



SERBIA

BACKGROUND

Since beginning its transition to democracy at the end of the Yugoslav conflicts, Serbia has made important progress in strengthening democratic freedoms and improving human development. Although tensions remain between Serbia and several countries in the region, Serbia is making efforts to normalize relationships, as evidenced by its continued cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). In recognition of Serbia's progress, and the continued commitment to the normalization of its relations with Kosovo¹, the EU opened negotiations for membership in 2014.

In 2015, Serbia was one of the main countries affected by the refugee and migrant crisis, as hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants, primarily from Syria, made their way to Western Europe. In a development that could potentially jeopardize the visa-free regime granted to Serbia in 2009, there was also an increase in applications for asylum from Serbian citizens in this period, despite only 1 percent of requests submitted so far in Germany and other EU countries being considered admissible.

2015 was also the first year of an IMF guided programme to improve economic conditions. In recent years, the impact of the international financial cri-

¹ All references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

sis and numerous rounds of elections have slowed down necessary structural reforms in the country. However, this programme, which includes measures to reduce the deficit, reform public institutions and improve the business environment, appears to be producing results. In 2015, the deficit almost halved to 3.7 percent and unemployment fell significantly.² Additionally, the economy is expected to return to positive growth after going backwards in 2014.³ Although poverty and unemployment are still prevalent, particularly in the South and Southwest regions which have large minority populations, sustained growth in Serbia would be expected to provide an economic boost to the entire Western Balkans.

ASSISTANCE AND IMPACT

2015 saw several notable projects to improve transparency and accountability come to fruition. In efforts to improve budget accountability, UNDP supported the launch of a portal that enables MPs to monitor public budget expenditures electronically, replacing the current practice of circulating monthly paper reports produced by the Ministry of Finance. This portal should enable the Parliament and the Committee on Finance, State Budget and Control of Public Spending to subject the Government to additional scrutiny on budgetary issues.

Efforts were also undertaken to increase the openness of the political process, with UNDP supporting 34 public hearings in the Parliament and 18 mobile committee sessions of MPs. The success of this programme has been recognized by national partners as one of the most effective ways to improve transparency and promote public participation in decision-making. It was piloted at the local level.

In another push for increased transparency, UNDP also began the process of introducing open data in Serbia. This included the completion of an Open Data Readiness Assessment with the World Bank, inclusion of the open data standard in the e-Government Strategy, and the publishing of previously unavailable datasets relating to public procurement, education, environmental protection, interior affairs and health. In November, UNDP supported Serbia's

first Open Data Hackathon, that developed numerous open data enabled applications.



Participants in Serbia's first Open Data Hackathon show their applications in Belgrade

Photo by: SEE ICT

The lack of accountability in the management of public finances is also a significant issue in Serbia. From the initial procurement process to implementation at the local level to the final oversight by the State Audit Institution, significant gaps allow for corruption and the mismanagement of resources. To address this, UNDP supported the certification of over 1,000 public procurement officials, the first audit of political parties, training for judges and prosecutors on procurement law and fraud, and promoting audit findings at the local level.

Combatting corruption was also the goal of an innovative initiative to support investigative journalists embedded in NGOs. Encouraged to report on corruption specifically, this effort resulted in over 100 articles on the subject, of which 20 led to further action from the authorities. Further, UNDP supported the development and work of cross-party caucuses such as the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption, and sponsored the 10th anti-corruption benchmarking survey.

In efforts to reduce SGBV, UNDP facilitated support for the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention (the Istanbul Convention) on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. With Serbia ratifying the convention, UNDP is helping the country meet its standards. This includes improving the quality of

² Bloomberg Technology, "Serbia Cuts 2015 Gap by Almost Half Despite December Surge", 1 February 2016. Available from <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-02-01/serbia-cuts-2015-deficit-by-almost-half-despite-december-surge>

³ The World Bank, "Serbia Overview". Available from <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/serbia/overview> (accessed 8 June 2016)

and access to SOS hotline services by promoting the inclusion of women's NGOs as SOS hotline service providers. UNDP has also been working with 30 municipalities to better coordinate the services required, including health, social protection, the police, the judiciary and civil society. In 2015, positive results are already being seen with the timeliness and adequacy of responses improving in most municipalities.

“Combating violence against women is a strategic pillar of the policy to improve gender equality in Serbia. What gives the sense to life and politics, in front of pain and suffering of women victims of violence is an action that has a clear goal. And so, for me, the most important question is not where we are today, but where we’re going.”

– Ms. Zorana Mihajlovic, Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia and President of the Coordinating Body for Gender Equality

Complementing this, UNDP is also supporting the Work with Perpetrators programme within the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs. This programme provides individual and group therapy sessions in order to reduce the recidivism rate of the perpetrators of violence.

In Serbia, as in many countries across the ECIS region, ethnic minorities, and Roma in particular, remain vulnerable to poverty and discrimination. In efforts to alleviate the worst effects of poverty in Roma communities, UNDP piloted an inclusive housing model for Roma families in Southwest Serbia, refurbishing houses and constructing additional and legal housing for families formerly living in shacks. With a national Roma inclusion strategy being prepared in 2015, UNDP also continued its work with municipal Roma Coordinators, providing specialized trainings on

monitoring and evaluation frameworks, allowing them to more meaningfully contribute to the strategy.

In August 2015, UNDP joined the UN country team in working to address the refugee and migrant crisis, with a focus on supporting local communities to deal with increased pressure on municipal utilities and services. Immediate support was provided in Preševo and Šid, with analysis also completed in other municipalities in preparation for additional work in 2016. UNDP also worked closely with civil society in affected municipalities to strengthen community cohesion during this difficult time.



UNDP gets resources to where they are needed most, hiring the nearest available trucks and crews to help deal with the waste management challenge in Belgrade

Photo by: UNDP Serbia

CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNED AND THE WAY FORWARD

There are several positives for Serbia looking forward. Despite early parliamentary elections being held in 2016, in addition to regular provincial and local elections, continued work on reforms for EU accession is expected to remain a high priority. It is also expected that reform efforts will be helped by improving economic conditions, and a reduction in the large flows of refugees and migrants.

For UNDP, providing assistance and support for reforms required for EU membership will continue to be a key priority. As part of these efforts, support will be provided to joint initiatives on war crimes involving prosecutors from Serbia, Croatia and BiH. Work will also continue on parliamentary openness and accountability in the management of public

finances. New phases of the projects on parliamentary development and accountability in public finance management are planned, and will include opening data on procurement and public finance. Partnerships with municipalities will expand to help them manage the pressure on their infrastructure and services posed by migrants and refugee flows, as well as work on social cohesion and inclusiveness. This will be complemented by 30 additional infrastructure projects. Furthermore, to better prepare municipalities for emergency situations and disasters, UNDP has several initiatives planned. This includes a large programme covering 27 municipalities to improve emergency response abilities, and a conference on gender in disaster risk reduction that will serve as a platform to identify recommendations for future work.

In work to assist at-risk groups, UNDP will contribute to a new UN cross-agency project that will look to address challenges faced by women, youth and Roma. The main focuses of the project will be combatting violence against women, encouraging participation in regional initiatives to support the LGBTI community, and maintaining the dialogue on Roma inclusion.

Finally, in recent years, Serbia has passed significant reforms in rule of law, including the implementation of the 2013–2018 Strategy on Judicial Reform. However, further efforts are needed to safeguard the judiciary's effectiveness and independence, and to ensure the adoption of key pieces of legislation. UNDP plans to continue providing support and assistance to implement needed reforms in this area.



34 public hearings in the parliament and 18 mobile committee sessions of MPs



Launch of a portal that enables MPs to monitor public budget expenditures electronically



Minimum conditions and standards for provision of SOS helpline service for women survivors of violence adopted in 2015, as the main precondition for establishing 24/7 SOS hotline service for women victims of violence

Key results