

Statement on the UPR Pre-session on the Republic of Serbia
5 April 2023, Geneva
Delivered by: UPR YOUTH COALITION

I Introduction

This statement is delivered on behalf of twelve Serbian CSOs, i.e., youth associations, youth organizations and organizations for youth, youth professional networks, and informal youth groups (from now on UPR YOUTH COALITION SERBIA). The Report is based on the findings of projects and activities monitoring and reporting on youth rights and needs.

First of all, I would like to bring to your attention that **this is the FIRST TIME EVER** that the position of young people from Serbia is presented in the UPR mechanism. Only one of the recommendations made by Moldova to the Republic of Serbia, concerning the adoption of the National Strategy for the Prevention of Domestic and Partner Violence Against Women and Girls, could be linked to youth.

In Resolution 35/14: Youth and Human Rights, the Human Rights Council urges the Member States to consider addressing issues pertaining to the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights for youth through the Universal Periodic Review.

II Plan of the Statement:

This statement addresses the following issues: (1) Youth Rights to work, (2) Meaningful Participation in the Decision-Making processes, and (3) Youth's right to health and access to healthcare.

ISSUE 1: Youth Rights to work

SITUATION: Every second young person in Serbia wants to leave the country, mainly due to their difficulty in finding stable employment that respects their labor rights. The 2021–2026 Employment Strategy and its 2021–2023 Action Plan recognize youth as hard-to-employ persons. Young people in Serbia find it difficult to employ, and even when they do, their jobs are unstable and they do not exercise their labor rights, making them vulnerable to exploitation. Most jobs held by youth are insecure, making them unlikely to qualify for unemployment benefits if they lose their job, since the right to unemployment benefits may be exercised by workers who have employment contracts without interruption for at least a year. Besides that, the abuse of work of those youth who are engaged via student and youth cooperatives is not addressed at all, and many young people who have participated in traineeship programs report that they did not sign a contract and received any wage for their work. Young people deserve fair and stable employment with the right to a contract and full labor protections.

Therefore, we recommend that the Serbian government must:

- **Redesign all the existing active employment policy programs within the next 12**

months to ensure that youth beneficiaries can exercise their right to just conditions of work, including equal pay for work of equal value, full social insurance, and the right to join a trade union.

ISSUE 2: Meaningful Participation in the Decision-Making Processes

SITUATION: Young people in Serbia do not trust institutions and do not believe that their voice is heard. Over **77%** of young people do not trust any politician, **71.9%** think that the elections are not fair and free, and as many as **78.8%** of young people believe that it does not influence decision-making processes. The civil sector has been advocating for years to encourage young people to participate in decision-making processes. However, a major obstacle is an insufficient budget allocated to the sector of youth. Additionally, the project method of financing civil sector organizations defined by the Rulebook of Strategy for Youth, which lasts from 3 to 6 months, hinders the development potential of programs, does not encourage the sustainability of results, and represents only occasional and temporary action in the field of youth policy and work with young people. Also, in order to educate youth about political participation, it is necessary that they are met with civic education from their high school years, as a compulsory subject in high schools.

Recommendations:

- **Implementation of the program for financing youth organizations through changes in the Law on Youth and Rulebook on financing and co-financing programs and projects of public interest in the youth sector until the end of 2024.**
- **Establish continuous youth participation and civic education in schools and universities during the 4th Cycle.**

ISSUE 3: Youth's right to health and access to healthcare

Serbia still has only five mental health centers, although the 2019–2026 National Mental Health Protection Program Action Plan provided for the opening of another five centers in 2020. The existing network of psychosocial support for young people is not enough to cover their needs, and many young people cannot afford private counseling. The insufficient availability of experts in the field of mental health protection and improvement is one of the most pressing issues, especially in smaller communities. In addition, Serbia still lacks a law on psychotherapy clearly defining who may work as a psychotherapist and under which conditions. Serbia also lacks a nationwide register of community psychosocial support service providers for youth, which would facilitate their access to reliable information on providers of such services.

With all the above being said, we recommend that the Republic of Serbia needs to:

- **Take urgent measures to expand the community support network by opening youth centers offering free counseling;**
- **Establish a nationwide register of psychosocial support service providers within the next 12 months;**
- **Amend school curricula within the next school year, so they must include programs equipping children and youth with techniques for maintaining and improving mental health, as noted in the National Mental Health Protection Program.**