

Education in Serbia

Context

The past decade in Serbia has seen the end of eight years of war, a transition to democracy with the resignation of Slobodan Milošević in 2000 and independence from Montenegro in 2006. In the midst of all of this change, the country has begun to rebuild its battered education system. Serbia faces many challenges of access and quality in its schools, especially for adolescents, Roma children and children with disabilities.

Serbia's GDP (PPP) per capita is about \$10,985 USD, which is the third highest in South-eastern Europe after Bulgaria and Romania, which have GNPs per capita of \$12,252 USD and \$12,285 USD, respectively. While on par with its peers in GNP per capita, Serbia has not enjoyed consistent economic growth like some of its neighbours. Its annual growth, which was 4.5% in 2000, rose to 6.2% in 2005 but then dropped again to 5.7% in 2006. Income inequality is relatively low, with a gini coefficient of 0.24.

A national survey in 2007 estimated that about 7% of the population is poor, which is a decrease from 2000 when about 13% were living below the poverty line. The unemployment rate in Serbia is among the highest in the region of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) at about 20%. Youth unemployment is of particular concern, given that about half of the youth population is without work.¹ 'Education is directly linked to poverty in Serbia, with 71.3% of the poor being without education or with only a primary school education.'²

Education Reforms

With the change of government, the Law on the Foundation of the Education System was amended in 2004, with the explanation from the new Ministry that: "the proposed amendments should provide a systematic, rational, and gradual approach towards



the changes in the education system, capturing the overall process, from the beginning to the completion of education, and not only parts of the process, which characterizes the existing law." This practically put the 2002 education reform on hold.

The amended Law introduced a compulsory Preparatory Preschool Programme for children one year prior to primary education (six months four hours a day) to be applied from the 2006/2007 school year.

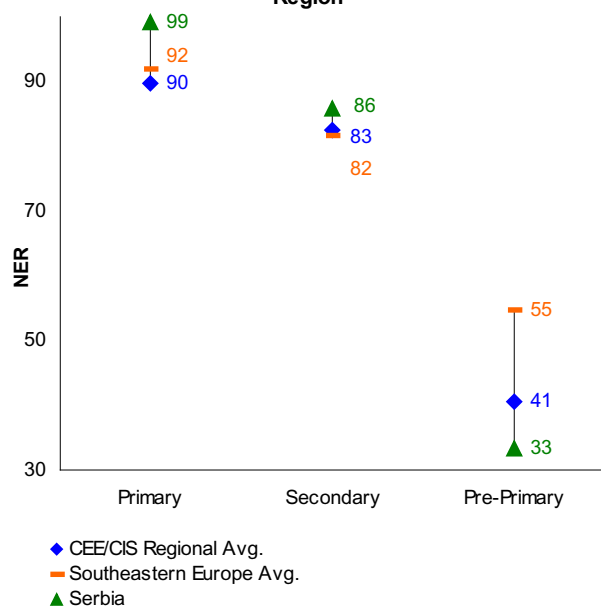
Neither one of these laws has been accompanied by national education strategies nor action plans. In 2006 the National Education Council was appointed by the Serbian Parliament as a supreme body for education development and quality assurance. It is still not fully functional; all decisions are made by the Minister of Education.'

Quick Facts about Education in Serbia

	Serbia	Southeastern Europe
Total Population	10.5 million	50.7
Youth unemployment rate as percentage of unemployment rate	309.4%	x
Percentage of GDP spent on Education	3.5%	4.07%
Net Pre-Primary School Enrolment, 2005 (<i>Gender Parity Index (GPI) (Girls/Boys)</i>)	-	55
Net Enrolment in Primary School, 2005 (<i>GPI</i>)	-	92
Net Enrolment in Secondary School, 2005 (<i>GPI</i>)	-	82
Gross Enrolment in Tertiary Enrolment, 2005 (<i>GPI</i>)	-	35
Student/Teacher Ratio, 2005	14 (1999)	18.2
Out of School Children (% girls)	-	80,000
Number of refugees and internally displaced persons of concern	488,000	690,000
PISA Scores (mathematics (regional rank out of 17), reading (""), science (""))	435, (12), 401 (13), 436 (11)	x

Source: UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008; Innocenti Research Centre.

Figure 1. Net Education Enrolment Ratios in Serbia, Southeastern Europe and the CEE/CIS Region



*Serbian figures are based on NAR because of a lack of available data on NER. They do not include the Roma population living in settlements.

Access

Serbia does not have a developed network of pre-school institutions nor enough trained staff for pre-schools, which is one of the main obstacles for greater coverage. The primary school network is bipolar, with either big town schools that work in three shifts attended by 83% of all children and small rural multi-grade schools attended by 17% of children. This distribution doesn't correspond to population distribution and some children in rural areas have to walk between 3-10 km one way to school. Optimisation of the school network is necessary to ensure access and quality of education to all children. Children in remote rural schools who attend multi-grade classes lag behind in school achievements by one school year comparing to their peers in the town schools.³

The net primary school enrolment rate is 94%,⁴ with high disparities between urban and rural (enrolment in rural areas is 81.2%⁵); NSA for Roma is 73.6% and only 28.1 complete primary education.

The access and quality of education has not been improved in the last decade, on the contrary the decrease in quality and attendance is a serious problem particularly for marginalised groups (Roma, the extremely poor, children with disabilities). Education information systems are not yet established, which is a significant obstacle for monitoring, planning and improvement.

Equity

Access to education at all levels is not equal in all sub-populations in Serbia. The country has essentially eliminated gender disparities in primary education, with 99% of boys and 99.1% of girls attend-

ing. In secondary school, a small gender gap exists in favour of girls. Nationally, 88.9% of girls attend secondary school compared with 82.4% of boys. This reverse gender gap is larger in rural areas, where only 76.5% of boys attend secondary school compared to 82.2% of girls. This enlarged gap could be explained by boys' greater access to the labour force. Similarly, Serbia has done well to equalize educational access for other sub-regional groups.

The most significant equity gap is the Serbian-Roma divide in access to and completion of education at all levels. For every four Serbian children that attend primary school in Serbia, only three Roma children attend. By adolescence, only 10% of Roma children attend secondary school, compared with 86% of the non-Roma population – almost a ratio of 1:10. Only 4% of Roma children attend pre-primary school, compared with 33% of non-Roma children. Additionally, Roma children are much more likely to attend special schools for the disabled. The rate of Roma children enrolled in special schools is about 30%, which is extremely disproportionate considering that only 2% of the population is Roma. See Figure 2.

Another inequity gap exists for children with special needs. 'Due to the years of conflict, Serbia was not part of the Salamanca agreement or the Dakar Framework for Action, which both laid out action plans for inclusive education. Currently only 1% of special needs children have access to pre-primary education. Special need children's access to primary school and other educational levels is unknown, because many of these children are hidden due to the stigma attached to their challenges.

Learning Outcomes and Quality

On the Trends in Mathematics and Science Survey (TIMSS) 2003 Serbia performed above the international average in mathematics, and it scored 8th out of 12 participating countries in the region, indicating that Serbia's learning outcomes are ahead of many of the developing countries that were assessed, although still below average for the region. In science in 2003, Serbia scored below the international average and scored third to last in the region.

Serbia's participation in the 2006 PISA assessment made it clear that the country continues to face serious challenges with regard to the learning outcomes of its education system. In mathematics, Serbia scored 41st out of all 57 participating countries and 12th out of the seventeen participating countries in the region. In reading, Serbia performed more poorly than it did in mathematics, scoring 44th of all countries that participated, and 13th of the 17 participating countries in the region. In science, Serbia scored 40th among all countries and 9th out of the participating countries in the region. However, Serbia did outperform three of the four participating countries in its sub-region – Bulgaria, Romania and Montenegro – in both science and mathematics. In reading Bulgaria surpassed Serbia's score.

Figure 3. Distribution of Overall Science Achievement on 2003 TIMSS, grade 8

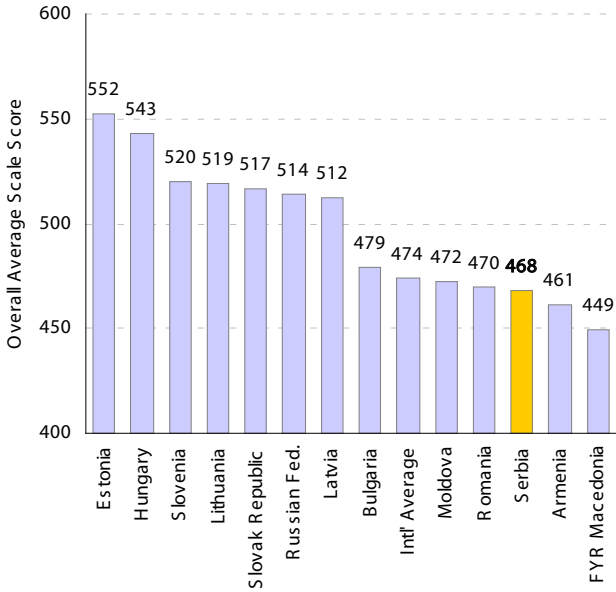
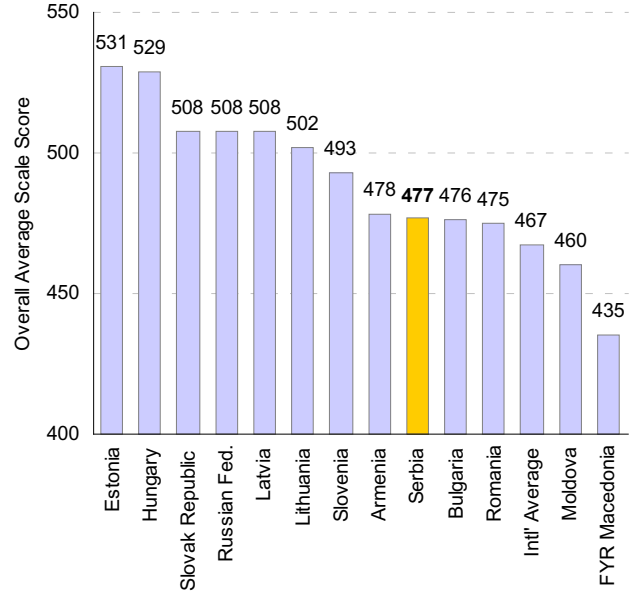


Figure 4. Distribution of Overall Mathematics Achievement on 2003 TIMSS, grade 8



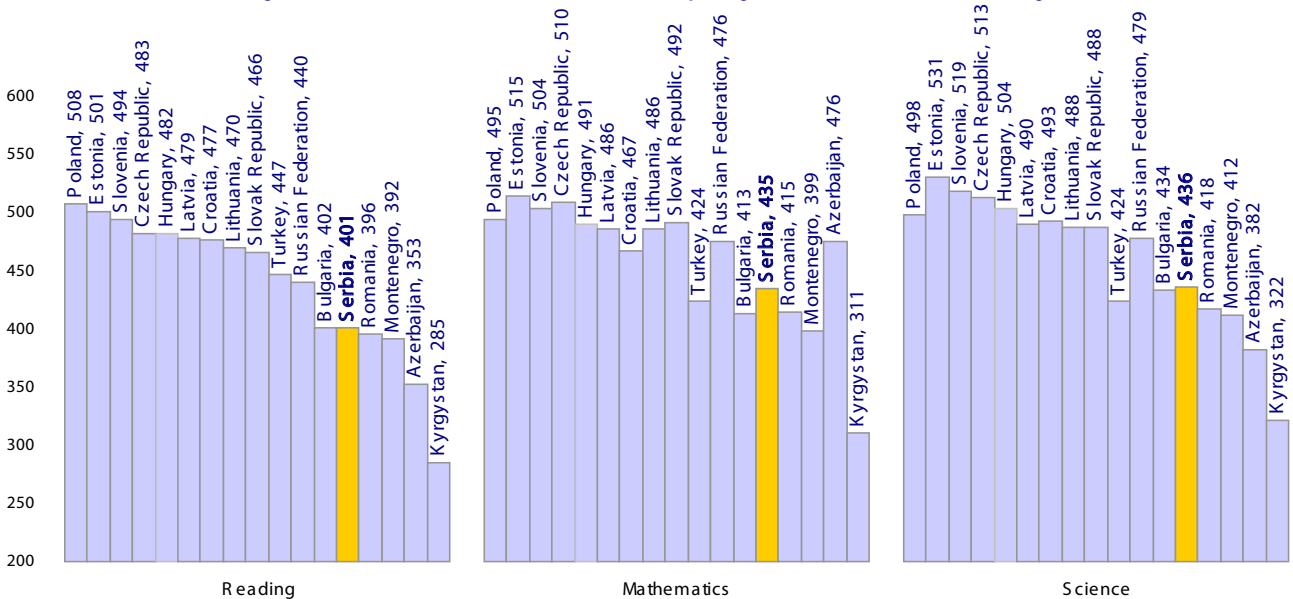
Serbia's low performance on the international assessments reopened the dialogue on school quality. Aside from the measures of learning outcomes, little data is available on internal school processes in Serbia, yet, with such low learning outcomes, it is apparent that school efficiency remains poor.

- The country's teachers, although all officially trained, predominantly adhere to the outdated Yugoslav pedagogy of rote learning, although recently the government has begun to support Active Learning techniques.
- School safety is a major concern, with drug use and incidences of violence being high in schools. The government has launched a 'Schools without Violence' programme, in response.
- Schools are often in poor condition, with unsafe drinking water and severe lack of sanitation in toilets.

- The current teacher-pupil ratio is not clear, although in 1999 it was 1:14, which is on par with the regional average.
- Dropout rates, although not clearly documented, are thought to be high, especially in secondary education, because of lower attendance rates.
- Fewer than half of schools have libraries.

Additionally, the school system has not adequately taken into account the psycho-social needs of children emerging from conflict. Children and youth of eight years and older lived through some of the brutal war and many experienced horrific scenes of violence. Those children, now on the verge of adulthood, are in need of a response from the education system. In addition the education system must play a role to prevent future violence. See Box 1.

Figure 5: Serbia's on the PISA 2006 in Participating Countries in the CEE/CIS Region



Education Financing

In 2006, the government of Serbia spent 3.5% of its GDP on education, which is down from 4.3% in 1999.⁶ The current spending level is far below the sub-regional average, which is about 4.4%. Ninety per cent of the education budget goes toward paying teachers' salaries, although the salaries remain inadequate and below regional standards. The remaining 10% of the budget is allocated to equipment purchases and emergency school repairs. Thus, while compulsory schooling is free by government mandate, it is often not so in practice because of the government's low investment in education.

Educational Priorities in Serbia

- Adopt national strategy of education
- Finalise the establishment of an education information system
- Increase educational access and quality of education for Roma and other socially excluded children at all levels
- Increase school readiness by developing adequate preschool curriculum
- Increase preschool coverage
- Train pre-school staff
- Adopt Law on Preschool Education drafted three years ago)
- Adopt national strategy on inclusive education, develop database on children with special education needs
- Lobby for children with special needs to be included in all levels of education
- Improve school quality with particular attention to: education attainments of all students and students from marginalised groups; improvement of teaching-learning methodology and expansion of application of active learning; promotion of inclusive, child centred education and enhancement of school community cooperation; reduction of school violence; improvement of school sanitation and reduction of drop out rates
- Ensure second chance education of adequate quality for children who dropped out or have never enrolled in school (children between 10-18, for the time being they attend evening schools for adults
- that are absolutely not child friendly)⁷

1 UNICEF Serbia Annual Report 2007.

2 UNICEF Serbia Annual Report 2007.

3 UNICEF - Institute for Psychology assessment in 2005

4 MICS 3

5 Republican Statistical Office, 2005

6 UNICEF Serbia Annual Report 2007., EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008.

7 Serbian Second Progress Report on PRS (2007).

Box 1. Post-Conflict Education in Serbia

The year 2000 marked the end of eight years of ethnic and religious war in Serbia and neighbouring countries. The scars of this war, while born by all involved, are carried heavily by the country's children. Today all children in Serbia aged eight and older experienced a piece of the war. Some of them endured severe tragedy, trauma and loss that continue to cause psychological distress today. In some cases, remnants of the ethnic hatred that fuelled the war persist.

The education system in Serbia has taken little systematic action to address the psycho-social needs of its children or to address the aspects of the education system that reinforce previous ethnic stereotypes and tensions. A large scale cross-cultural assessments of teachers' attitudes toward Serbian history showed that many teachers harbour ethnic resentment and stereotypes that could be manifested in their teaching. Several peace education initiatives have been launched, however civil society efforts to discuss peace have at times been labelled as 'traitorous'. Additionally, many of the old textbooks are still in circulation, teaching a controversial version of history.

Education, while often thought to bring about tolerance, can also insight violence, especially in a post-conflict environment. Education in Serbia must be explicitly shaped to breed tolerance and cross-cultural respect.

Source: Cerovic, T.K. (1997). Democracy in Education for Democracy. Belgrade.