

**Interreg
Danube Region**



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Country report Republic of Serbia

by Pulse- Groupe SOS

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List of abbreviations

EU – European Union

EU27 – European Union (27 Member States)

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

ICT – Information and Communication Technology

ISCED – International Standard Classification of Education

IT – Information Technology

LE – Life Expectancy

NEET – Not in Education, Employment, or Training

NUTS – Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics

O1.1 / O3.3 / O3.4 – Project Output Codes

PPS – Purchasing Power Standard

R&D – Research and Development

SME – Small and Medium-sized Enterprise

UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund

WBL – Work-Based Learning

YG / YGs – Youth Guarantee

1. Introduction

This report presents and analyses territorial and diagnostic data on the labour market integration of vulnerable young people in Serbia. It displays key demographic, socio-economic, educational, labour market, health, and digital indicators, complemented by qualitative insights gathered through desk research and validation interviews. The purpose is to refine and validate the needs and challenges identified during the proposal stage by situating them within both the national and local context.

2. Problem

This data report tells us that the challenges faced by vulnerable young people in the labour market are fragmented and inconsistent across Serbia, in this report the Nišava District is the primary focus . This lack of a harmonised, validated evidence base makes it difficult to accurately assess needs or compare territorial situations. The report therefore addresses this gap by providing a coherent diagnostic grounded in national and local data.

3. Analysis

3.1. Population and demographic statistics

3.1.1. Population and age structure

TABLE 1
Main demographic data

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Total population	6,690.887	1,408,420
Proportion of 15-29-year-olds in the total population	16.3%	15.0%
Proportion of females in total population	51.4%	51.9%
Median age of population	43.8	46.5
Median age of population – females	45.2	48.0

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

According to Eurostat data, Serbia’s population stands at approximately 6.69 million, reflecting a continued trend of demographic decline driven by low fertility rates, population ageing, and sustained outmigration. This decline is accompanied by a pronounced ageing process: the median age of the population has reached 43.8 years at the national level and is even higher at the NUTS 2 level (46.5 years), indicating a more advanced ageing profile in less developed regions. Women constitute a slight majority of the population (around 51%), and the median age among women is higher (45.2 nationally and 48.0 regionally), reflecting longer life expectancy and gendered demographic dynamics.

The share of young people aged 15–29 is relatively low, accounting for 16.3% of the total population at the national level and 15.0% at the regional level. This indicates a shrinking youth cohort, particularly in the selected NUTS 2 region, where demographic ageing is more pronounced. Such trends suggest increasing pressure on the labour market and social systems, as the proportion of working-age population declines while dependency ratios increase.

Overall, both national and regional data point to a structurally ageing and contracting population, with slightly more adverse dynamics at the regional level. This has direct implications for youth employment policies, as smaller and potentially more vulnerable cohorts of young people face structural barriers in transitioning to the labour market.

3.1.2. Marriage and fertility

TABLE 2
Main socio-demographic data

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Mean age at first marriage – females	31.1	31.5
Mean age at first marriage – males	34.1	34.5
Mean age of women at childbirth	30.1	30.5
Proportion of live births outside marriage	28%	32-34%
Proportion of live births from 15 to 29 years in the total live births	47%	45%

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

Serbia shows clear trends of delayed family formation, consistent with broader European demographic patterns. The mean age at first marriage has increased, reaching 31.1 years for women and 34.1 years for men at the national level, with slightly higher values observed at the regional level. Similarly, the mean age of women at childbirth has risen to around 30 years, indicating a postponement of parenthood.

At the same time, non-traditional family structures are becoming more prevalent. The proportion of live births outside marriage is relatively high, accounting for approximately 28% at the national level and up to 32–34% at the regional level. This suggests evolving social norms and changing patterns of partnership and family formation, particularly in less urbanised or economically disadvantaged areas.

Despite delayed fertility overall, a significant proportion of births still occurs among younger women: around 47% of all live births are attributed to women aged 15–29. This indicates that young adults remain a key demographic group in reproductive behaviour, even in the context of broader demographic ageing.

These trends reflect a dual dynamic: on one hand, postponement of life transitions such as marriage and parenthood, and on the other, continued early family formation among certain groups. This is particularly relevant for vulnerable youth, as early parenthood may further complicate labour market integration and reinforce cycles of socio-economic exclusion.

3.1.3. Life expectancy and infant mortality

TABLE 3
Main life expectancy data

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Life expectancy at less than 1 year_Total	74.7	73.0-73.5
Life expectancy at less than 1 year_Males	72.1	70.5-71.0
Life expectancy at less than 1 year_Females	77.3	75.5-76.0
Infant mortality rate	4 per 1000 births	4-5 per 1000 births

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

Life expectancy in Serbia has gradually improved but remains below the EU average. At the national level, life expectancy at birth is approximately 74.7 years, with notable gender disparities: women live significantly longer (77.3 years) than men (72.1 years). Similar patterns are observed at the regional level, where overall life expectancy is slightly lower (around 73.0–73.5 years), indicating territorial inequalities in health outcomes.

Infant mortality rates have decreased over time and currently stand at around 4 deaths per 1,000 live births at the national level, with slightly higher values (4–5 per 1,000) observed regionally. While these figures represent progress compared to previous decades, they still point to disparities in access to healthcare and living conditions, particularly in less developed areas.

The combination of moderate life expectancy, persistent gender gaps, and regional disparities suggests that structural inequalities continue to shape health outcomes in Serbia. In particular, lower life expectancy and higher infant mortality in certain regions may be linked to socio-economic conditions, access to services, and urban–rural divides.

These demographic and health patterns provide important context for the pilot intervention, as they highlight broader structural vulnerabilities that may affect young people’s life trajectories, including their access to education, employment, and social support systems.

3.2. General economic accounts

3.2.1. National economic accounts

TABLE 4
Main national economic accounts data

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Gross domestic product (GDP) at current market prices (Euro per capita)	€9,420	€5,595
Euro per inhabitant in percentage of the EU27 (from 2020) average	45% of EU27	-
Current prices, purchasing power standard (PPS, EU27 from 2020) per capita	€16,500	€11,000-€12,000

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

Serbia’s economic performance remains below the European Union average, reflecting ongoing structural development challenges. GDP per capita at current market prices amounts to approximately €9,420 at the national level, while the selected NUTS 2 region records significantly lower levels (around €5,595), indicating pronounced regional disparities in economic development.

When measured in purchasing power standards (PPS), GDP per capita reaches approximately €16,500 nationally, compared to an estimated €11,000–€12,000 at the regional level. This confirms that differences in economic output translate into substantial gaps in living standards between regions. In relative terms, Serbia’s GDP per capita corresponds to around 45% of the EU27 average, highlighting a persistent convergence gap.

These figures point to a structurally uneven economic landscape, where more developed urban areas concentrate economic activity, while less developed regions face lower productivity, weaker investment dynamics, and more limited employment opportunities. Such disparities directly affect young people’s access to stable and quality employment, particularly in regions with lower economic output.

3.2.2. Business statistics

TABLE 5
Main business statistics

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Number of enterprises	-	-
Business churn - birth and death rate - percentage	-	-

The available data for this report does not provide detailed quantitative indicators on business demography at national or regional level. However, existing economic patterns and structural characteristics of the Serbian economy allow for several relevant observations.

The business environment in Serbia is largely shaped by small-scale enterprises and a significant presence of service-oriented activities, particularly in trade, basic services, and manufacturing segments with relatively lower value added. In less developed regions, including the selected NUTS 2 area, economic activity is typically characterised by a narrower economic base, lower levels of investment, and reduced diversification of business activities.

These structural features have direct implications for labour market opportunities. In regions with lower economic output, employment is more often concentrated in sectors with limited productivity growth and fewer opportunities for long-term career development. This affects young people in particular, as entry-level jobs are frequently associated with temporary, unstable, or lower-paid positions.

In addition, the limited availability of larger or higher-productivity enterprises in less developed regions reduces the capacity of the local economy to absorb and retain young talent. This contributes to patterns of outmigration and weakens the link between education, skills development, and employment.

Overall, while detailed business statistics are not available within the dataset used for this analysis, the broader economic context indicates a business environment that may constrain stable youth employment pathways, particularly outside major economic centres. This reinforces the need for targeted interventions that support youth activation, skills development, and stronger connections between young people and local labour market actors.

3.3. Labour market situation

3.3.1. Employment

TABLE 6
Main employment data

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Employed persons (total, 15 - 24 years old)	≈ 200,000	≈ 33,400
Employed persons (females, 15 - 24 years old)	≈ 86,000	≈ 14,400
Employed persons (total, 15 - 74 years old)	≈ 2,600,000	≈ 473,000
Employed persons (females, 15 - 74 years old)	≈ 1,190,000	≈ 214,000

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

The Serbian labour market shows moderate overall employment levels but continues to display structural weaknesses in youth integration. While total employment reaches approximately 2.6 million persons aged 15–74, the number of employed young people aged 15–24 remains relatively limited, at around 200,000 nationally and approximately 33,400 in the selected NUTS2 region. This reflects a persistent gap between overall labour market performance and youth participation.

Youth employment rates remain low compared to the general population, indicating that entry into the labour market is a key bottleneck. According to Labour Force Survey data, the youth employment rate (15–24) stands at around 24–25%, with slightly lower performance in Southern and Eastern Serbia. This suggests that a significant share of young people are either inactive, in education, or unable to access employment opportunities.

Gender disparities are also visible, with young women consistently less represented in employment compared to young men. Structural factors such as care responsibilities, sectoral segregation, and limited access to stable entry-level jobs contribute to this gap. At the regional level, these disparities are often more pronounced due to weaker labour market diversification and fewer formal employment opportunities.

The employment structure in Southern and Eastern Serbia, including the Niš region, is characterised by a combination of public sector employment, small and medium-sized enterprises, and service-oriented activities. However, many available jobs are low-productivity, temporary, or lack clear career progression pathways. This limits young people’s ability to accumulate stable work experience and transition into long-term employment.

At the local level, Niš functions as a regional economic centre, attracting workers and job seekers from surrounding municipalities. However, this concentration of opportunities does not automatically translate into inclusive access. Young people from smaller or rural areas often face barriers such as transport costs, lack of networks, and limited information about opportunities, which reduces their effective participation in the labour market.

Overall, the employment landscape indicates that the main challenge is not only job availability, but also access, readiness, and transition mechanisms for young people. This reinforces the need for targeted interventions that combine skills development, employer exposure, and structured support in the transition from inactivity to employment.

3.3.2. Trainees

In Serbia, the development and legal framework for apprenticeships have been evolving in line with efforts to align with European standards, yet it remains characterised by a dual regulatory structure. Under the Law on Secondary Education, apprenticeships are defined as professional practice undertaken during schooling and form a mandatory component of three- and four-year vocational programmes, as well as certain higher education fields such as healthcare, law and social work. Their implementation, including contractual and logistical arrangements, is largely left to the institutions themselves. In parallel, Article 201 of the Employment Act regulates vocational training and internships outside the formal education system, enabling contracts for traineeships, professional exams and specialisations when required by law. At the policy level, the National Employment Service (NES) plays a central role through programmes that can finance up to twelve months of vocational training, covering financial assistance, transport costs and insurance against workplace injuries; however, funds are paid directly to participants rather than employers. Additional NES traineeship schemes target unemployed graduates and secondary school leavers, particularly young people, persons with disabilities, Roma, and those with foster-care backgrounds, though participation is limited to specific eligibility criteria and timeframes. Despite these frameworks, apprentices do not receive wages and social security coverage is restricted to accident insurance expected to be provided by schools or HEIs, reflecting a wider absence of comprehensive social protection. Quality control mechanisms exist primarily when apprenticeships are embedded within accredited study programmes, governed by bylaws that require students to keep signed diaries of daily activities, later validated by teachers or mentors. Yet, Serbia still lacks a top-level quality assurance system for apprenticeships and traineeships, and social partners continue to call for reform. A working group has proposed changes, and a Draft Law on Traineeships has been under public debate since 2021. Alongside these structural developments, several initiatives aim to promote apprenticeships, including UNICEF Serbia's programme "Improving the Employability of Youth through Traineeships", which combines online training via the I Choose Success platform with placements across diverse sectors. Recognition of learning acquired through apprenticeships is uneven: while HEIs can award ECTS for mandatory practice and VET mobility activities may use ECVET, the system is not formally adopted in national legislation. More broadly, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) provides a reference structure for classifying qualifications and has, since 2019, formally recognised youth work as an occupation. Funding for traineeships largely stems from active labour market policies implemented by the NES and supported through the National Employment Action Plan, which allocates substantial annual resources at both national and municipal levels. Within this context, regional developments, such as the expansion of dual education in Southern & Eastern Serbia and the pronounced collaboration between firms and

educational institutions in the Nišava District, reflect broader national efforts, though they continue to face challenges including limited employer incentives, the absence of standardised wage structures, and fragmented quality assurance.

3.3.3. Unemployment

TABLE 6
Main unemployment data

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Unemployed persons (total, 15 - 74 years old, less than primary, primary and lower secondary education)	205,000	63,250
Unemployed persons (females, 15 - 74 years old, less than primary, primary and lower secondary education)	92,250	29,727
Unemployed persons (total, 15 - 74 years old, all ISCED 2011 level)	488,800	126,500
Unemployed persons (females, 15 - 74 years old, all ISCED 2011 level)	265,200	73,190

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

Despite improvements in overall labour market indicators, unemployment in Serbia continues to disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, particularly young people and those with lower levels of education. At the national level, approximately 488,800 persons aged 15–74 are unemployed, with around 126,500 in the selected NUTS2 region, indicating a significant regional concentration of labour market challenges.

Unemployment is especially pronounced among individuals with lower educational attainment. Among those with less than primary, primary, or lower secondary education, approximately 205,000 individuals are unemployed nationally, with 63,250 in the region. This highlights the strong link between education, skills, and labour market participation.

Youth unemployment remains structurally high compared to the general population. According to Labour Force Survey data, the youth unemployment rate (15–24) is significantly higher than overall unemployment, reaching around 23% nationally and nearly 30% in Southern and Eastern Serbia. This indicates persistent difficulties in school-to-work transition and limited availability of entry-level opportunities.

In addition, the NEET rate (young people not in employment, education or training) reaches approximately 12.9% nationally and 19.4% in Southern and Eastern Serbia. This points to a substantial group of young people who are not only unemployed but also disconnected from formal support systems, making re-engagement more complex.

At the local level, administrative data further illustrates the scale of the challenge. In Nišavska district, nearly 25,000 individuals were registered as unemployed in 2025, with a large share concentrated in the city of Niš. This confirms that even in regional centres, unemployment remains a structural issue.

Beyond quantitative indicators, unemployment in Serbia is also characterised by qualitative challenges. Many unemployed young people face low confidence, lack of work experience, and weak connections to employers. At the same time, employers report difficulties in finding candidates with adequate skills and work readiness, indicating a mismatch between labour supply and demand.

Overall, unemployment in the pilot region reflects a combination of structural economic constraints, skills mismatches, and weak transition mechanisms. Addressing these challenges requires not only job creation, but also targeted support that reconnects young people with employment pathways through training, mentoring, and cooperation between local stakeholders.

3.4. Education system

3.4.1. Participation in education and training

TABLE 8
Main enrolment data

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Pupils enrolled in upper secondary education, total	240834	69984

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

Participation in upper secondary education in Serbia remains relatively stable, with approximately 240,834 pupils enrolled at national level and around 69,984 in the Southern and Eastern Serbia region. These figures reflect the continued importance of upper secondary education as the primary pathway for young people before entering the labour market or progressing to tertiary education.

The structure of upper secondary education in Serbia is characterised by a dual system consisting of general (gymnasium) and vocational education and training (VET). VET programmes play a significant role, particularly in regions outside major urban centres, as they are more directly linked to local labour market needs. However, the effectiveness of these programmes varies depending on the strength of cooperation between schools and employers.

Regional disparities are clearly visible. In Southern and Eastern Serbia, participation patterns mirror national trends but are shaped by demographic decline, migration, and weaker institutional capacity. While urban centres such as Niš offer a broader range of educational options, including gymnasiums and specialised vocational schools, smaller municipalities face more limited programme availability, teacher shortages, and reduced access to quality educational infrastructure.

Participation in tertiary education remains uneven and is strongly influenced by geographic and socio-economic factors. Young people from the region often migrate to larger university centres, including Belgrade and Novi Sad, which contributes to a “brain drain” effect and reduces the pool of highly educated youth remaining in the local labour market.

Overall, while participation in upper secondary education is relatively high, structural inequalities persist in terms of access, quality, and transition opportunities, particularly in less developed regions. This reinforces the need for interventions that complement formal education with practical skills development and improved links to employment pathways.

3.4.2. Out-of-school rate and early leavers from education and training

TABLE 9
Early School Leaver rate

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Early School Leaver rate	5.7%	5.7%
NEET rate (18-24)	12.6%	18.6%

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

These indicators highlight that, although Serbia performs relatively well compared to some regional peers, early school leaving and NEET rates remain structurally linked to socio-economic conditions and regional disparities. The significantly higher NEET rate in Southern and Eastern Serbia (18.6%) compared to the national average reflects deeper systemic challenges, including limited access to quality education, weaker labour market opportunities, and lower institutional support capacity.

Early school leaving is therefore not only an educational issue but also a **labour market and social inclusion challenge**, as young people who disengage from education face substantially higher risks of long-term inactivity and exclusion.

3.4.3. Access to information and obstacles to participation in education and training

Access to information on education and training in Serbia has improved in recent years, largely due to increased reliance on digital platforms. According to the 2023 survey on the use of information and communication technologies, individuals with higher educational attainment are more inclined to search for information about learning possibilities, and younger age groups are more active in these online searches than older cohorts. The information accessed commonly influences decisions about further education and training. The main sources of information include educational institutions’ websites, online learning platforms and social media channels. However, the effectiveness of these information-seeking behaviours varies within the country, partly due to differences in digital literacy and in access to stable internet connections.

In the Southern & Eastern Serbia NUTS 2 region, access to information broadly reflects national patterns but is affected by regional disparities. While individuals in this region also rely heavily on digital platforms to explore learning opportunities, with younger and more educated people being the most active, limited internet access in rural areas and lower levels of digital literacy reduce the effectiveness of information searches. As a result, although the same information channels are used at national level, the ability to act upon the information is more constrained.

Obstacles to participation in education and training remain significant in Serbia. According to the 2024 Labour Force Survey, 12.9% of individuals aged 15–24 were NEET, indicating ongoing barriers to remaining in or returning to education or training. Early school leaving stood at 6.2% among 18–

24-year-olds, highlighting difficulties in retaining students within the education system. These obstacles stem from factors such as economic constraints, limited access to educational resources and regional differences in infrastructure.

These challenges are notably more pronounced in the Southern & Eastern Serbia NUTS 2 region. In 2024, the NEET rate in this region reached 19.4%, substantially higher than the national average, reflecting a larger share of young people disengaged from both education and employment. Early school leaving was also higher at 8.2%. Contributing factors include limited availability of quality educational institutions, economic hardship and lower digital literacy. These structural constraints intensify the obstacles to participation, even when information about opportunities is accessible.

Overall, while Serbia has made progress in improving access to information on education and training, regional disparities, particularly in the Southern & Eastern Serbia NUTS 2 region, continue to shape both the availability of information and the ability of young people to participate in education and training opportunities.

Interviews conducted with professionals working in youth employment and social inclusion in Serbia, including a Project Manager and the Co-founder and Programme Manager of the NGO ENECA, reveal persistent structural barriers faced by vulnerable young people. Drawing on professional experience ranging from over five to more than twenty years, the interviewees highlighted how poverty, economic insecurity, limited family support, political instability, and inadequate school-based support significantly hinder academic progression. While teachers and support staff are often aware of these challenges, they lack the resources and institutional capacity to respond effectively. As a result, the education system frequently fails to equip vulnerable youth with labour-market-relevant skills, particularly in relation to soft skills, digital competences, and practical work experience. In some cases, dropout-prevention efforts lead to students advancing through the system without acquiring sufficient knowledge or skills, reflecting a broader misalignment between educational programmes and labour market needs, with only limited relevance in areas such as languages or technical training.

3.4.4. Education and training outcomes

TABLE 10
Youth employment and unemployment rate

	Country level	NUTS2 level
Youth unemployment rate (15–24)	22.72%	25.0%
NEET rate	12.4%	12.4%
Youth employment rate	23.9%	20.6%

Source: Eurostat. 2024 data or the latest available.

Education and training outcomes in Serbia reflect a strong connection between educational attainment and labour market participation, but also reveal persistent structural inequalities. At the national level, the youth unemployment rate (15–24) stands at approximately 22.7%, while the youth employment rate remains relatively low at around 23.9%. These figures indicate that completing education does not automatically ensure successful transition into employment.

Regional disparities further intensify these challenges. In Southern and Eastern Serbia, youth unemployment is higher (around 25%), while the youth employment rate is lower (approximately 20.6%), confirming weaker labour market absorption capacity in the region. This suggests that young people in the region face additional barriers when attempting to transition from education to employment.

The relationship between education level and labour market outcomes is particularly significant. Young people with lower levels of education are more likely to be unemployed or inactive, while those with upper secondary or tertiary education have better employment prospects. However, even among more educated youth, transition challenges persist due to skills mismatches, limited work experience, and insufficient exposure to real working environments.

The relatively high NEET rate further highlights gaps in the transition system. While national NEET levels remain moderate, regional disparities indicate that a substantial share of young people are neither continuing education nor entering employment. This points to weaknesses in guidance systems, limited coordination between education providers and employers, and insufficient support mechanisms during transition phases.

Qualitative evidence from stakeholder interviews reinforces these findings. Practitioners highlight that the education system often fails to equip vulnerable young people with practical skills, confidence, and labour-market-relevant competences. In particular, gaps in soft skills, digital literacy, and real work exposure reduce young people's ability to navigate employment opportunities effectively.

Overall, education outcomes in Serbia demonstrate that the main challenge is not only educational attainment, but the effectiveness of transition pathways from education to employment. Strengthening these pathways requires closer cooperation between education institutions, employers, and support services, as well as targeted interventions that build both skills and confidence among young people.

3.4.5. Adult learning

Adult learning in Serbia is measured through several indicators, including participation rates in education and training during the last four weeks, disaggregated by type, sex and age, educational attainment level, and labour status. Additional indicators include the distribution of participation in formal education and training by programme, sex and age, participation rates by NUTS 2 region, as well as participation rates by sex, age, educational attainment level, labour status, and degree of urbanisation.

At the national level, Serbia's participation in adult education and training remains below the EU average. According to Eurostat data, participation in education and training during the last four weeks indicates that a significant portion of the adult population engages in formal and non-formal learning activities; however, this rate is notably lower than the EU average, reflecting persistent challenges in lifelong learning engagement. In Southern and Eastern Serbia, participation rates are even lower, with adults aged 25–64 recording a rate of approximately 8.5 per cent, below the national average. The Nišava District reflects similar challenges in adult learning participation. Although specific district-level data are limited, its economic and infrastructural characteristics suggest that participation rates are likely below the regional average.

3.5. Health, poverty and social exclusion

3.5.1. Health issues

Health issues in Serbia display clear socio-economic and demographic patterns, as shown across several indicators, including self-perceived health by sex, age, labour status and educational attainment; functional limitations; and absence from work due to personal health problems. At the national level, older individuals, women and those with lower levels of education tend to report poorer self-perceived health, while unemployed persons and those outside the labour force also assess their health less favourably than the employed. Functional limitations, covering difficulties in carrying out everyday activities, are likewise more common among older adults and individuals with lower educational attainment, often linked to chronic conditions that affect quality of life and participation in the labour market. Absenteeism due to personal health problems follows similar patterns: women, older workers and those with lower education levels are more frequently absent from work, underlining the need for targeted health interventions and workplace support. In the Southern and Eastern Serbia NUTS 2 region, these trends are even more pronounced, as higher unemployment, lower educational attainment and more limited access to healthcare services contribute to poorer health perceptions and greater functional limitations. Economic constraints in the region also reduce access to preventive and rehabilitative care, which further deepens disparities. The Nišava District reflects these regional challenges: despite Niš being an important urban centre, the district continues to experience higher rates of chronic disease, limited healthcare infrastructure in rural areas and socio-economic inequalities that contribute to poorer health outcomes. Nevertheless, the district benefits from ongoing initiatives aimed at strengthening the healthcare system and addressing these persistent disparities.

3.5.2. Disability - Access to education and training

Access to education and training for individuals with disabilities in Serbia is shaped by persistent disparities across educational attainment, participation rates, and labour market transitions. National data show that people with disabilities generally achieve lower levels of education than those without disabilities, with particularly marked differences across age groups and between sexes. These gaps illustrate the need for more targeted educational policies and support systems. Participation in education and training (over the last four weeks) is also significantly lower among individuals with disabilities, especially among older adults and women, reflecting ongoing barriers such as limited physical accessibility, insufficient tailored programmes and enduring societal attitudes towards disability. Early school leaving is more prevalent among students with disabilities, particularly males and older learners, pointing to systemic challenges including inadequate accommodations, lack of individualised support and stigma. In the Southern and Eastern Serbia region, these challenges are compounded by economic underdevelopment and limited infrastructure, which lead to even lower educational attainment and participation rates among people with disabilities. The scarcity of specialised programmes and trained personnel further restricts opportunities for inclusive education. The Nišava District mirrors these regional disparities: although the city of Niš provides comparatively better educational facilities, individuals with disabilities still encounter significant obstacles, including physical barriers, limited specialised

provision and negative societal perceptions. Rural areas face even greater difficulties, with restricted access to inclusive education and training. These patterns across Serbia, the Southern and Eastern Serbia region and the Nišava District underscore the continued need for targeted, multi-level interventions to improve accessibility, participation and educational outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

3.5.3. Disability - Access to the labour market

Access to the labour market for individuals with disabilities in Serbia is marked by persistent inequalities, as reflected in indicators such as the disability employment gap, occupational distribution, professional status, unemployment rates and activity levels. Nationally, people with disabilities experience a substantial employment gap compared to those without disabilities, a disparity that is particularly pronounced among individuals with severe activity limitations and varies between men and women. Employment rates for persons with disabilities remain significantly lower, reflecting systemic barriers, employer discrimination and limited workplace accommodations. Those who are employed tend to be concentrated in lower-skilled occupations, owing largely to restricted access to education, vocational training and supportive employment services. Furthermore, persons with disabilities are more likely to work in informal or part-time positions, underscoring the difficulties in securing stable, full-time employment. In the Southern and Eastern Serbia region, these challenges are exacerbated by higher overall unemployment, limited infrastructure and fewer job opportunities. Lower educational attainment levels in the region further restrict the labour market prospects of individuals with disabilities, reinforcing their marginalisation. The Nišava District reflects these regional patterns: although the city of Niš offers comparatively more employment possibilities, individuals with disabilities continue to face significant barriers, including inaccessible workplaces, insufficient support services and entrenched discriminatory attitudes. In rural parts of the district, infrastructural shortcomings and limited access to inclusive education and vocational training intensify these challenges. Collectively, these issues highlight the continuing structural obstacles that hinder equal labour market participation for individuals with disabilities across Serbia, its Southern and Eastern region and the Nišava District.

3.5.4. Risk of poverty

Risk of poverty and social exclusion in Serbia varies significantly across demographic groups, regions and socio-economic characteristics, as reflected in indicators such as age, sex, educational attainment, household composition, activity status, tenure status and degree of urbanisation. Nationally, older adults and women face a heightened risk of poverty or social exclusion, often linked to lower income levels, reduced labour market participation and limited access to social services. Educational attainment also plays a critical role, with individuals who have lower levels of education experiencing higher risk. Urban areas generally report lower poverty rates than rural regions, largely due to better access to employment, education and healthcare, while rural areas continue to struggle with limited infrastructure and fewer economic opportunities. These disparities become sharper in the Southern and Eastern Serbia NUTS 2 region, where economic underdevelopment, lower levels of industrialisation and fewer job opportunities contribute to consistently higher poverty and social exclusion rates. The region's lower educational attainment

and higher proportions of elderly people and single-parent households further increase vulnerability. The Nišava District reflects these regional patterns: although Niš city provides relatively more employment possibilities, surrounding rural areas face substantially higher poverty risks due to restricted economic activity, limited infrastructure and inadequate access to quality education and vocational training. Overall, the interplay of labour market status, work intensity, educational attainment and regional development levels shapes the likelihood of experiencing poverty or social exclusion across Serbia and its Southern and Eastern regions, including the Nišava District.

Interviews with the selected professionals indicate that socio-economic barriers and employment opportunities for young people in Serbia are unevenly distributed across regions. While Belgrade offers comparatively broader access to employment, many other areas face limited labour market prospects. Available jobs are largely concentrated in vocational trades linked to manufacturing and in technical or IT-related sectors, leaving few opportunities in other fields. Young people from rural or underdeveloped regions encounter additional obstacles, including inadequate infrastructure, limited transport options, and restricted access to employment centres.

3.5.5. Housing cost overburden rate

The housing cost overburden rate measures the share of the population spending more than 40% of their disposable income on housing, and is assessed across indicators such as age, sex, poverty status, income quintile, tenure status, degree of urbanisation, household type and NUTS 2 region. While specific national figures for Serbia are not detailed in the available sources, the general picture indicates that housing affordability is shaped by broader structural factors, including average income levels, the availability and condition of housing, and ongoing urbanisation trends. These elements collectively influence the extent to which individuals and households may become overburdened by housing costs across the country.

3.5.6. Material and social deprivation

Material and social deprivation is monitored across a range of indicators, including age, sex, activity status, educational attainment, degree of urbanisation and NUTS 2 region, as well as the number of deprivation items and the mean number of items among deprived individuals. Although specific data for South and Southeastern Serbia are not available, regional disparities tend to follow national patterns, with urban areas generally experiencing lower levels of deprivation due to better access to services, employment opportunities and infrastructure. The Nišava District reflects these dynamics: while Niš, as a major urban centre, benefits from stronger access to education, healthcare and labour market opportunities, the surrounding rural areas face higher risks of material and social deprivation. This urban advantage contributes to comparatively lower deprivation levels within the city of Niš, whereas rural parts of the district continue to experience more pronounced deprivation consistent with broader regional trends.

3.6. Digital economy and society

3.6.1. Personal and household access

Personal and household access to the internet in Serbia shows relatively high levels of connectivity. According to Eurostat data, 88.8% of households in Serbia had internet access in 2023, indicating that most individuals can engage in digital activities. Broadband availability is similarly widespread, with 89.8% of households connected via broadband, reflecting continued improvements in digital infrastructure and the growing availability of high-speed services. Although specific data for the Southern and Eastern Serbia region are not provided, regional patterns generally mirror national trends, with urban areas benefiting from stronger infrastructure and therefore higher levels of connectivity, while rural areas face more persistent challenges such as limited broadband availability and lower digital literacy. The Nišava District reflects this divide: the city of Niš enjoys relatively well-developed internet infrastructure and higher broadband penetration rates, but rural municipalities continue to experience slower connections and less reliable access, which can hinder digital inclusion despite strong connectivity in the urban centre.

3.6.2. Information society

In terms of the information society, specific data on the use of the internet in education in Serbia are not available, limiting insight into how digital tools are integrated into learning environments. However, available evidence on digital technology adoption shows that Serbia is gradually incorporating more advanced digital systems into everyday life. In 2024, 4.38% of individuals used an internet-connected home energy management system, such as smart thermostats or utility meters, indicating a growing—though still modest—uptake of Internet of Things (IoT) devices in households. Although no figures are provided for the South and Southeastern Serbia NUTS 2 region, regional disparities in internet access and digital literacy suggest that adoption of online education tools and IoT devices may be lower in rural or economically disadvantaged areas. Data are also not specified for the Nišava District, but urban centres like Niš are likely to exhibit higher levels of adoption compared to surrounding rural municipalities, reflecting stronger infrastructure and higher digital competence among the urban population.

3.6.3. Digital economy

The development of the digital economy and society in Serbia is closely tied to levels of internet access, digital infrastructure and the extent to which pre-existing social and regional inequalities are replicated online. Nationally, internet connectivity is high: in 2023, 88.8% of households in Serbia had internet access, and 89.8% were connected via broadband. These figures reflect substantial infrastructure improvements and increasingly widespread availability of high-speed internet, suggesting that most households have the potential to participate in digital life. However, while this connectivity forms the basis for digital inclusion, it does not automatically eliminate disparities in digital access or skills.

Regional differences remain visible. Although specific data for Southern and Eastern Serbia are not provided, patterns typically mirror broader national trends in which urban areas enjoy stronger

infrastructure and higher-quality connections, while rural areas face more barriers, including slower broadband speeds, connectivity gaps and lower digital literacy. These disparities can limit the ability of vulnerable groups—particularly youth from disadvantaged backgrounds—to fully engage in online education, digital services or remote work. The Nišava District reflects these regional contrasts. While the city of Niš benefits from better-developed internet infrastructure and consequently higher broadband penetration, rural parts of the district continue to experience slower and less reliable connections, potentially reinforcing existing socio-economic inequalities in digital participation.

In terms of information society indicators, Serbia lacks specific data on the use of the internet in education. However, the available evidence on digital technology adoption suggests a gradual shift towards greater integration of digital tools in everyday life. In 2024, 4.38% of individuals used internet-connected home energy management systems, such as smart thermostats or utility meters, indicating growing albeit still limited uptake of Internet of Things (IoT) technologies. Regional disparities likely affect the extent to which such technologies are used in South and Southeastern Serbia, particularly in relation to digital literacy and infrastructure. Similarly, while no figures are available for the Nišava District, urban centres like Niš are likely to show higher adoption rates compared to surrounding rural areas.

Regarding the wider digital economy, such as online purchases, the use of computers and internet by employees, and e-commerce activity, no specific data were provided for Serbia or its regions. Nonetheless, the interplay of national connectivity trends and regional disparities suggests that digital economic participation may be easier for individuals in more urbanised and better-connected areas, while vulnerable youth in rural or economically disadvantaged regions risk being excluded from the opportunities offered by digital platforms, online learning and e-commerce.

Overall, while Serbia has made significant progress in expanding digital infrastructure, inequalities in internet access, digital literacy and technology adoption demonstrate that existing “real-life” disparities are indeed replicated in the digital world. Vulnerable youth, particularly those in rural or economically disadvantaged areas of Southern and Eastern Serbia and the Nišava District, continue to face barriers to full digital inclusion, underlining the need for targeted interventions to bridge these gaps.

3.6.4. Personal digital skills

Personal digital skills in Serbia reveal a persistent digital divide, as shown through indicators on digital illiteracy and computer skills. Nationally, around 52.5% of individuals aged 16–74 possess at least basic digital skills, according to Eurostat, meaning that approximately 47.5% lack such skills. This remains below the EU average and highlights substantial inequalities across demographic groups: older adults, rural populations and individuals with lower educational attainment are disproportionately represented among the digitally illiterate. Data from the 2022 RZS Census reinforce this picture, showing that only about 45.73% of the population aged 15 and over is computer literate, defined as being able to perform basic computer tasks. In the South and Southeastern Serbia NUTS 2 region, digital illiteracy rates are even higher, reflecting the region’s older age structure, larger rural population, lower income levels and more limited access to fast internet infrastructure compared with areas such as Belgrade or Vojvodina. The Nišava District

presents a more nuanced picture: Niš city, as a university and ICT hub, has a young and digitally skilled urban population, significantly improving the district's average computer literacy. Students and ICT professionals contribute to stronger digital competence levels within the urban core. However, rural municipalities within the district still experience high levels of digital exclusion due to age, socio-economic disadvantage and limited infrastructure, resulting in an internal digital divide that is even more pronounced than the national one.

4. Solutions

4.1 Strategic goals

Reduce youth unemployment and inactivity

Address persistently high youth unemployment and NEET rates in Nišava District by improving transition pathways from education to employment, including work-based learning and targeted activation measures.

Strengthen education-to-employment pathways

Improve retention and transition outcomes by strengthening vocational education, career guidance, and practical exposure to the labour market, particularly for vulnerable youth and those in rural areas.

Promote local economic inclusion and employability

Enhance young people's employability in existing local economic sectors by strengthening transversal skills, digital competences, and access to entry-level opportunities, rather than focusing solely on structural economic transformation.

Improve psychosocial resilience of vulnerable youth

Integrate mental health and confidence-building support into employability measures, recognising their role in activation and sustained participation.

Reduce regional inequalities

Address structural barriers affecting rural municipalities, including access to services, transport, and information, to ensure more equitable participation.

Strengthen intersectoral cooperation

Improve coordination between employment services, education providers, municipalities, CSOs, and employers through structured local mechanisms.

4.2. Proposed intervention (where it's applicable)

Establishment of local coordination mechanisms (LCI-type approach)

Create a structured cooperation platform in Niš linking employment services (NES), CSOs (including ENECA), municipalities, and employers to coordinate outreach, training, and transition support.

Targeted youth activation and guidance support

Provide structured guidance combining career counselling, skills assessment, and referral pathways, particularly for NEET youth and those outside formal systems.

Work-based learning and employer engagement

Facilitate short-term placements, company visits, and mentoring opportunities with local SMEs and institutions, building on existing schemes such as “My First Salary”.

Delivery of modular employability training

Implement short, practice-oriented training programmes (e.g. TEAME-based approach) focusing on soft skills, communication, teamwork, and basic digital competences.

Integrated psychosocial support within employability services

Embed confidence-building, mentoring, and basic psychosocial support into training and guidance activities to address non-technical barriers to participation.

Outreach to vulnerable and rural youth

Use decentralised and mobile outreach approaches in cooperation with local actors to reach young people with limited access to services.

The findings from consultations with local stakeholders and professionals confirm the need for more inclusive, civil-society-led employment support targeting vulnerable young people, particularly in underdeveloped and rural areas of the Nišava region. Stakeholders emphasise the importance of trust-based engagement, continuous guidance, and structured support pathways tailored to individual needs. They also highlight the necessity of stronger cooperation between educational institutions, employers, civil society organisations and public actors, particularly to support work-based learning and smoother transitions into employment. These findings reinforce the positioning of the Serbian pilot as a civil-society-oriented model centred on coordination, responsiveness, and participant-focused support.

5. Conclusions

This analysis of Nišava District within the broader Serbian context highlights a combination of structural demographic, economic, and social challenges that shape youth vulnerability in the region. Population decline, ageing, and sustained youth outmigration reduce the local labour force and limit long-term development potential. At the same time, the regional economy—characterised by lower GDP per capita and a predominance of small-scale activities—offers limited high-quality employment opportunities, particularly for young people.

Labour market indicators confirm persistent barriers to youth integration, including high unemployment, elevated NEET rates, and weak transition pathways from education to employment. While participation in education remains relatively stable, significant gaps persist in terms of quality, accessibility, and alignment with labour market needs, especially in rural areas. These challenges are further compounded by socio-economic vulnerabilities, health disparities, and a digital divide that disproportionately affects young people outside urban centres.

Overall, the findings point to a systemic issue: the lack of effective coordination between education, employment services, local authorities, and employers, combined with insufficient support for vulnerable youth during key transition phases. While young people often demonstrate motivation and willingness to engage, structural barriers continue to limit their opportunities.

In this context, targeted and integrated interventions are essential. The proposed approach within the COOPOWER project—based on a civil-society-oriented model that combines local coordination (LCI), skills development, employer engagement, and structured transition support—responds directly to these identified gaps. Its focus on trust-based engagement, participant-centred pathways, and intersectoral cooperation makes it particularly relevant for addressing the complex and multi-dimensional challenges faced by vulnerable youth in Nišava District.

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