

**Republic of Serbia**

**GOVERNMENT**

**OFFICE FOR HUMAN AND MINORITY RIGHTS**

**Comments of the Republic of Serbia on the proposal of the concept of General comment on the Rights of children in relation to the digital environment**

Preventing and combating violence against children is one of the priorities of the Government of the Republic of Serbia. Policies in the areas of child rights are coordinated by the Government's Children's Rights Council. In addition to the members of the republic and local authorities and institutions, the children and civil society organizations are included in the work of this Council in improving the position of children

Also, in our country since 2017, the Inter-Ministerial Operational Team for the Protection of Children from Violence has been functioning. The goal of forming this team is better coordination and co-operatation of the actors that is the key to protecting children from violence. In 2018 the team issued an Instruction on the conduct of the institutions of upbringing and education and the guardianship or welfare centers in the event of suspicion or established violence against children.

Growing up of children in a safe and incentive environment in which the child's right to protection against all forms of violence, including digital violence, is fully respected is one of the main goals of the General Protocol for the Protection of Children against Violence.

Currently, a new General Protocol for the Protection of Children against Violence is being drafted, as well as a new Strategy for the Prevention and Protection of Children against Violence. The strategy is in line with international and regional human rights treaties, as well as the Sustainable Development Objectives of the UN Agenda 2030. Within the consultative process of drafting the Strategy, the opinions of children, young people and civil society organizations have been included. The children suggested that adults consult them more often for opinion, that children in schools are more educated, and that education is raised to a higher level. They also highlighted teh significance of peer education and emphasized the need to hear the voice of children with disabilities, who are at increased risk of being victims of violence.

The Draft Law on the Rights of the Child and the Child Rights Protector is underway. Through the Institution of the Protector of the Rights of the Child, we want to achieve more effective protection of children's rights and to provide greater influence of children's opinion on representatives of parliamentary and executive bodies in the decision-making process regarding the rights of the child.

In the system of social protection in the Republic of Serbia, there is a lack of a centralized database of cases of discrimination and violence against children, which would enable simple, reliable access to data, to analyze the situation and to monitor and take the necessary measures. Each of the departments, institutions (health, education, social protection, internal affairs, judges, prosecutors, independent state bodies, etc.) keeps a record of data in this area, but the data are not consolidated into a single database.

Since 2017, the Republic Institute for Social Protection, with the support of UNICEF, has been working on the development of indicators for monitoring domestic violence and violence in intimate partner relationships, that is, for the implementation of the software application of the Lanzarot Committee. The application will be adapted to the specifics of the domestic normative framework and social protection system. In the Republic Institute for Social Protection the programme has also been accredited "Improving the capacity of professional social protection workers to protect children from violence and abuse through the Internet", which is intended for all professionals working in the social protection system, working directly on the protection of children and their rights.

In the Republic of Serbia, over 3,108,000 persons used a computer every day or almost every day in 2018. The internet usage rate is 73.4 percent. The use of computer technologies in education provides access to domestic and international teaching services, making it easier for children and young people to work to fully realize their personal and professional potentials. However, the availability of digital technologies also increases the risk of discrimination, bearing in mind that this type of technological solution is not available to everyone equally, so it is necessary to work on measures that prevent discrimination. With the increasing use of digital solutions, challenges continuously arise with the problems of modern addiction that include interenet addiction. We believe that for these reasons it is necessary, in addition to promoting digital literacy, to actively work on the prevention of digital addiction disorder, so that the risks of the digital environment do not prevail over the benefits of using digital technologies.

Research on the exposure of children to violence in the digital space is relatively new and small in the Republic of Serbia. The first systemic survey was conducted in 2012 and according to the findings of this research, 62 percent of elementary school students and 84 percent of secondary schools had been exposed to at least one risky situation on the Internet in a year. The results of this research have shown that almost 90 percent of children aged 10-15 years use ICT and Internet access on a daily basis, mostly from their mobile phone since the age of nine. Most are willing to leave their personal information on the Internet, including their address, and every fourth girl will go to meet a person with whom she is a "friend" on social networks. Every third elementary school student was a victim of electronic violence. It is alarming that only 12 percent of secondary school students who use the Internet are aware of potential risks, that every fourth parent does not know what the child is doing while spending time on computer, and that 65 percent of teachers do not know how to recognize and react in case of electronic violence against children. According to research findings from 2016, 64 percent of parents / guardians stated that their children, aged 8-17 had had disturbing experiences on the Internet.

In July 2016, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the Regulation On Children Safety and Protection In the Use of Information and Communication Technologies.[[1]](#footnote-1) The regulation provides for preventive measures for protection and safety on the Internet, which should be implemented through: informing and educating children, parents and teachers, and establishing a unique place for providing advice and receiving applications regarding the safety of children on the Internet (call center).

In accordance with the Regulation, in 2017, the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications established the National Contact Center for Child Safety on the Internet. Since the establishment of the Center, a total of 4,319 telephone calls, e-mails, site-based and social networking applications have been generated that are related to harmful, inappropriate, illegal content and behavior on the Internet, that is, the vulnerability and rights of children. The Center's operators have so far held a presentation on the topic of safety for 150 employees in 27 health centers; 4900 children and 2000 parents in 50 primary schools.

Since 2016, the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications has been implementing an IT caravan every year, an educational campaign to promote the useful, creative and safe use of information technologies. School presentations in 104 schools were attended by 10,900 pupils and 3,700 parents, while thousands of citizens saw the promotion of the project on the city squares. Implementation of the fourth in a row of IT caravans is in progress.

In order to spread awareness on the topic of developing information society and the safety of children on the Internet, as well as the availability of information on children's safety on the Internet, the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications has in the past reached agreements with international and non-governmental organizations on joint cooperation in this area (UNICEF, Save the Children, UNITES, Red Cross of the Republic of Serbia, Institute of Social Sciences, Foundation Tijana Jurić).

The Ministry of Education has developed a manual "Digital Violence-Prevention and Response"[[2]](#footnote-2). The manual also contains a series of examples of good practice that make up one of the models of the programme of prevention of digital violence, among which is the prevention of cyber violence. Within the catalogue of accredited training sessions of vocational training, training related to digital violence is envisaged.[[3]](#footnote-3) In addition, active cooperation with the Call Center for Reporting of Digital Violence of the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications was realized; SOS line for reporting violence in educational institutions actively works; the process of familiarizing students, parents, teachers with the existence of SOS lines of other systems and certain civil society organizations in order to stop violence (family, digital, human trafficking) is continuously being carried out.

Concerning discrimination on the Internet, the Ministry in charge of social protection in cooperation with the German development agency GIZ is preparing short anti-discrimination videos directed at children, which will be shown on the YouTube channel. It is also planned to produce computer games on the topic of discrimination, stereotypes, prejudices, gender equality, hate speech. In the second half of 2019 the government will launch an online campaign to prevent discrimination against Roma population.

Since 2010, the Ministry of the Interior, in cooperation with the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, has been conducting a continuous operational action to suppress the sexual exploitation of minors with pornographic purposes through the Internet called "Armageddon".

In 2016, the Department for the fight against high-tech crime organized training in the fight against criminal offenses of sexual abuse of minors on the Internet, which was attended by 70 police officers from all police administrations in the territory of Serbia, as well as from the Ministry's headquarters. The department established an international contact point 24/7 for high-tech crime within the Council of Europe, as well as contact points within Europol, namely "Twins" (child pornography) and "Cyborg" (cyber crime).

Within the project "Improving the Training of Judicial Authorities in the field of Child Protection against Violence on the Internet", with the support of the organization Save the Children, plans and training programmes for judges and public prosecutors in the field of high-tech crime and protection of minors on the Internet have been developed. Also, within the project, a manual was prepared - A Guide for Judges and Public Prosecutors on the topic of high-tech crime and protection of minors in accordance with the Action Plan for Chapter 24 in the process of accession of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union.

1. ''The Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia’’, no. 61/16 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/priru%C4%8Dnik-interaktivni.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://katalog2016.zuov.rs> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)