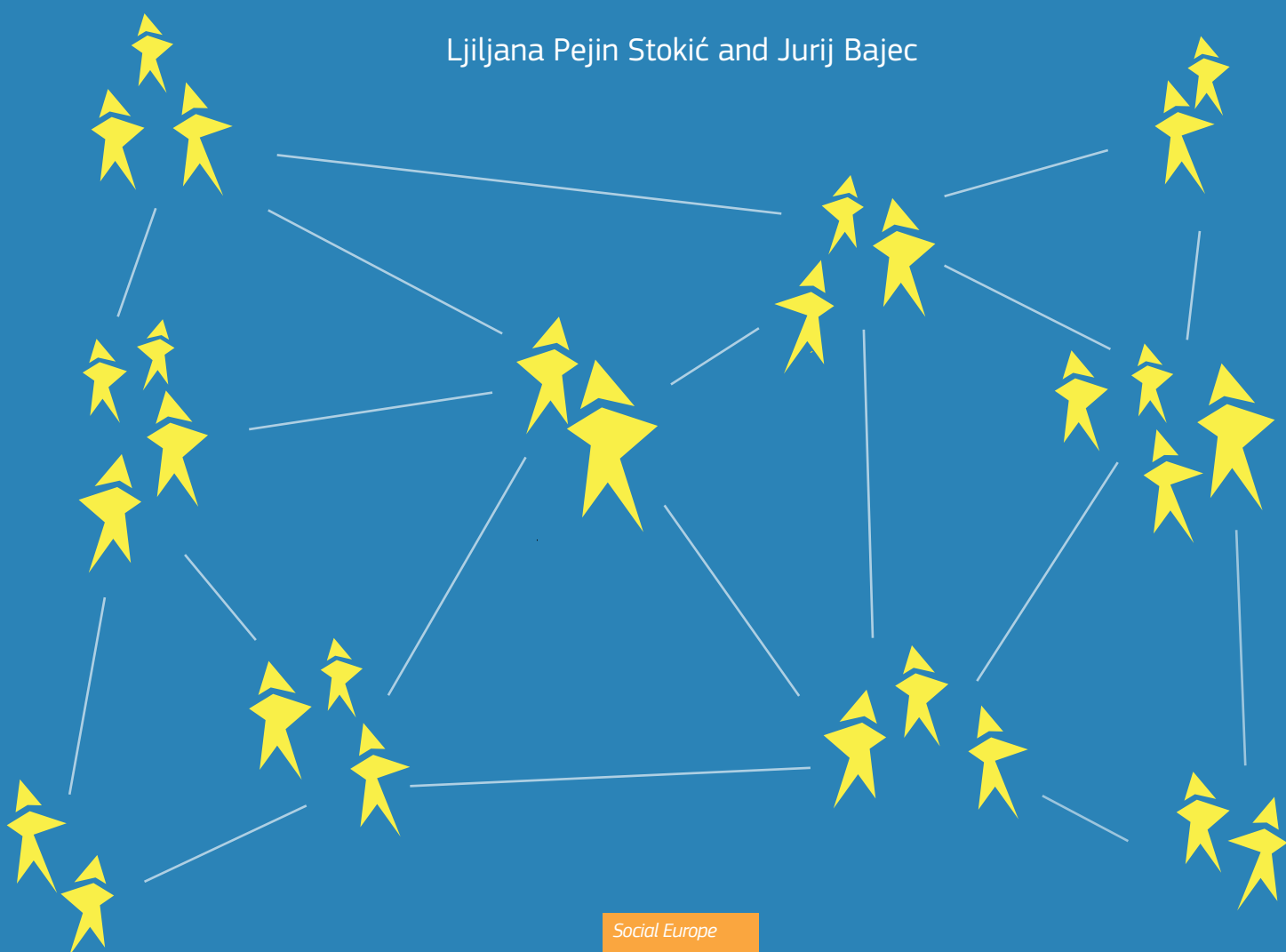


## EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK (ESPN)

# Making access to social protection for workers and the self-employed more transparent through information and simplification

## Serbia

Ljiljana Pejin Stokić and Jurij Bajec



**EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion  
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**European Social Policy Network (ESPN)**

**ESPN Thematic Report on  
Making access to social  
protection for workers and the  
self-employed more  
transparent through  
information and simplification**

**Serbia**

**2022**

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The ESPN brings together into a single network the work that used to be carried out by the European Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion, the Network for the Analytical Support on the Socio-Economic Impact of Social Protection Reforms (ASISP) and the MISSOC (Mutual Information Systems on Social Protection) secretariat.

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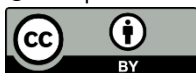
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## Summary

The purpose of this report is to identify and analyse policies put in place by the country to improve transparency in access to social protection, considering both access to information and simplification of access. The report focuses on the six social protection branches covered in the 2019 Council Recommendation on "Access to social protection for workers and the self-employed" and covers policies and measures implemented between January 2017 and May 2022.

Traditionally, information about social insurance rights and obligations can be accessed at the premises of the local offices of social insurance organisations. Internet use has become the standard form of sharing information and communication: all line ministries and social insurance organisations have web portals. The Pension and Invalidity Fund has an interactive application on Facebook, which allows users to learn about their individual rights. Awareness-rising campaigns have not been the customary way of communication. The first campaign was conducted in December 2020, with presentation of the new rules for seasonal work and a newly established web portal for the registration of seasonal workers.

There were no reforms of social protection schemes over the period January 2017 – May 2022, and no simplification of the schemes.

In terms of accessing benefits, a certain degree of simplification was introduced by the 2016 Law on General Administrative Procedures, which came into force in June 2017. The most important new instrument for communication is the "single administrative point", which enables parties to submit a single application, instead of having to contact a number of different authorities or initiate several procedures before the same authority. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Employment Service and the Pension and Invalidity Fund introduced online application for benefits.

Simplifications of the structures within the social protection administration were embedded in a number of new legal acts, programmes and plans for digitalisation adopted over the period under consideration. The 2021 Law on Registration of Administrative Procedures sets rules and conditions for the establishment of a web portal for the Register of Administrative Procedures, which will enable citizens and businesses to access information on administrative procedures for the realisation of rights and obligations. The plans are to include all procedures relevant for personal use by the end of 2022.

The only debate related to access to information was initiated by the Serbian Association of Internet Workers in 2020. The association claimed that the tax administration failed to provide its members with adequate information about their obligations, and that no guidance on the complicated procedures for tax and social contribution payments were available for platform workers.

The main issue regarding the simplification of procedures relates to the digitalisation of services, as digital literacy among the general public is rather low. Another issue concerns people with a disability, as a survey has shown that e-government is not sufficiently accessible to people with disabilities.

In 2021, the Public Administration Reform (PAR) Strategy 2021–2030 was adopted. It sets out directions for the development of public administration over the next 10 years. The specific objective of "Communication and visibility" plans for social media campaigns to raise awareness among citizens about their rights. In February 2022, the Programme for Digitalisation of the Healthcare System of the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2022–2026 was adopted. It plans a simplification of administrative procedures in the delivery of healthcare services. One of the planned measures seeks to replace previously paper-based procedures with the electronic management of sick leave and leave of absence notices.

# **1 Current policies and practices to ensure information on, and to simplify access to, social protection for workers and the self-employed**

## **1.1 Policies and practices to ensure access to information on social protection rights, entitlements and obligations**

### **1.1.1 Policies and practices to ensure access to general and personalised information**

The rights and obligations related to the six social protection branches analysed below are regulated by a number of laws and corresponding bylaws. All national legal acts are published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia and are available in electronic format in the central database at the portal Legal and Information System of the Republic of Serbia (*Pravno Informacioni Sistem Srbije*).<sup>1</sup> Use of the database is free of charge for all internet users, and documents can be downloaded in pdf format. The Ministry of Labour Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs (MoLEVSA) publishes all related legal documents on its website, and these can be downloaded in html format. The essential legal acts can also be accessed on the website of the Republic Institute for Social Insurance (available in Serbian and English). The institute also publishes interpretations of the legal acts related to social rights.<sup>2</sup>

#### **1.1.1.1 Unemployment benefits**

The National Employment Service (NES) administers unemployment benefits and manages the application procedures. Claimants can obtain information about unemployment rights and submit an application at one of the local NES offices, which are located in 83% of all local communities in the country. The simulation or calculation of individual benefits is not available. Detailed general information is also available on the NES website.

#### **1.1.1.2 Sickness and healthcare benefits**

Employees, the self-employed and the temporarily employed are entitled to sickness and healthcare benefits. Sickness benefits for a period of 30 days of illness and/or injury are paid by the employer, while the Health Insurance Fund (HIF) provide payments for the period after 30 days. The HIF website has a comprehensive set of information about the rights of insured persons. A set of booklets related to general and special rights can be downloaded in pdf format. The insured person can also access online his or her insurance status and can check if the healthcare contributions have been paid regularly. The information can also be accessed at a local HIF office (every local community has one). The simulation or calculation of individual benefits is not available. Personal information in case of sickness is given by a general practitioner (GP), who is authorised to complete a sick note form that is submitted to the employer.

Currently, 75 Roma mediators are engaged to provide advice and assistance to the Roma population in realising their healthcare rights (the programme was introduced in 2008).<sup>3</sup> This assistance has been of particular importance in securing healthcare insurance coverage, as Roma are entitled to free coverage under compulsory healthcare insurance, if they are not insured otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> Accessible on the website [www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs](http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs)

<sup>2</sup> Rights stemming from social insurance ([zso.gov.rs](http://zso.gov.rs))

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dw.com/sr/romske-zdravstvene-medijatorke-osobe-od-poverenja-u-romskim-zajednicama/a-58178903>

### **1.1.1.3 Maternity and equivalent paternity benefits**

The HIF website has a special icon (link) to access information on the healthcare rights of pregnant women and on maternity and paternity rights, with explanations on application procedures and level of benefits. The simulation or calculation of individual benefits is not available. As these benefits are paid by the HIF, the website regularly publishes the scheduled date of payment releases.

### **1.1.1.4 Invalidity benefits**

Invalidity benefits are administered by the Pension and Invalidation Fund (PIO Fund). They provide compensation on the grounds of reduced earnings for employees with a disability or invalidity pension. The PIO Fund is the main source of information, which can be accessed by visiting the local office (83% of all local communities have a PIO Fund office). The fund's website portal and Facebook and Instagram pages also provide comprehensive information. Users can access general information about their entitlement and the application procedure. The website provides quite comprehensive information, including a set of booklets on all invalidity benefits, which can be downloaded in pdf format. The simulation or calculation of individual benefits is not available.

In June 2021, in cooperation with the National Organisation of Persons with Disabilities, the Ministry of Employment, Labour, Veterans and Social Affairs published the Guide on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which can be downloaded in html format (MoELVSA, 2021).

There have been no surveys/studies published on the awareness of workers and the self-employed of their social protection rights and obligations arising from their invalidity status.

### **1.1.1.5 Old-age benefits and survivors' benefits**

Old-age and survivors' benefits comprise old-age pensions and survivors' pensions, which are administered by the PIO Fund. The PIO Fund is the main source of information (see section 1.1.1.4). The fund's website hosts a programme allowing calculation of the date when an insured person becomes eligible for old-age pension. Employees can also access information on the compulsory social insurance contributions payments that have been paid. The Facebook page has an interactive feature "How to retire", which provides an explanation of all available options regarding the procedures and rules for the related benefits. The calculation of individual benefits is available; however, the beneficiary must have data on all previous earnings and contribution payments, which is a rather complicated procedure.

### **1.1.1.6 Benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases**

Cash compensation for impairment caused by an injury at work or an occupational disease is administered by the PIO Fund (see section 1.1.1.4). The PIO Fund's Facebook page has an interactive feature "Questions and answers about the right to invalidity compensation for work-related injuries and/or diseases", with the posted questions and answers displayed. The simulation or calculation of individual benefits is not available.

## **1.1.2 General awareness-raising campaigns**

The only general awareness-raising campaign about obligations and rights was organised to raise awareness of the new rules about seasonal work and the advantages of the tax administration portal for the registration of seasonal workers, which was established in January 2019 (see section 1.2.3).<sup>4</sup> In December 2020 and January 2021, the campaign "Agro Info Caravan" visited 17 local communities, where representatives from the National Organisation for Local Development presented the new portal to local administration

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<sup>4</sup> [Сезонски радници \(sezonskiradnici.gov.rs\)](http://sezonskiradnici.gov.rs)



officials, agricultural producers and seasonal workers.<sup>5</sup> Seasonal work in agriculture is one of the main sources of informal employment in Serbia: in 2018, the overall informal employment rate was 19%, while in agriculture the figure reached 51% (RSO, 2019). After the law came into force in January 2019, a significant dip of 6 percentage points in informal employment in agriculture (down to 45%) was registered that year (RSO, 2020). The positive shift did not continue in 2020 and 2021, however the rates returned to 50% and 51%, respectively (RSO, 2021, 2022). The published data show that, over the period 2018-2020, 63,000 workers were registered on the portal, and around EUR 7.9 million had been paid in total for the social insurance contributions and taxes.<sup>6</sup>

In the second half of 2021, the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Communication and the MoLEVSA organised campaigns in 16 local communities in Serbia to promote digital literacy and the use of public web portals.<sup>7</sup> The two-day programme – the “Digital Expedition – Caravan”, with the theme “How to be an e-citizen” – included workshops and lectures open to the general public. There is no readily available information on the impact of the campaign.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, information about the exceptional support measures was widely disseminated in the electronic and print media. In May 2020, the MoLEVSA installed a link entitled “e-guide about employees’ rights”, with information about workers’ rights related to working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interactive link enabled employees to receive personalised information about their rights regarding income payment in the event of a change to their working conditions due to the pandemic. There is no readily available information on the impact of this campaign.

#### **1.1.2.1 Unemployment benefits**

There were no general awareness-raising campaigns on employment benefits, apart from the one for seasonal workers.

#### **1.1.2.2 Sickness and healthcare benefits**

There were no general awareness-raising campaigns on sickness and healthcare benefits, apart from the one for seasonal workers.

#### **1.1.2.3 Maternity and equivalent paternity benefits**

There were no general awareness-raising campaigns on maternity and equivalent paternity benefits, apart from the one for seasonal workers.

#### **1.1.2.4 Invalidity benefits**

There were no general awareness-raising campaigns on invalidity benefits, apart from the one for seasonal workers.

#### **1.1.2.5 Old-age benefits and survivors’ benefits**

There were no general awareness-raising campaigns on old-age benefits and survivors’ benefits, apart from the one for seasonal workers.

#### **1.1.2.6 Benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases**

There were no general awareness-raising campaigns on benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases, apart from the one for seasonal workers.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://naled.rs/en/vest-uspesno-završen-agro-info-karavan-4724>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/4798851/sezonski-radnici-poslovi-traznja-srbija.html>

<sup>7</sup> [Дигитална експедиција - Дигитална експедиција \(digitalnaekspedicija.gov.rs\)](https://digitalnaekspedicija.gov.rs/)

## **1.2 Policies and practices to simplify access to social protection**

### **1.2.1 Simplification objective embedded in reforms of social protection schemes**

There was no simplification objective embedded in reforms of social protection schemes over the period January 2017 – May 2022.

#### **1.2.1.1 Unemployment benefits**

There was no simplification objective embedded in reform of the unemployment benefits scheme.

#### **1.2.1.2 Sickness and healthcare benefits**

There was no simplification objective embedded in reform of the healthcare benefits scheme.

#### **1.2.1.3 Maternity and equivalent paternity benefits**

There was no simplification objective embedded in reform of the maternity/paternity benefits scheme.

#### **1.2.1.4 Invalidity benefits**

There was no simplification objective embedded in reform of the invalidity benefits scheme.

#### **1.2.1.5 Old-age benefits and survivors' benefits**

There was no simplification objective embedded in reform of the old-age and survivors' benefits scheme.

#### **1.2.1.6 Benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases**

There was no simplification objective embedded in reform of the benefits scheme in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases.

### **1.2.2 Simplification of the application process for accessing benefits**

The new 2016 Law on General Administrative Procedures, which came into force in June 2017, introduced a degree of simplification in the realisation of social protection rights (National Parliament, 2016). The legislature's intention was to make communication between authorities and the different parties more efficient and more flexible. The beneficiaries of the new solutions are business entities and citizens. Potential beneficiaries of social protection schemes now have better access to information on administrative procedures, their obligations and the regulatory framework. The law introduced the new forms and rules of communication in administrative procedures, with special rules on electronic communication. A new element regarding communication is the definition of written communication, which now, apart from paper-based communication (via regular mail/delivery), also includes communication by electronic means.<sup>8</sup> The most important new instrument for communication is "a one-stop shop". With the introduction of the single administrative point, parties can now submit a single application, rather than having to contact a number of different authorities or initiate several procedures with the same authority for recognition of a certain right or several connected rights. This instrument is developing rather slowly, although financial support from the central budget has been provided. By the end of January 2022, only 27.6% of local communities had established a

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<sup>8</sup> Electronic communication is not applied in every case, but only if the party communicating electronically with an authority has previously agreed to such communication, or if it is provided for by a separate regulation.

single administrative point.<sup>9</sup> At present, there is no readily available information about the achieved effects of the law.

#### **1.2.2.1 Unemployment benefits**

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, as the majority of NES offices were closed, online application options were introduced. The application form can be filled in online and the NES office may retrieve any other necessary documents on behalf of the applicant (with the applicant's consent). Claimants can also complete and submit an online complaints form, if necessary.

#### **1.2.2.2 Sickness and healthcare benefits**

There was no simplification of procedures for accessing sickness and healthcare benefits. At present, there is no online function allowing applications for benefits, but once the e-card becomes operational there will be (there is no information about when that will be).

#### **1.2.2.3 Maternity and equivalent paternity benefits**

There was no simplification of procedures for accessing the maternity and/or paternity benefits. At present there is no online function allowing applications for benefits, but once the e-card becomes operational there will be (there is no information about when that will be).

#### **1.2.2.4 Invalidity benefits**

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the PIO Fund introduced online applications and submission of documents (via e-mail), since the majority of offices had reduced the number of workplace staff. In May 2020, it created a portal "e-counter", which can be used to submit applications, to obtain personalised information on the social security status of persons concerned and for submitting documents upon request. Access to the portal is available to all, and applications and inquiries can be submitted on behalf of other people (provided a certificate of representation is presented); this helps people with lower digital skills gain access.

#### **1.2.2.5 Old-age benefits and survivors' benefits**

For information on the simplification of the application process for access to old-age benefits and survivors' benefits, see section 1.2.2.4.

#### **1.2.2.6 Benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases**

For information on the simplification of the application process for access to benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational disease, see section 1.2.2.4.

### **1.2.3 Simplification of the structures within the social protection administration**

Over the period January 2017 – May 2022, the government adopted a number of legal acts, programmes and plans for digitalisation and the simplification of administrative procedures. The main acts and programmes related to all aspects of social protection are:

- April 2018: the Law on Electronic Government (National Parliament, 2018a). The law aims to harmonise and synchronise the existing information systems and electronic registers of different public bodies and institutions at all levels of governance. The rationale for the proposal of the law states that the existing practice did not allow for the effective exchange of electronic data between public

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<sup>9</sup> <https://rs.n1info.com/biznis/jedinstveno-upravno-mesto-u-25-gradova-i-opstina-svi-poslovi-na-jednom-salteru/>

bodies, as the applied software solutions had been developed independently, without harmonisation. The main stated objectives of the law were the simplification of all administrative procedures and the creation of the conditions necessary for efficient electronic communication between citizens, businesses and public administration. The law stipulates that everyone, including persons with disabilities, shall have the right to use e-government services, including access to electronic data and documents, in the same manner and on equal terms, without technical, audio-visual, semantic and language barriers. The law will improve the functionality of the Central Register of Social Insurance (CROSO), with a simplification of the exchange of data between the CROSO and the Residence Register, which will reduce administrative procedures for registration with the mandatory social insurance schemes.

- July 2019: the government adopted the “Programme E-paper 2019–2021” (*E-papir*) for the simplification of administrative procedures and regulations (Government, 2019).<sup>10</sup> The project aimed to reduce the administrative costs to the economy by at least 15–20% by 2021 and the administrative burden from 3.46% of GDP to 3%.
- June 2020: the government adopted the Programme for the Development of Electronic Government for the Period 2020–2022 with an Action Plan (Government, 2020b). The programme outlines plans for the further development of the e-government infrastructure and services. It was developed around the key principles of the European Union’s e-Government Action Plan 2016–2020 and includes a section on inclusiveness and accessibility, which states that the inclusivity and accessibility of e-services must be ensured at the design stage. The programme plans for the development of around 300 new electronic services for citizens and businesses.
- April 2021: the National Parliament adopted the Law on Registration of Administrative Procedures (National Parliament, 2021). It sets out the rules and conditions for the establishment of a web portal for the Register of Administrative Procedures, which will enable citizens and businesses to access information on administrative procedures for the realisation of rights and obligations. Data on the procedures regulated by the country’s legal acts will be accessible by 1 January 2023. The register became operational in June 2021, with 1,600 procedures for business, while the plan is to include all procedures relevant to individuals by the end of 2022.

In June 2018, Parliament adopted the Law on Simplification of Seasonal Work Engagement in Specific Sectors (National Parliament, 2018b), which came into force in January 2019. It lays out the contractual obligations of employers in the agricultural sector for the engagement of seasonal workers. Under this law, seasonal work is not regarded as employment and seasonal workers may keep their status as registered unemployed persons.<sup>11</sup> The employer must cover the compulsory social insurance contributions for the pension and invalidity scheme and for healthcare protection in the event of work-related injury or occupational disease. The employer is not obliged to draw up a written contract with the worker; however, **workers must be informed of the available social protection rights** and can request a written verification of work engagement. The law introduced a web portal for the electronic registration of seasonal workers, which has been installed on the tax administration website.<sup>12</sup> Upon registration, an employer receives information electronically about the monthly contributions and tax payments for every registered worker. Estimates show that with a traditional registration procedure, which

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<sup>10</sup> <https://epapir.rsip.gov.rs/>

<sup>11</sup> Registered unemployed persons are entitled to coverage by mandatory healthcare insurance.

<sup>12</sup> [Сезонски радници \(sezonskiradnici.gov.rs\)](https://sezonskiradnici.gov.rs/)

requires a visit to a tax administration office, employers spend on average five hours per registered worker per month, even if the work engagement lasts only one day.<sup>13</sup>

#### **1.2.3.1 Unemployment benefits**

For information on the simplification of the structure within the administration of unemployment benefits, see section 1.2.3.

#### **1.2.3.2 Sickness and healthcare benefits**

For information on the simplification of the structure within the administration of sickness and healthcare benefits, see section 1.2.3.

#### **1.2.3.3 Maternity and equivalent paternity benefits**

For information on the simplification of the structure within the administration of maternity and/or paternity benefits, see section 1.2.3.

#### **1.2.3.4 Invalidity benefits**

For information on the simplification of the structure within the administration of invalidity benefits, see section 1.2.3.

#### **1.2.3.5 Old-age benefits and survivors' benefits**

For information on the simplification of the structure within the administration of old-age and survivors' benefits, see section 1.2.3.

#### **1.2.3.6 Benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases**

For information on the simplification of the structure within the administration of benefits in respect of accidents at work and occupational diseases, see section 1.2.3.

## **2 Issues, debates and ongoing or planned reforms to ensure information on, and to simplify access to, social protection for workers and the self-employed**

### **2.1 Issues, debates and reforms related to information**

#### **2.1.1 Issues**

The Republic Institute of Public Health conducts annual surveys on citizens' satisfaction with the public healthcare services (RIPH, 2020). The latest – for 2019 – shows inadequate knowledge of healthcare rights. Less than a third of respondents (28%) answered correctly about their right to choose a GP; only a quarter (26%) gave a correct answer about co-payment rules; while 45% of respondents did not know that all healthcare institutions have a website. In 2018, the European Policy Centre (CEP) published its Grey Book of Public Services in Serbia: a survey of citizens' views about primary healthcare services showed that the majority of respondents (58%) said they had no knowledge of patients' rights (CEP, 2018).<sup>14</sup> Almost half of respondents (49%) had no idea whom they should turn to in the event of a violation of patients' rights.

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<sup>13</sup> [Reforma angažovanja sezonskih radnika u poljoprivredi - korak po korak - YouTube](#)

<sup>14</sup> <https://cep.org.rs/en/publications/grey-book-of-public-services/>

### **2.1.2 Debates**

In December 2020, the Serbian Association of Internet Workers initiated a debate about the unresolved status of platform workers, regarding labour rights and obligations (Pejin Stokić, 2021). The debate was launched in response to the extensive checks on the tax liabilities of platform workers by the tax administration, covering the period 2016–2020. The checks revealed high levels of arrears on income tax and social insurance contributions. The number of platform workers has been growing steadily in Serbia over the past 10 years; and a survey from 2018 shows that most of them are young people, aged 25–29 (Centre for public policy research, 2019). Around two thirds of platform workers performed undeclared work, and the majority of them were not registered with the CROSO. The association argued that platform workers were not adequately included in contemporary legislation; that the tax administration failed to provide adequate information about their obligations; and that no guidance about the complicated procedures for tax and social contribution payments was available for platform workers. At meetings with government officials held throughout 2021, the association representatives agreed on amendments for mandatory social insurance and income tax, while the government proposed to draft a new Tax Law for Freelance Workers. The debates were extensively covered by the electronic and print media and raised awareness about the status of platform workers among the general public.

In its Annual Reports for 2020 and 2021, the Serbian Ombudsman pointed out that citizens were not adequately informed of their rights in the area of labour affairs, and that in 2021 the majority of complaints received related to the violation of employee rights (Ombudsman, 2021, 2022).

### **2.1.3 Ongoing or planned reforms**

There are no ongoing or planned reforms related to information on social protection for workers and the self-employed.

## **2.2 Issues, debates and reforms related to simplification**

### **2.2.1 Issues**

The ongoing digitalisation of public services and administrative procedures highlighted the need for the adequate digital literacy of the general population. In February 2020, the government adopted the Strategy for Development of Digital Skills for the Period 2020–2024 (Government, 2020a). The main objective of the strategy is to raise the digital skills of Serbian citizens, with special focus on the most vulnerable population groups: people with disabilities, the elderly and people living in rural areas. The targets are: 46.2% of people with adequate digital literacy and 26.8% with partial digital literacy by 2024, compared to the 2018 basic values of 34.2% and 14.8%, respectively. The specific objectives aim to: raise awareness among the general public about the advantages of using digital services; improve the conditions for a widespread and affordable use of the internet; and develop accredited learning programmes tailored to the needs of the most vulnerable groups.

A review of the accessibility of government websites and of their compliance with the Regulation on Detailed Conditions for the Development and Maintenance of Websites has been conducted every year since 2018 by the Office for IT and e-Government, in order to improve the accessibility of information and the operational functions of public websites (Government, 2018). The latest data – for 2020 (not comparable with the previous years, due to methodological changes) – show that less than half (47.7%) of the websites of national bodies met all the criteria, while the proportion was lower for local administrative bodies (35.6%) (SIPRU, 2021). The analysis of digital inclusion in Serbia for 2018–2021 also covered an evaluation of the adequacy of e-government services for people with disabilities. Interviewed in focus groups, persons with disabilities reported that e-

government was not sufficiently accessible: instructions are often inadequate and are updated without any notice, while registration for e-government services can be extremely challenging for persons with intellectual disabilities (SIPRU, 2021).

### 2.2.2 Debates

There has been no debate related to the simplification of access to social protection for workers and the self-employed.

### 2.2.3 Ongoing or planned reforms

In April 2021, the government adopted the new Public Administration (PAR) Reform Strategy for the Period 2021–2030 (amended in January 2022) (Government, 2021/2022). The strategy sets out directions for development and change in the field of public administration over the next 10 years; it plans for efficient, responsible and transparent administration, tailored to the needs of citizens and the business sector. The Action Plan adopted for 2021–2025 includes activities to increase the competence and skills of public employees and programmes for continuous education. Under the specific objective “Communication and visibility” the planned activities are: social media campaigns to raise awareness among citizens of their rights; the promotion of centres for the education of citizens in the use of e-services, and promotional activities of other ongoing programmes related to e-administration.

In February 2022, the government adopted its Programme for Digitalisation of the Healthcare System of the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2022–2026 (Government, 2022). The programme was included in the structural reform package in the Serbia Economic Reform Programme (ERP) for the Period 2021–2023 (Government, 2021). Its main objective is to complete the digitalisation of the healthcare system and the safe application of services and technology to improve the quality, efficiency and availability of healthcare services. The programme plans to simplify administrative procedures in the delivery of healthcare services. One of the planned measures aims to replace previously paper-based procedures with the **electronic management of sick leave and leave of absence notices** (due to illness, injuries, pregnancy, and maternity or paternity leave). Education of the general public in the use of electronic services in health care is covered by specific objective No. 5. It comprises several activities, including information campaigns, the development of guides and booklets, and periodic assessment of the utilisation of electronic services and users’ responsiveness. The planned activities for 2022 aim to raise technical and human capacities in public healthcare institutions for implementation of the programme. Promotional activities and an evaluation of the take-up of electronic services, along with the inclusion of citizens in the creation of new services are planned for 2023.

## 2.3 Suggestions for improvements

As digital communication is becoming a main source of information and communication among public administrative bodies, digital literacy is a prerequisite for accessing information and for interacting with the social protection insurance schemes. The available data show that vulnerable population groups (the less educated, elderly, poor people, people living in rural areas and people with disabilities) have the lowest digital skills, while at the same time they may be the least well informed about their social protection rights and obligations. It is necessary to find the best methods to reach these population groups and to create tailored education programmes to raise their digital skills.

Regular assessment of the take-up of benefits will reveal the potential gaps and obstacles, and will enable officials to identify the reasons behind such occurrences and to plan a timely response. Available evidence shows that the least well informed are non-standard workers, especially young people with no previous employment history: future research should take the needs of this group into consideration.

Over the period January 2017 – May 2022, digitalisation became the primary development objective in all areas of public governance. Consequently, a number of projects and programmes have been supported by the EU, the World Bank and bilateral donors. Such arrangements have resulted in a large number of projects and programmes, leading to differentiation in organisational capacities and responsibilities of different public bodies and multiple stakeholders. Such a state of affairs requires strict policy coordination, in order to avoid overlapping and inconsistencies in policies and directions.



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