



REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

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Protector of Citizens

Ombudsman

OBSERVATIONS OF THE PROTECTOR OF CITIZENS ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

General information

The Protector of Citizens of the Republic of Serbia (hereinafter: the Protector of Citizens) submits this independent written contribution to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (hereinafter: the Committee) ahead of its 117th session (13 April – 1 May 2026), during which the combined sixth to ninth periodic reports of the Republic of Serbia (CERD/C/SRB/6-9) will be considered.

The Protector of Citizens is an independent institution mandated to protect and promote human and minority rights. Since 2020, the institution has been recognized as the National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) of the Republic of Serbia. In October 2021, the Protector of Citizens was successfully re-accredited with “A” status by the Sub-Committee on Accreditation (SCA) of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), confirming its full compliance with the Paris Principles.

The Protector of Citizens attaches particular importance to its continuous cooperation with the Committee and to monitoring the implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (hereinafter: ICERD). Demonstrating a long-standing commitment to this process, the institution has regularly submitted independent NHRI reports during previous review cycles, including in February 2011 (prior to the initial review of Serbia) and in October 2017 (prior to the consideration of the second to fifth periodic reports).

With regard to the current reporting cycle, the Protector of Citizens actively participated in the preparation of the State party’s report. In January 2020, the institution submitted comprehensive inputs and data to the competent national authorities for the drafting of the State party’s combined sixth to ninth periodic report.

Taking into account the time that has elapsed between the submission of the State party’s report (February 2021) and its review by the Committee (April 2026), the primary objective of this NHRI submission is to provide the Committee with updated and relevant information on the implementation of the ICERD in the Republic of Serbia during the period 2020–2025.

Legislative and institutional framework (Articles 2 and 6 of the ICERD)

This section outlines the legal and institutional framework for the protection against racial discrimination in the Republic of Serbia. It presents the relevant constitutional guarantees, legislation and policy framework, as well as the institutions responsible for the protection of human and minority rights, with particular reference to the role and mandate of the Protector of Citizens.

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia¹ guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on any grounds, including race, nationality, ethnic origin, language and religion. The general legislative framework is provided by the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination², which establishes the principles of equality, defines various forms of discrimination and provides mechanisms for protection and redress. In addition, the Criminal Code³ criminalizes the incitement of national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance, as well as other criminal offences committed with a discriminatory motive.

The protection of minority rights is further regulated by specific legislation, including the Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities⁴ and the Law on National Councils of National Minorities⁵. The legislative framework is complemented by strategic policy documents adopted by the Government, including the Strategy for Prevention and Protection Against Discrimination⁶, which aims to strengthen institutional responses to discrimination, including racism, xenophobia and hate speech.

The Government also adopted the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Roma Women in the Republic of Serbia 2022–2030⁷, which represents the main strategic framework for improving the position of Roma communities. The strategy foresees measures aimed at reducing discrimination and improving access of Roma to education, employment, housing, health care and civil registration, as well as strengthening institutional coordination and monitoring of policies.

Within the institutional system for the protection of human and minority rights, an important role is played by independent oversight bodies. In particular, the Protector of Citizens and the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality contribute to monitoring the implementation of anti-discrimination legislation and addressing violations of the right to equality.

An important institutional development during the reporting period was the adoption of the new Law on the Protector of Citizens in November 2021⁸, which further strengthened the legal framework governing the work of the national human rights institution and clarified a number of its competences. In addition to its general oversight mandate, the Protector of Citizens performs several specialized functions, including the role of the National Preventive Mechanism against torture (hereinafter: NPM), the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings, and the Independent Monitoring Mechanism for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The law also reaffirmed the institution's role as a specialized body for the promotion and protection of the rights of the child.

The Protector of Citizens performs the duties of the National Rapporteur in the field of human trafficking in accordance with the Law on the Protector of Citizens. Pursuant to Article 29, paragraph 4 of the Law on the Ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, the National Rapporteur monitors the activities of state institutions in combating human trafficking and the implementation of relevant national legislation. Its mandate covers all aspects of combating human trafficking, including investigation, prosecution and processing, identification and protection of victims, prevention, partnership, cooperation, and coordination. The Protector of Citizens also

¹ "Official Gazette of RS", Nos. 98/06 and 115/21.

² "Official Gazette of RS", Nos. 22/09 and 52/21.

³ "Official Gazette of RS", Nos. 85/05...and 94/24.

⁴ "Official Journal of the FRY", No. 11/02, "Official Journal of the SM", No. 1/03 - the Constitutional Charter, and "Official Gazette of RS", Nos. 72/09 - other law, 97/13 - CC decision and 47/18.

⁵ "Official Gazette of RS", Nos. 72/2009, 20/2014 - decision of the Constitutional Court, 55/14 and 47/18.

⁶ "Official Gazette of RS", Nos. 12/22 and 14/26.

⁷ "Official Gazette of RS", No. 23/22.

⁸ "Official Gazette of RS", No. 105/21.

participates in international and regional cooperation aimed at strengthening the protection mechanisms for victims of human trafficking.

Through its two published annual reports in this field, the National Rapporteur has identified systemic shortcomings and issued recommendations for improvement, thereby contributing to a stronger institutional response to trafficking in human beings. Further progress was made through the adoption of the Program for Combating Human Trafficking in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2024–2029 and the accompanying Action Plan for 2024–2026. Representatives of the Protector of Citizens also participated in drafting the Draft Law on the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking and the Protection of Victims, as well as other relevant strategic and normative documents. The adoption of the new law is expected to strengthen early identification, access to rights and institutional coordination, which is particularly important for the equal protection of vulnerable groups and for the more consistent implementation of the ICERD.

In accordance with its mandate, the Protector of Citizens pays particular attention to the protection and promotion of the rights of national minorities. Within its internal organizational structure, the institution has a dedicated unit responsible for minority rights, which monitors their exercise, handles complaints submitted by members of national minorities and conducts thematic monitoring in this field. In addition to its headquarters in Belgrade, the institution maintains three local offices in southern Serbia (Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa) in order to improve accessibility for citizens, particularly members of the Albanian and Roma national minorities.

Through its complaints-handling procedures, monitoring activities and thematic reports, the Protector of Citizens regularly addresses issues related to discrimination, the protection of national minorities, the situation of Roma communities and the rights of migrants, asylum seekers and other vulnerable groups. During the reporting period, the institution also monitored the implementation of legislation relevant for access to remedies and the protection of rights, including the Law on Free Legal Aid⁹, highlighting challenges related to the accessibility and uniform application of free legal aid services at the local level.

In 2021, the Protector of Citizens submitted an initiative to amend the Law on Public Order and Peace¹⁰ in order to strengthen protection against harassment, including in the digital space. The issue was revisited in early 2026 during a meeting with the Minister of the Interior, when the Ministry expressed readiness to support the initiative.

Hate speech, hate crimes and xenophobia (Article 4 of the ICERD)

Xenophobia and racist graffiti in public spaces

Manifestations of ethnic distance and xenophobia occasionally appear in the form of offensive and racist graffiti in public spaces. Such incidents illustrate how prejudice and hostility towards particular ethnic groups can materialize in everyday environments and affect the sense of security of minority communities. In its 2023 Annual Report¹¹, the Protector of Citizens highlighted a concerning phenomenon indicating that ethnic distance towards the Roma community remains significant. The institution received a complaint from a member of the Roma community regarding racist graffiti appearing in several locations in the city of Leskovac. The complainant submitted photographic evidence showing that messages

⁹ "Official Gazette of RS", No. 87/18.

¹⁰ "Official Gazette of RS", Nos. 6/66 and 24/18.

¹¹ Report available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/7979/Regular%20Annual%20Report%20of%20the%20Protector%20of%20Citizens%20for%202023.docx>

targeting Roma had been sprayed in multiple public spaces, demonstrating the visibility and spread of such expressions of intolerance.

A similar case occurred in the same year involving the Slovak national minority. The Protector of Citizens received a complaint from the National Council of the Slovak National Minority regarding graffiti in the settlement of Kisač in the city of Novi Sad reading "*princip Ubi Slovaka*" ("principle Kill the Slovak"). Following the complaint, the Protector of Citizens launched an investigation into the City Administration of the City of Novi Sad and the Ministry of Interior. As a result, the City Administration informed the Protector of Citizens that inspection authorities had removed the graffiti. The Ministry of Interior identified the perpetrator, who was a minor, and informed the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad, which qualified the act as the criminal offence of inciting national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance (Article 317, paragraph 1 of the Criminal Code). The case was also referred to the Center for Social Work, which undertook measures within its competence.

The Protector of Citizens considers this case an example of a coordinated response by several institutions once the incident was reported. At the same time, the appearance of such graffiti indicates that manifestations of ethnic hostility remain present in public spaces and require continued vigilance and timely action by competent authorities.

Ethnic distance in schools

Prejudices and ethnic distance are particularly concerning when they appear among younger generations, as they may contribute to the reproduction of discriminatory attitudes within society. Earlier research conducted by the Protector of Citizens illustrates the depth of these challenges.

According to the 2023 Special Report of the Protector of Citizens on Peer Violence and Bullying in Schools¹², negative attitudes towards the Roma national minority were highly visible in the school environment. The research indicated that a considerable number of students, particularly boys, expressed approval of violence against Roma. Furthermore, the findings showed that approximately one quarter of students justified violence against vulnerable and sensitive groups.

The report also highlighted the persistence of stereotypes, including the belief among many students that Roma and other minorities receive unjustified privileges. These findings point to the importance of strengthening educational policies aimed at combating prejudice and promoting tolerance. They also underline the role of the educational system in preventing peer violence motivated by ethnic hatred and in addressing stereotypes affecting minority communities.

Hate speech in the media

Hate speech disseminated through the media represents a particularly concerning form of intolerance because of its potential to reach a wide audience and contribute to the spread of stereotypes and hostility towards minority communities. In this context, the role of regulatory authorities and other competent institutions in responding promptly to such cases is of particular importance.

In its 2025 Annual Report¹³, the Protector of Citizens noted an increase in hate speech directed primarily at members of the Roma community. The institution also observed that existing

¹² Report (in Serbian only) available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/7910/Posebna%20izvestaj%20Zastitnika%20gradjana%20o%20nasilju%20u%20skolama.pdf>

¹³ Report (in Serbian only) available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/8413/%D0%A0%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B>

institutional response mechanisms, particularly those of regulatory bodies responsible for supervising electronic media, are not always sufficiently proactive.

A notable case highlighted by the Protector of Citizens concerned the broadcast of the television programme “Ni pet ni šest” on the national-frequency television channel “Kurir” on 30 October 2025. During the broadcast, insulting, racist and unfounded statements about the Roma community were presented, including rhetoric that targeted the Roma population as a whole. Following this incident, the Protector of Citizens launched an investigation into the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM). During the procedure, the institution established that REM had undertaken certain activities and compiled a report on potential violations only after the oversight investigation had been launched. However, given that the REM Council is responsible for imposing measures on media service providers in accordance with the law, the Protector of Citizens has suspended further action until the formation of that body, after which it will decide on the further course of the proceedings and the possible need to adopt measures within its own competence.

Based on these findings, the Protector of Citizens underlined the importance of timely and proactive action by competent authorities in situations involving potential hate speech in the media. The institution emphasized that delayed reactions by regulatory bodies may weaken the effectiveness of existing mechanisms for preventing the dissemination of discriminatory and harmful content, particularly when such content is broadcast through media outlets with a wide audience.

This case illustrates both the presence of hate speech targeting minority communities in the public media space and the challenges related to the timely and effective institutional response to such incidents.

The situation of the Roma national minority (Articles 3 and 5(e) of the ICERD)

Members of the Roma national minority continue to face significant challenges in the exercise of their rights in the Republic of Serbia. These challenges are particularly visible in areas such as housing, access to basic infrastructure, education, health care and access to civil registration. Through its work on complaints, monitoring activities and field visits, the Protector of Citizens regularly identifies structural problems affecting Roma communities and provides recommendations aimed at improving their position.

The activities of the Protector of Citizens indicate that many Roma continue to live in informal or substandard settlements, often lacking access to basic services such as water, electricity and adequate sanitation. Such living conditions have direct consequences for the enjoyment of other rights, including the right to health, education and social protection. In this regard, the Protector of Citizens has repeatedly emphasized the importance of coordinated action by state authorities and local self-government units in order to improve living conditions and ensure equal access to public services.

The institution also addresses challenges related to discrimination, stereotypes and social exclusion that affect Roma communities. Through oversight procedures, opinions and recommendations addressed to competent authorities, the Protector of Citizens has sought to ensure that public authorities act in accordance with the principles of equality and non-discrimination and take appropriate measures to improve the position of Roma.

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The following sections present selected examples from the activities of the Protector of Citizens illustrating both the systemic challenges faced by Roma communities and the measures undertaken by the institution in order to protect their rights.

Right to adequate housing and living conditions

The Protector of Citizens continuously monitors the realization of the rights of the Roma community, particularly with regard to inadequate housing conditions in informal settlements. According to the findings presented in the institution's activities, a significant number of Roma continue to live in substandard settlements lacking basic infrastructure, which directly affects the exercise of other fundamental rights.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Protector of Citizens paid particular attention to living conditions in Roma settlements. The institution organized urgent meetings with the Minister for Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs and the President of the National Council of the Roma National Minority, and addressed letters to all local self-government units calling on them to provide basic living conditions, including access to drinking water and hygiene packages for residents of Roma settlements.

In order to obtain direct insight into the situation on the ground, the Protector of Citizens conducted field visits to ten Roma settlements in five cities and municipalities (Belgrade/Čukarica, Kovin, Pančevo, Požarevac and Kostolac). The findings of these visits were presented in a Special Report on the Living Conditions in Roma Settlements During the State of Emergency¹⁴. As a concrete result of the institution's intervention with the President of the City Municipality of Čukarica, a water cistern was provided for the Roma settlement "Čukarička šuma".

The Protector of Citizens also played a role in monitoring and mediating relocation processes involving informal settlements. In 2020 and 2021, the institution mediated the relocation of the "Vijadukt" settlement in Resnik and the "Rakovica selo" settlement, which was relocated due to the construction of the international highway E-75. The mediation involved cooperation with the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, the City of Belgrade, and the public enterprise "Koridori Srbije", with the aim of ensuring that the relocation process respected the rights of the residents.

Despite such interventions, serious infrastructural problems continue to affect many Roma settlements. In 2023, the Protector of Citizens initiated a control procedure against the City Administration of the City of Niš regarding the Roma settlement "12. februar", where residents had been left without electricity for more than five months. Following the intervention of the Protector of Citizens, temporary electricity supply and increased financial assistance were provided, and the process of legalization of the settlement was initiated.

The institution also monitored the situation following emergencies affecting Roma communities. After a fire in a Roma settlement in Belgrade in May 2023, where several families lost all their property, the Protector of Citizens established that the City Administration of the City of Belgrade provided financial aid and clothing but could offer only collective shelters as temporary accommodation. In response, the Protector of Citizens issued a Report with an opinion highlighting the need to increase the availability of social housing.

Monitoring activities continued in 2025, when the Protector of Citizens conducted a control procedure concerning living conditions and safety in an informal settlement in the City Municipality of Rakovica. In the same year, following a complaint submitted by the Vojvodina

¹⁴ Report available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/6656/SPECIAL%20REPORT%20OF%20THE%20PROTECTOR%20OF%20CITIZENS%20WITH%20RECOMMENDATIONS%2015%2006%202%2020%2020.doc>

Roma Center, the institution requested a statement from the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure regarding the application of regulations related to property registration in substandard settlements.¹⁵

These cases illustrate that housing conditions remain one of the most significant structural challenges affecting the Roma community in Serbia. At the same time, they demonstrate the role of the Protector of Citizens in monitoring the situation on the ground, mediating between residents and authorities and encouraging competent institutions to take measures aimed at improving living conditions in Roma settlements.

Right to Health and Roma Health Mediators

Access to health care remains an important issue affecting the Roma community in Serbia, particularly in the context of marginalized living conditions and barriers in communication between Roma communities and the health care system. In this regard, the institution of Roma health mediators represents an important mechanism for facilitating access to health services and improving communication between Roma communities and health institutions.

The Protector of Citizens has repeatedly pointed to the unresolved employment and legal status of Roma health mediators as a systemic challenge. During the preparation of the National Strategy for Gender Equality for the period 2021–2030¹⁶, the Protector of Citizens proposed that the status of Roma health mediators be permanently regulated. However, this proposal was not accepted.

The problem became particularly visible in 2025, when the engagement of Roma health mediators was interrupted for a period of nine months. During this time, no mediators were active, which halted the regular monitoring of health and socio-economic indicators within Roma communities and limited the functioning of this mechanism intended to facilitate access to health care.

Following the intervention of the Protector of Citizens, the Ministry of Health informed the institution that the engagement of mediators had been restored in September 2025, with a total of 61 mediators re-engaged. Subsequently, the Protector of Citizens addressed an Opinion to the Ministry of Health, emphasizing the need to ensure continuous engagement of Roma health mediators and to resolve their employment status on a permanent basis.

The institution also informed the Coordination Body for the Improvement of the Position of Roma about this issue, highlighting the importance of ensuring the sustainability of this mechanism. The Protector of Citizens considers that the interruption in the engagement of mediators demonstrated the vulnerability of this system and the need for a stable and clearly regulated institutional framework to ensure its continuous functioning.

Education and Combating Stereotypes

Education represents an important area for addressing discrimination and preventing the reproduction of stereotypes affecting minority communities, including Roma. Through its monitoring activities and interventions in individual cases, the Protector of Citizens has emphasized the importance of ensuring that the educational system promotes equality and respect for diversity.

¹⁵ Report (in Serbian only) available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/8413/%D0%A0%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BD%20%D0%93%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%88%D1%9A%D0%B8%20%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%98%20%D0%97%D0%B0%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%20%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%92%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%202025.%20%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%83.docx>

¹⁶ “Official Gazette of RS”, No. 103/21.

In 2021, during the preparation of the Draft Strategy for the Development of Education until 2030¹⁷, the Protector of Citizens submitted an opinion highlighting several issues relevant to vulnerable groups, including Roma children. The institution recommended increasing the number of pedagogical assistants, strengthening mechanisms to prevent school dropout – particularly among Roma children and girls – and improving the planning of support services for children living in poverty and rural areas.

In addition to systemic recommendations, the Protector of Citizens has also intervened in specific cases involving discriminatory or stereotypical representations in educational materials. In 2022, the institution initiated an investigation on its own initiative regarding the work of the Ministry of Education following concerns about a reading book for third-grade students published by “Klett”, which contained a derogatory term referring to Roma and promoted negative stereotypes. Following the intervention of the Protector of Citizens, the Ministry of Education removed the textbook from the recommended list of teaching materials, and the publisher committed to removing the offensive content in the next edition.¹⁸ The case illustrates the role of the Protector of Citizens in identifying discriminatory content within the educational system and ensuring that competent authorities take corrective measures.

The institution considers that addressing stereotypes in education is an important element in preventing discrimination and promoting tolerance, particularly in relation to minority communities that are frequently exposed to prejudice.

Child Marriages

Child and early marriages remain an issue of concern, particularly in relation to girls from marginalized communities, including the Roma community. The Protector of Citizens has addressed this issue primarily through cooperation with relevant institutions and participation in initiatives aimed at strengthening prevention and protection mechanisms.

In 2020, within the framework of the National Coalition to End Child Marriages, the Protector of Citizens participated in activities aimed at raising public awareness about the harmful consequences of early marriages. On the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Coalition launched the public campaign “Child marriage is not a Roma tradition”, emphasizing that early marriages are primarily linked to poverty and social vulnerability rather than cultural practices.¹⁹

The Protector of Citizens also contributed to awareness-raising and education activities. In 2022, the institution organized training sessions for members of its Youth Advisory Panel and participants of the Protector of Citizens’ Summer School, focusing on the protection of children who may become victims of early and forced marriages.

In addition to awareness-raising activities, the Protector of Citizens participated in efforts aimed at improving the normative framework. The institution took part in the work of the Subgroup for Normative Changes of the National Coalition for the Prevention of Child Marriage in Serbia, which initiated proposals for amendments to the Family Law²⁰, the Law

¹⁷ “Official Gazette of RS”, No. 63/21.

¹⁸ Report available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/7685/Regular%20Annual%20Report%20of%20the%20Protector%20of%20Citizens%20for%202022.pdf>

¹⁹ Report available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/7007/Regular%20Annual%20Report%20of%20the%20Protector%20of%20Citizens%20for%202020.pdf>

²⁰ “Official Gazette of RS”, Nos. 18/05, 72/11 – other law, 6/15 and 109/25 – other law.

on the Prevention of Domestic Violence²¹ and the Criminal Code, with the aim of strengthening legal protection of children from child and forced marriages.

Furthermore, the Protector of Citizens participated in the Working Group of the Ministry for Family Welfare and Demography established to improve the normative framework in this field. However, the proposed legislative amendments have not yet been adopted.

Through these activities, the Protector of Citizens contributes to raising awareness of the risks associated with child marriages and supports efforts aimed at strengthening legal and institutional mechanisms for the protection of children.

Civil Registration and Prevention of Statelessness

Ensuring universal birth registration and preventing so-called “legal invisibility” remains an important aspect of protecting the rights of Roma and other vulnerable groups. Lack of personal documentation may significantly limit the ability of individuals to access fundamental rights, including health care, education, social protection and employment.

In order to address these challenges, the Protector of Citizens has continued its cooperation with relevant institutions and international partners. The activities of the institution in this field are based on Memorandums of Understanding signed with the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The most recent memorandum was signed in February 2022, continuing long-standing cooperation aimed at facilitating birth registration and preventing statelessness.

Within this framework, the Protector of Citizens organized a series of round tables and training sessions during 2021 and 2022, involving more than 550 participants, including civil registrars, police officers and representatives of centers for social work. These activities were aimed at improving institutional coordination and facilitating the registration of children whose mothers do not possess personal documents.

In addition to national-level activities, the Protector of Citizens organized local training sessions in several cities, including Vranje, Bujanovac, Kragujevac, Niš and Leskovac, as well as a dedicated training session for the National Council of the Roma National Minority in Belgrade. These activities focused on strengthening the capacity of local institutions to address cases involving persons at risk of lacking civil documentation.

The institution also carried out public awareness activities, including an information campaign organized in Kruševac in April 2024, aimed at informing citizens about procedures for birth registration and access to personal documents.

The progress achieved by the Republic of Serbia in resolving the issue of birth registration among Roma over the previous decade was also presented by a representative of the Protector of Citizens at a regional conference held in Skopje in October 2023, organized by UNHCR and the OSCE Mission to Serbia.

Through these activities, the Protector of Citizens contributes to strengthening cooperation between national institutions and international partners and supports efforts aimed at preventing legal invisibility and ensuring access to civil registration for all persons.

Exercise of the rights of national minorities (Articles 5(c) and 5(e) of the ICERD)

Although the legislative framework regulating the rights of national minorities in the Republic of Serbia is relatively well developed, the practice shows that challenges persist in the consistent implementation of these guarantees. Through its complaints-handling

²¹ “Official Gazette of RS”, Nos. 94/16 and 10/23 – other law.

procedures and monitoring activities, the Protector of Citizens has identified a number of cases illustrating difficulties in the practical exercise of minority rights, particularly in the areas of the official use of minority languages and scripts, education, administrative procedures and participation of national minority councils in decision-making processes.

The cases addressed by the Protector of Citizens demonstrate that problems often arise at the level of administrative practice, where authorities fail to apply existing legal provisions consistently. In such situations, the intervention of the Protector of Citizens has contributed to correcting irregularities and ensuring the proper implementation of minority rights.

Official Use of Minority Languages and Scripts

The Protector of Citizens has addressed several cases concerning the official use of minority languages and scripts in administrative procedures. These cases illustrate the gap that may exist between the legal framework and its implementation in practice.

In 2023, the Protector of Citizens found that the Ministry of Interior, through the Police Station in Preševo, violated the rights of a police officer belonging to the Albanian national minority by conducting a disciplinary procedure exclusively in Serbian, despite the officer's explicit request for the procedure to be conducted in the Albanian language. Following the intervention of the Protector of Citizens, the Ministry committed to issuing bilingual decisions in future proceedings.

In another case from 2023, the City Administration of the City of Niš failed for two years to register the personal name and surname of a minor in the Albanian language and script in the birth registry. After the Protector of Citizens initiated a control procedure and issued an opinion, the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government, acting as a second-instance authority, annulled the decision. The City Administration subsequently registered the child's name in Albanian.²²

A similar issue arose in 2024 concerning members of the Hungarian national minority. Acting on a complaint submitted by the National Council of the Hungarian National Minority, the Protector of Citizens established that the Ministry of Interior had issued passports in which the names of citizens were not written exactly as recorded in the birth registry in the Hungarian language and script. Following the recommendation of the Protector of Citizens, the Ministry annulled the flawed documents and issued new passports at its own expense.²³

The Protector of Citizens also monitored the implementation of language rights concerning the Bulgarian national minority. A Special Report on the Official Use of Bulgarian Language and Script²⁴ published in 2021 highlighted shortcomings in the visibility of public notices informing citizens of their right to use their mother tongue in administrative proceedings. At the same time, the report identified examples of good practice, particularly in civil registries and maternity wards in municipalities such as Bosilegrad, Vranje and Surdulica, where

²² Report available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/7979/Regular%20Annual%20Report%20of%20the%20Protector%20of%20Citizens%20for%202023.docx>

²³ Report available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/8177/Regular%20Annual%20Report%20of%20the%20Protector%20of%20Citizens%20for%202024.docx>

²⁴ Report (in Serbian and Bulgarian only) available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/7286/%D0%9F%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%98%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BB%D1%83%D0%B6%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%98%D0%D1%83%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B1%D0%B8%D0%B1%D1%83%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%D1%98%D0%B5%D0%B7%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%20%D0%B8%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BC%D0%B0.pdf>

requests for registering female surnames according to Bulgarian orthography were properly implemented.

These cases illustrate that, despite the existence of a solid legal framework, the effective exercise of language rights often depends on the consistent application of the law by administrative authorities at the local level.

Right to Education in Minority Languages and Combating Discrimination

Education in minority languages represents an important element of the protection of minority rights. While the legal framework in Serbia guarantees the right to education in minority languages, the practice occasionally reveals situations in which educational materials or administrative decisions may negatively affect the realization of these rights.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Protector of Citizens noted a positive example of institutional cooperation in ensuring access to education in minority languages. The institution commended the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and the Radio Television of Vojvodina (RTV) for organizing and broadcasting distance learning programmes in eight minority languages, which enabled students belonging to national minorities to continue their education during the pandemic.²⁵

At the same time, the Protector of Citizens addressed cases involving discriminatory or inaccurate content in educational materials. In 2022, following complaints submitted by the National Council of the Croatian National Minority and the National Council of the Bosniak National Minority, the institution examined the approval of a Serbian language textbook for eighth-grade students. The textbook contained a definition stating that the Croatian and Bosnian languages do not exist as separate languages, but that these communities use the Serbian language under different names. The Protector of Citizens found that such content was inappropriate and could contribute to discrimination and the denial of the linguistic identity of members of these national minorities. Following the recommendation issued by the Protector of Citizens, the Ministry of Education instructed the publisher to amend the disputed content before the beginning of the 2022/2023 school year.²⁶

This case illustrates the role of the Protector of Citizens in monitoring the protection of minority rights in the field of education and ensuring that educational materials respect the linguistic identity and dignity of national minorities.

Civil Registration and Employment

Through its complaints-handling procedures and oversight activities, the Protector of Citizens has addressed several cases concerning administrative procedures affecting members of national minorities. These cases illustrate that difficulties may arise in practice when public authorities apply regulations inconsistently or introduce requirements not provided by law.

In 2025, the Protector of Citizens initiated a control procedure against the City Administration of Vršac after establishing that the competent registry office had failed to process a citizen's request to register their German national affiliation in the birth registry for a period exceeding

²⁵ Report available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/7007/Regular%20Annual%20Report%20of%20the%20Protector%20of%20Citizens%20for%202020.pdf>

²⁶ Report available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/7685/Regular%20Annual%20Report%20of%20the%20Protector%20of%20Citizens%20for%202022.pdf>

six months. The case highlighted delays in administrative procedures that may affect the ability of citizens to exercise their rights related to personal status.²⁷

In another case from 2024, the Protector of Citizens found that the Ministry of Interior had unlawfully rejected an application for citizenship by requesting that the applicant submit a public document proving their national affiliation. The Protector of Citizens established that such a requirement is not prescribed by the Law on Citizenship of the Republic of Serbia²⁸. Namely, the expression of national affiliation is free, and a party cannot be required to provide public documents proving national affiliation, particularly since such a requirement is not prescribed by law²⁹.

At the same time, the institution emphasizes that not all complaints alleging discrimination prove to be founded. In 2025, acting on a complaint submitted by an employee of the Ministry of Interior belonging to the Croatian national minority, who alleged that he had been reassigned to a lower-paid position because of his national affiliation, the Protector of Citizens conducted the investigation procedure. After reviewing the relevant documentation and examining circumstances of the case, the institution found no evidence of discriminatory conduct, and the complaint was rejected as unfounded.

These cases illustrate the role of the Protector of Citizens in ensuring that administrative authorities apply the law in a consistent and lawful manner, while also maintaining an objective approach when assessing allegations of discrimination.

National Minority Councils and Democratic Participation

National Minority Councils represent an important mechanism through which members of national minorities participate in the exercise of their collective rights in the fields of culture, education, information and the official use of language and script. The Protector of Citizens has monitored both the functioning of these bodies and the broader framework enabling the participation of national minorities in public life.

In this regard, the Protector of Citizens closely monitored the population census and the elections for National Minority Councils held in November 2022. The institution noted positively that the electoral process was conducted in accordance with the law and resulted in the constitution of 24 National Minority Councils, including the newly established National Council of the Gorani National Minority.

However, the practice also indicates challenges in the effective participation of these councils in decision-making processes at the local level. In 2022, the Protector of Citizens found that the Municipality of Sjenica failed to consider proposals submitted by the National Council of the Bosniak National Minority concerning the appointment of school board members in three local schools: the Gymnasium “Jezdimir Lović” and the primary schools “12. decembar” and “Jovan Jovanović Zmaj”. Despite the recommendation issued by the Protector of Citizens to reconsider the proposals and provide a reasoned explanation, the municipality did not act upon this recommendation.

²⁷ Report available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/8413/%D0%A0%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BD%20%D0%93%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%88%D1%9A%D0%B8%20%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%98%20%D0%97%D0%B0%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%20%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%92%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%202025.%20%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%83.docx>

²⁸ “Official Gazette of RS”, Nos. 135/04, 90/07 and 24/18.

²⁹ Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Article 47 Paragraph 1.

The Protector of Citizens has also examined the broader functioning of National Minority Councils. A comprehensive analysis³⁰ published in 2019 indicated that many councils face difficulties in fully exercising their mandate. According to the analysis, some councils react only when approached by state authorities and lack proactive engagement in promoting minority rights. The analysis also pointed to challenges related to strategic planning, financial and administrative capacities, as well as insufficient communication with minority communities, including the absence of functional websites or other communication channels.

In order to strengthen local interethnic dialogue and institutional capacities, the Protector of Citizens organized training sessions in March and April 2022 in cooperation with the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and the Council of Europe. These trainings were intended for members of Councils for Interethnic Relations in nine local self-government units and aimed at improving their capacity to address issues affecting relations between different ethnic communities.

These findings indicate that, although the institutional framework for minority participation exists, its effective functioning depends on the consistent involvement of local authorities and the strengthening of the capacities of minority institutions.

Rights of migrants, asylum seekers and stateless persons (Article 5(b) of the ICERD)

During the reporting period, the Protector of Citizens monitored the situation of migrants and asylum seekers primarily through the activities of the National Preventive Mechanism (NPM), as well as through complaints received from individuals and civil society organizations. These activities focused on the conduct of police authorities, conditions in reception and accommodation facilities and access to asylum procedures.

The findings of the Protector of Citizens indicate that, although Serbia has established a legal and institutional framework for the protection of migrants and asylum seekers, challenges remain in ensuring the consistent protection of their rights in practice. Particular concerns relate to allegations of ill-treatment, conditions in facilities for migrants and access to basic services and legal procedures.

Through visits to reception centers, police stations and facilities for foreigners, as well as through control procedures initiated in response to complaints and media reports, the Protector of Citizens has identified both positive developments and areas requiring further improvement. The institution has repeatedly emphasized the importance of respecting the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment, ensuring lawful procedures in cases involving restrictions of liberty and providing adequate living conditions for migrants and asylum seekers.

The following sections present selected examples from the activities of the Protector of Citizens illustrating the main challenges identified during the reporting period.

Police Conduct, Detention and Allegations of Pushbacks

Through the activities of the NPM and control procedures initiated following complaints and media reports, the Protector of Citizens has monitored the conduct of law enforcement authorities towards migrants and asylum seekers. The institution has identified several cases indicating challenges in ensuring full compliance with standards prohibiting ill-treatment and guaranteeing lawful procedures in situations involving restrictions of liberty.

³⁰ Report (in Serbian only) available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/6473/ZAstitnik%20POSEBAN%20IZVESTAJ%20ZG%20ANALIZA%20O%20STANJU%20U%20OBLASTI%20VRSENJA%20JAVNIH%20OVLASCENJA%2020200127a.pdf>

In 2023, following media reports, the Protector of Citizens initiated a control procedure regarding the conduct of police officers at the Reception Center in Sombor. The procedure established that police officers physically abused two unidentified migrants, using batons, kicks and punches. The Internal Control Sector of the Ministry of Interior reviewed the available video footage and confirmed that unlawful conduct had occurred. However, it stated that the specific perpetrators could not be identified. In response, the Protector of Citizens issued a Report with recommendations to the Police Directorate, calling for the strict application of a zero-tolerance policy towards torture and ill-treatment and for the organization of specialized training on the lawful use of police powers³¹.

The Protector of Citizens also identified concerns regarding the lawfulness of detention practices. During a control visit in 2025 to the Police Station in Kanjiža (Police Administration Kikinda), the institution found that irregular migrants were being held in police premises after receiving return decisions. The migrants were deprived of their liberty in a room not intended for detention and lacking basic conditions, including access to food and water. The Protector of Citizens recommended that the Ministry of Interior cease using such premises for detention, ensure that any restriction of liberty has a clear legal basis and provide prompt transfer of migrants to appropriate reception facilities. The Ministry of Interior only partially complied with these recommendations³².

In addition, the NPM recorded numerous allegations of pushbacks and physical abuse, although these allegations could not always be independently verified. In 2025, migrants accommodated in the Reception Center in Preševo reported that they had been subjected to physical violence by police officers after leaving the center and had subsequently been pushed back to North Macedonia during the night. The NPM informed the Commission for the Implementation of Standards of Police Conduct in the Field of Torture Prevention, recommending the strengthening of preventive measures³³. During visits to reception centres in Preševo and Bujanovac in 2021, the NPM recorded a number of allegations of unlawful pushbacks of migrants, both from Serbia and from other countries. These allegations could not be further verified, as none of the migrants interviewed had submitted formal complaints. Nevertheless, the NPM reported these allegations for preventive purposes, emphasizing the need to ensure effective investigations, the establishment of individual responsibility and the sanctioning of responsible officials in cases of suspected unlawful conduct.

Following the NPM's recommendations, the Ministry of Interior informed the Protector of Citizens that the report had been forwarded to all organizational units of the border police, with instructions to act in accordance with the law and to take all necessary measures to prevent torture and other forms of ill-treatment of migrants.

Another issue identified during the reporting period concerned health and safety risks during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the Protector of Citizens found that the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (KIRS) and the Ministry of Interior had made omissions during the transfer of migrants from the Asylum Center in Tutin to the Reception Center in Preševo.

³¹ Report (in Serbian only) available at:

<https://npm.ombudsman.org.rs/attachments/article/1309/GI%20NPM%202023.pdf>

³² Report available at:

<https://www.ombudsman.rs/attachments/article/8413/%D0%A0%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BD%20%D0%93%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%88%D1%9A%D0%B8%20%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%98%20%D0%97%D0%B0%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%20%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%92%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%202025.%20%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%83.docx>

³³ *Idem*.

During the procedure at the police station in Preševo, sixteen migrants left before the registration process had been completed, which increased the risk of spreading the virus³⁴.

These cases indicate the importance of ensuring effective oversight of law enforcement authorities, particularly in situations involving vulnerable groups such as migrants and asylum seekers.

Border Procedures and Access to Asylum

Access to asylum procedures and the treatment of migrants at border crossings represent important aspects of the protection of migrants' rights. Through the activities of the NPM, as well as through the handling of individual complaints, the Protector of Citizens has monitored the implementation of asylum procedures and the conduct of border authorities.

In 2021, the NPM paid particular attention to monitoring the treatment of migrants at the borders with North Macedonia, Bulgaria and Croatia. In this context, six reception centres, four police stations, four regional border police centres, two correctional institutions and the "Konstantin Veliki" Airport in Niš were visited, with the aim of obtaining a comprehensive overview of the treatment of migrants.

Special attention was devoted to the treatment of foreign nationals who were denied entry into the country, i.e. persons awaiting return to their country of departure. The NPM continuously monitored these situations through six visits to Belgrade Airport "Nikola Tesla", three visits to "Konstantin Veliki" Airport in Niš and two visits to the airport in Kraljevo during the reporting period, including unannounced visits. During these visits, the NPM assessed accommodation conditions, access to information and procedures, as well as the possibility for individuals to express their intention to seek asylum. Following these visits, the Protector of Citizens issued recommendations aimed at improving procedures, upon which the border police undertook measures within their competence.

In addition to monitoring procedures at entry points, the NPM also monitored the treatment of foreign nationals in the process of removal from the country, including their accommodation in the Detention Centre for Foreigners. In this context, a number of challenges were identified, including the lack of a systematically regulated system of healthcare and psychological support, the absence of organized activities, and the practice of assigning residence to foreigners for whom there are no realistic prospects of enforced removal. It was also noted that foreigners do not always have an effective opportunity to present circumstances that could constitute obstacles to their removal to a specific country, which may lead to a risk of violating the principle of non-refoulement and the standards set out in Article 3 of the Convention against Torture.

An additional challenge relates to communication with migrants and asylum seekers, given the limited availability of professional interpreters. In practice, authorities often rely on alternative means of translation, which may affect the quality of information provided and the ability of individuals to fully understand their rights and the procedures involved.

The Protector of Citizens also intervened in individual cases in order to ensure access to asylum procedures. On 31 December 2024, following a complaint concerning the detention of two citizens of the Democratic Republic of Congo at the border crossing at Belgrade Airport "Nikola Tesla", the Protector of Citizens conducted an urgent inspection at the Border Police Station at the airport. During the inspection, representatives of the Protector of Citizens interviewed the complainants, who expressed their intention to seek asylum in the Republic

³⁴ Report available at:

<https://npm.ombudsman.org.rs/attachments/article/1052/Godisnji%20izvestaj%20NPM%202020.pdf>

of Serbia.³⁵ As a result of the intervention, the asylum procedure was formally initiated, enabling the individuals concerned to access the protection mechanisms provided under Serbian legislation.

These findings highlight the importance of comprehensive oversight of border procedures, both with regard to access to asylum and procedures related to the removal of foreign nationals, as well as the need to ensure full respect for procedural safeguards and protection standards against ill-treatment.

Living Conditions and Access to Healthcare in Reception Centers

In carrying out its NPM mandate, the Protector of Citizens continuously monitors living conditions and access to services in reception and accommodation centres for migrants and asylum seekers under the authority of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration.

The findings of the NPM indicate that accommodation conditions and access to services in these centres vary depending on the specific facility and the time of year. In certain cases, shortcomings have been identified in terms of material conditions, including hygiene, infrastructure and the maintenance of sanitary facilities. However, these issues are not uniform and do not necessarily indicate the existence of systemic deficiencies at the level of the entire system.

In 2025, the Protector of Citizens also acted upon a complaint concerning the work of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration related to inadequate accommodation conditions that hindered the effective conduct of the asylum procedure at the Asylum Centre in Sjenica. Following the intervention of the Protector of Citizens, the asylum seeker was transferred to the Asylum Centre in Obrenovac, where better conditions for the continuation of the asylum procedure were ensured.

These findings point to the need for continuous improvement of accommodation conditions and access to services.

Migrants at Risk of Human Trafficking, Unaccompanied Children, and Victims of Human Trafficking

The Protector of Citizens pays special attention to the protection of unaccompanied migrant children and persons who may be victims of human trafficking. Through the activities of the NPM (National Preventive Mechanism), as well as within the mandate of the National Rapporteur in the field of human trafficking, the institution monitors the protection mechanisms available to these particularly vulnerable groups.

Regular annual reports of the National Rapporteur indicate that children account for a significant share among identified victims of human trafficking and that they are particularly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation. At the same time, unaccompanied migrant children and children on the move are exposed to an increased risk of human trafficking, as well as numerous obstacles in accessing rights, services, and protection mechanisms. In practice, challenges have been observed in the timely identification of victims, the provision of continuous protection, and the effective coordination of competent authorities, which can have disproportionate consequences for certain groups.

³⁵ Report available at:

<https://npm.ombudsman.org.rs/attachments/article/1355/%D0%98%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%98%20%D0%9D%D0%9F%D0%9C%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%202024.%20%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%83.pdf>

According to data from the Center for Human Trafficking Victims Protection, in 2025, children accounted for 41% of formally identified victims, out of a total of 75 identified victims. The most common forms of child exploitation were sexual exploitation (36%), forced begging (20%), forced marriage (19%), forced criminality (17%), and labor exploitation (8%). Children from the Roma population are particularly endangered, facing a high risk of forced marriages and begging, as are children without parental care, including unaccompanied migrant minors. The reports of the National Rapporteur also point to the problem of an insufficient number of identified victims among the migrant population. During 2022 and 2023, a total of 12 human trafficking victims from the migrant population were identified. The short stay of migrants in Serbia, frequent location changes, and insufficient information among potential victims regarding their rights have been recognized as key challenges for identifying victims within this segment of the population.

The National Rapporteur also highlighted the need to strengthen preventive activities aimed at vulnerable groups, including members of the Roma population, legally invisible persons, and migrants. It was particularly emphasized that continuous support measures for children and students of Roma nationality regarding enrolment in preschool institutions, primary, and secondary schools—even in situations where they lack the necessary documentation—represent an important preventive mechanism against human trafficking. More than 23,000 students utilized this support measure. In addition, nearly 10,000 scholarships have been awarded over the past nine years, according to data from the National Rapporteur's report for 2024, which further contributes to retaining children in the educational system and reducing the risk of exploitation.

During 2020, the NPM conducted visits to monitor the treatment of unaccompanied migrant minors. The findings showed that their living conditions were satisfactory and in accordance with standards, particularly in social welfare institutions and facilities managed by humanitarian organizations. A large number of activities were available to the beneficiaries, they were informed about the reasons for their accommodation as well as their rights and obligations, and adequate healthcare was provided to them. Simultaneously, efforts were noted toward strengthening the engagement of social workers, both in the field and within the competent centers for social work, with the aim of protecting the best interests of the child.

The NPM indicated that competent authorities need to continue investing in and supporting, to the greatest extent possible, the accommodation of unaccompanied migrant minors in residential-type social welfare institutions and facilities managed by humanitarian organizations, keeping in mind that this type of accommodation is more appropriate for their needs than accommodation in large reception centers.

During 2020, the Protector of Citizens identified serious omissions in the protection of unaccompanied migrant minors at the Bogovađa Asylum Center. It was established that a private security employee physically attacked several unaccompanied minors accommodated in that center. At the same time, the Inter-Municipal Center for Social Work for the municipalities of Ljig, Lajkovac, and Mionica, which acted as the legal guardian of the children, as well as the center's management, failed to take adequate measures or report the incident to the police or the competent prosecutor's office. The Protector of Citizens noted that the competent authorities did not fully comply with the recommendations issued following these findings.

The aforementioned findings highlight the importance of the consistent application of protection mechanisms, the timely identification of victims, and the strengthening of inter-institutional cooperation in order to ensure the effective protection of migrants, unaccompanied children, and other persons at an increased risk of human trafficking.

Concluding remarks and summary of recommendations

Through its work on complaints, monitoring activities and thematic analyses, the Protector of Citizens continuously identifies challenges affecting the enjoyment of equality and the protection of minority rights in the Republic of Serbia. The examples presented in this submission illustrate both positive developments and persistent structural issues in the implementation of anti-discrimination standards.

During the reporting period, the Protector of Citizens observed that the legal and institutional framework for the protection against racial discrimination is largely established. However, the effectiveness of this framework depends on the consistent and timely application of laws and policies by competent authorities. In several areas, including the protection of national minority rights, the situation of Roma communities and the treatment of migrants and asylum seekers, the institution identified challenges related primarily to the implementation of existing regulations and institutional practices.

The activities of the Protector of Citizens demonstrate that discrimination and intolerance may manifest in different forms, ranging from hate speech and racist graffiti in public spaces to systemic socio-economic exclusion affecting Roma communities. The institution also noted challenges in the practical implementation of minority language rights, the functioning of minority participation mechanisms at the local level and the protection of migrants and asylum seekers in situations involving police conduct, detention and accommodation conditions.

At the same time, the examples presented in this submission illustrate the important role played by independent oversight bodies in identifying shortcomings, initiating oversight procedures and encouraging competent authorities to take corrective measures. In several cases, the intervention of the Protector of Citizens contributed to concrete improvements, including the removal of discriminatory content from educational materials, the correction of administrative decisions affecting minority language rights and the initiation of asylum procedures for individuals seeking protection.

The Protector of Citizens remains committed to supporting the implementation of the ICERD in the Republic of Serbia and to continuing cooperation with international human rights mechanisms, including the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

The Protector of Citizens issues the following general recommendations to relevant authorities:

Articles 3 and 5(e) of the ICERD

- The Ministry of Health should ensure conditions for the continuous engagement of Roma health mediators and provide a permanent solution to their employment status, as well as develop mechanisms for monitoring health and socio-economic indicators related to the situation of the Roma population;
- The Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure should consider possibilities for simplifying and accelerating the legalization of housing facilities, including special facilitation measures for the Roma population;
- Local self-government units in which, according to the 2022 Population Census, members of the Roma national minority reside should, in accordance with identified needs, increase the stock of social housing and plan other measures to improve housing conditions in Roma settlements;
- The City of Belgrade should plan and, in accordance with assessments, increase the stock of social housing in order to ensure the right to housing for all persons in housing need.

Articles 5(c) and 5(e) of the ICERD

- The Ministry of Interior should ensure that in all future procedures due regard is given to the official use of the languages and scripts of national minorities;
- The Ministry of Education should ensure that, in all future textbook approval procedures, particular attention is paid to ensuring that textbook content does not infringe the rights of members of national minorities;
- The Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government should:
 - organize nationwide information campaigns on the rights related to the official use of the languages and scripts of national minorities;
 - in cooperation with other competent authorities, conduct training for employees in local self-government units on the implementation of the Law on National Councils of National Minorities;
 - resend instructions to all civil registry offices to display notices regarding the registration of personal names in the language of a national minority and according to the orthography of that language;
- The Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue should:
 - in cooperation with other competent authorities, organize training for members of the national councils of national minorities in order to strengthen their professional capacities and improve their work;
 - organize nationwide information campaigns on the rights related to the official use of the languages and scripts of national minorities;
 - in cooperation with other competent authorities, conduct training for employees in local self-government units on the implementation of the Law on National Councils of National Minorities and the Law on the Official Use of Languages and Scripts;
 - in cooperation with other competent authorities, organize training for members of councils for interethnic relations in local self-government units in order to strengthen professional capacities and improve the work of these councils;
 - adopt a new Action Plan for the advancement of the rights of members of national minorities, given that the previous action plan has expired;
- National councils of national minorities should make their activities more accessible to the wider public and develop strategies and measures aimed at increasing their visibility and public recognition;
- All local self-government units should display notices regarding the registration of personal names in the language and script of a national minority on their notice boards, as well as on the websites of their cities or municipalities;
- The Municipality of Sjenica should consider all proposals submitted by the National Council of the Bosniak National Minority as an authorized proposer, particularly when it concerns the appointment of representatives of the local self-government unit to institutions where, in the majority of classes, educational activities are conducted in the language of a national minority or which have been designated as being of particular importance for the education of that national minority;
- The competent authorities should adopt a new Action Plan for the advancement of the rights of members of national minorities, given that the previous action plan has expired;

Article 5(b) of the ICERD

- The Ministry of Interior should:
 - take the necessary measures to ensure that foreigners for whom there is no reasonable prospect of forced removal are not placed in detention in reception facilities for foreigners;

- appropriately organize the provision of health care in reception facilities for foreigners;
- ensure that, in return procedures, the foreigner is given the opportunity to indicate that, in a specific country, they may face persecution on the grounds of race, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, religion, nationality, citizenship, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, or that there is a risk of being subjected to the death penalty, torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, or serious violations of rights guaranteed by the Constitution;
- ensure that the competent authority assesses such claims and determines whether there are grounds for prohibiting forced removal in the concrete case;
- ensure that the foreigner's statements and the findings of the competent authority regarding the prohibition of forced removal are duly reflected in the reasoning of the return decision.

The Protector of Citizens, as the National Rapporteur in the field of human trafficking, proposes that the Committee recommend the following to the State:

- To urgently adopt the Law on the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking and the Protection of Victims;
- To develop and establish a new accommodation service intended for male victims of human trafficking, including a supported housing model;
- To establish a support and training program for foster parents to acquire competencies for working with child victims of human trafficking, as well as to increase the number of foster families ready to accept this category of children;
- To improve the procedure for appointing guardians for unaccompanied migrant minors, ensuring their urgent access to the social protection system outside of large reception centers for migrants;
- To initiate more intensive training for police officers and prosecutors on recognizing forced child marriages as human trafficking, while eliminating the argument of cultural tradition;
- To provide continuous education and specialization for police officers working with presumed victims of human trafficking, including regular training in the field of child rights and the criminal legal protection of minors, in order to ensure more effective victim identification and evidence collection for the successful conduct of criminal proceedings;
- To urgently continue and intensify the professional training of educators for the preliminary identification of human trafficking victims in the education system;
- To provide education for healthcare workers on the preliminary identification and recognition of human trafficking indicators;
- To intensify the education of employees in social welfare institutions who work with families and children, in order to improve early identification and prevent the long-term exploitation of human trafficking victims;
- To establish networks of translators for rare languages to enable the identification and protection of human trafficking victims, and conduct training to sensitize these translators to the problem of human trafficking;
- To simplify the procedure for accessing free legal aid through local self-government units, and provide specialized training for lawyers to offer legal support to victims of human trafficking;
- To ensure the systemic provision of information to presumed and identified victims of human trafficking regarding their rights, available services, and ways to access them, and ensure the development of informative brochures and materials to increase the accessibility of specific information.