

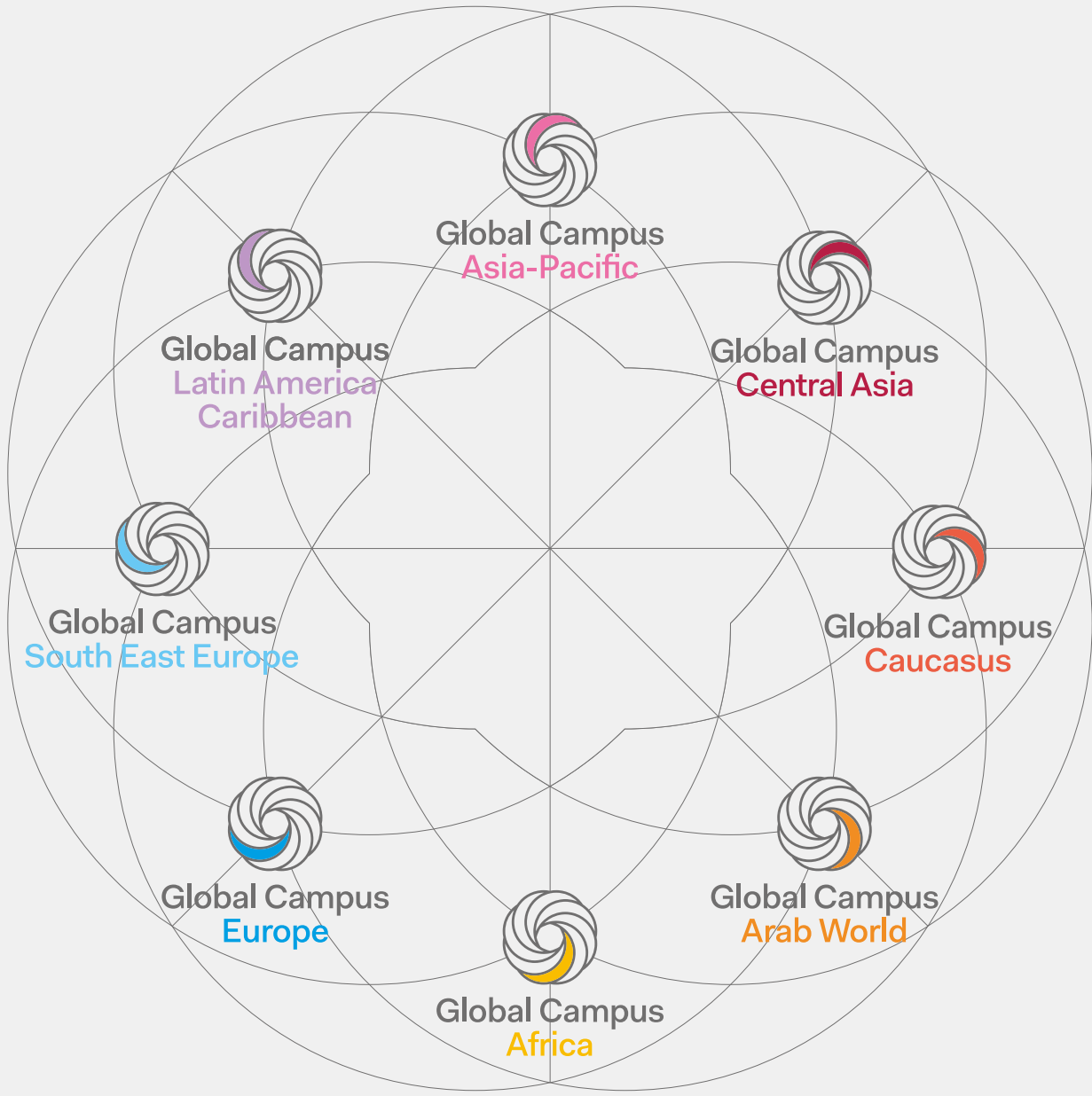
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# Navigating the Digital Waters in Education: The Importance of Promoting Digital Literacy and Teaching Digital Competences in South East Europe







# Global Campus of Human Rights

This policy brief is part of the **6th edition of the Global Campus Policy Observatory**, which revolves around the research project on '**The digitalisation of education systems and its impact on human rights, with particular attention to the right to education**', which was conceptualized and is led by GC Research Manager Dr. Chiara Altafin and which involves a team of seven policy analysts selected among alumni of GC regional programmes, namely Reda Benkhadra (GC Africa), Olga Lucía Camacho Gutierrez (GC Latin America and the Caribbean), Dr. Desara Dushi (GC Europe), Dr. Jean Linis-Dinco (GC Asia-Pacific), Goharik Tigranyan (GC Caucasus), Aida Traidi (GC Arab World), and Dr. Gergana Tzvetkova (GC South East Europe). Research outputs include workshop presentations, policy briefs, advocacy plans, and digital tools (infographics, webinars) developed in cooperation with the GC E-Learning Department.

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# Navigating the Digital Waters in Education: The Importance of Promoting Digital Literacy and Teaching Digital Competences in South East Europe

Gergana Tzvetkova <sup>1</sup>

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## Executive summary

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The worrisome rise of violence and abuse in the digital realm and the growing spread of misleading and harmful information raise the importance of developing skills linked to digital literacy and critical thinking in education. The ability to benefit from the advances of technology and communications without putting at risk children's and adults' privacy, physical, psychological and emotional well-being and safety is identified as crucial by many international and regional organisations, civil society organisations and state actors.

This policy brief explores how the digitalisation of education systems and the importance of acquiring digital skills and competences are presented in major international and regional frameworks. We explore a number of achievements and persisting challenges in these areas, focusing on four countries in South East Europe. Additionally, we identify potential best practices on the basis of which we derive specific policy recommendations. The brief also emphasises the importance of digital solutions in education, which have been designed to take into account human rights and the needs of vulnerable groups instead of exacerbating bias and discrimination.

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## Introduction

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This policy brief centres on three specific areas or needs that arise at the intersection of children's pursuit of the right to education and the advancement of digital technologies:

- Bring up to date and improve education systems so that they integrate and maximise the positive aspects of the digital age
- Foster, develop and improve the digital skills and competences of children and youth
- Ensure the digitalisation of education and the developing of digital skills do not exacerbate or create inequalities

Figure 1. Specific areas covered by this policy brief

The first two sections discuss the need for digitalising education systems, strengthening digital literacy and digital skills of children and adults, and building resilience against mis- and disinformation and abuse through technological means. We also outline the serious risks children face when exercising their right to education and using digital technologies to learn

and communicate – cyberbullying, hate speech, body shaming, etc. The lack for many children of accessible and affordable access to the digital world is also considered to highlight the need for legislation and policy that ensure the effective design, implementation and monitoring of various programmes and instruments related to digitalisation and the fostering of digital skills.

Next, we present four case studies from South East Europe (SEE).<sup>2</sup> We scrutinise the measures (pertinent to the needs identified above) that have been adopted and delineate areas for potential improvement in digitalisation and inclusive education in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia. Various activities and projects that can serve as the basis for good practices are presented. Ultimately, specific recommendations for policymakers, practitioners and educators are provided to help pupils, teachers and parents leverage the advantages of the digital age.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this policy brief, SEE will be understood to include the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia.

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## Problem description

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The rapid advancement of digital technologies is a double-edged sword, which is particularly true for the most vulnerable groups, especially children. On the one hand, digital technologies introduce children and young people to a captivating world where they can make new friends, communicate with peers, and learn. On the other hand, in this new world, children may be exposed to cyberbullying, hate speech, body shaming and unrealistic beauty standards. Furthermore, in many places, kids do not have access to affordable and high-quality digital technologies or lack the skills to use them. Thus, the following issues are identified and to be addressed:

- Insufficient **digitalisation** and access to internet
- Insufficient digital skills and media literacy that could **prevent risk exposure**

Digitalisation in education should be understood as the use of digital technologies and digitised information and data, thus leveraging their power. The Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No 25 has recognised: 'Meaningful access to digital technologies can support children to realize the full range of their civil, political, cultural, economic and social rights. However, if digital inclusion is not achieved, existing inequalities are likely to increase, and new ones may arise' (UNCRC 2021: 1). Children consulted during the drafting of the document expressed the opinion that 'the digital environment should support, promote and protect their safe and equitable engagement' (UNCRC 2021: 1).

A report by the then UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Koumbou Boly Barry, comprehensively recapitulates the negative impacts of digital technology on the right to education: rising inequalities, the growing involvement of commercial actors in

education, datafication and surveillance, threats to face-to-face education, standardisation of education to the detriment of cultural diversity, threats to the role of teachers as creative professionals and full partners, undermining structural approaches and debates, the unknown interplay of education, technology and health (UNGA 2022).

Such observations and recommendations are fully valid with respect to SEE countries. For instance, the 2nd Survey of Schools: ICT in Education showed that in Bulgaria and Croatia, there are less highly digitally equipped and connected schools at all ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) levels compared to the European average (European Commission 2019a; European Commission 2019b).

Mikić, Petrović & Sava (2023: 94) recognise as vital the ongoing digitalisation of education for developing the capabilities and the potential of young people in Serbia but also highlight that this is a long-term process because of the still-present inequality between urban and rural education institutions, different regions, etc. Differences between cantons are also present in BiH; combined with the insufficient digital competences of teachers, they hinder uniform progress and the achievement of set goals (Izetbegović, Kudra & Bešić 2023). A 2023 survey and report involving Bosnian youth demonstrated that high school students are both victims and perpetrators of digital violence and largely unaware about privacy and digital rights (Cerkez 2023). However, this is an across-the-board issue, a challenge for most countries and societies in the world.

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## Rationale for action

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There is a strong need to counter harmful phenomena, such as cyberbullying or the dissemination of misinformation, and to prepare citizens for the digital times. The digitalisation of education systems in the SEE region could improve the educational process by making it more efficient and fostering trust-based and stable relationships among school staff, teachers, parents and students.

Numerous existing analyses, recommendations and guidelines can serve as a solid framework for taking action. Koumbou Boly Barry called for linking discussions on the use of digital technologies in education to ‘the right of every person to free, quality, public education and the commitments of States in this regard under both international human rights law and Sustainable Development Goal 4’ (UNGA 2022: 3). Her cited report emphasises that to ensure empowerment, ‘the digitalization of education should not increase inequalities and benefit already privileged segments of societies only or lead to violations of other human rights within education, in particular the right to privacy’. Thus, there should be multifaceted actions, drawing upon the insights and contributions of various stakeholders. Including civil society and tech in decision- and policy-making is key to ensure that proposed and adopted measures are inclusive and do not prioritise certain social groups, thus exacerbating marginalisation and vulnerability. It is also essential to take into account the perspective and expectations of children. The **key requirements for child-centred digital inclusion and equality policies** offered in 2023 by UNICEF Innocenti may be seen as a good starting point:

- Focus on children as a key user group
- Apply digital inclusion and think of equality holistically
- Address inequalities by focusing on specific needs
- Follow an intersectional approach to supporting girls’ DI & E
- Drive broad-based digital literacy
- Focus on outcomes, not only inputs
- Aim to be future ready
- Embody a coordinated approach
- Be based on true multi-stakeholderism

In 2022, the EU launched a new strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+), aimed at protecting, respecting and empowering children online. The strategy, resting on three pillars – namely, safe digital experiences to protect children and to improve their well-being online, digital empowerment and active participation – commits to involving children in future implementation and monitoring (European Commission 2022). Notably, a Council of Europe (CoE) report highlighted that the consulted children shared that everybody should have access to the internet (but not without education and literacy), as well as that the ‘lack of digital literacy education in the state curriculum’ is especially problematic (CoE 2017: 16).

These documents also refer to the need to foster digital literacy and critical thinking when tackling digital risks. The cited General Comment No 25 notes that ‘States parties should ensure that digital literacy is taught in schools, as part of basic education curricula, from the preschool level’ and that these curricula should ‘include critical understanding, guidance on how to find trusted sources of information and to identify misinformation and other forms of biased or false content, including on sexual and reproductive health issues, human rights, including the rights of the child in the digital environment, and available forms of support and remedy’ (UNCRC 2021: 17). Significantly, among the several recommendations outlined in the 2023 UNICEF report ‘A Brighter Digital Tomorrow’ are

ensuring that digital commons are ‘accessible, equitable and safe for all children and youth’ and making sure that the digital environment’s potential for realising children’s rights (among which the right to education) is not overshadowed by the risks posed by digital technologies to children’s rights to privacy and protection from violence, exploitation and abuse (UNICEF 2023b: 14, 6).

Another point of reference for future policies is the EU Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027), which ‘sets out a common vision of high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe, and aims to support the adaptation of the education and training systems of Member States to the digital age’. The plan priorities are ‘Fostering the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem’ and ‘Enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation’. Moreover, the CoE Education Strategy (2024-2030) has three relevant pillars – ‘renewing the democratic and civic mission of education; enhancing the social responsibility and responsiveness of education; advancing education through a human rights-based digital transformation’ – and defines the ‘digital learner’ as one who is ‘aware of the impact of digital technologies and the digital environment on human rights, democracy and the rule of law’ (CoE 2023: 4). Thus, the ability to navigate the digital world is also linked to being a responsible citizen, who respects others’ rights and uses technology ethically.

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## Policy options

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Below, we focus on recent developments in four European countries: two EU member states – Bulgaria and Croatia, and two non-EU countries – BiH and Serbia. All countries are CoE members. Each case study starts with an overview of several advancements and areas where improvement is still needed in the aforementioned three key areas – the digitalisation of education systems, the cultivation of digital skills and competences, and the adoption of mechanisms to ensure inclusive digitalisation and training. These insights are derived from existing studies and reports. Subsequently, we briefly discuss activities and initiatives at the primary and secondary education levels, which could be considered good practices without claiming that the list is comprehensive. We aimed to include diverse examples, in terms of both topics (digitalisation of education, digital literacy, media literacy, increasing access to the digital sphere,

etc.) and formats (policy, conference, training, website, publication, etc.).

### Case 1: Bosnia and Herzegovina

Based on collected data, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development recommended an increase in ‘student access to digital technologies in the classroom’ to improve education outcomes and expanding internet access to develop the digital skills of both teachers and students (OECD 2022a). A pertinent report notes the post-COVID-19 prioritisation of digital learning in policy to improve the quality of education (UNICEF 2023a: 5).



## Positive developments and areas for improvement

### Positive developments

Guidelines for the improvement of online and blended teaching and learning for the educational system in BiH in the context of quality (and) inclusive education adopted by all cantonal governments (UNICEF 2023a)

Strategic document 'Improving the quality and relevance of professional education and training' in BiH published (includes provisions on digitisation, digital competencies, availability of digital tools)

In 2023, a partnership between UNICEF and the University of Sarajevo resulted in the launch of DigiEdu, the first learning platform for self-paced accredited courses for strengthening teachers' pedagogical-digital skills (Vashchenko 2023)

Strategy for the Development of Media and Information Literacy in the education systems of the Canton of Sarajevo adopted in 2022 (YouthWiki 2024a)

Republika Srpska started an education reform in 2019, which includes the digitalisation of educational materials and the procurement of IT equipment for 500 schools (YouthWiki 2024a)

### Good practices

A 2023 report assesses the **Akelius learning application** used by refugee and migrant children to study languages. The study found that Akelius 'contributed to the learning and personal development needs of both students and teachers' but recommended to equip schools with digital devices and ensure safe and sustainable digital learning (Poleschuk, Soldo & Dreesen 2023: 8).

The **Antenna in Sarajevo** organised several activities for teachers in BiH in late 2023, which aimed to highlight the importance of media and information literacy in the age of artificial intelligence (AI) and provide educators with the skills for supporting students in the digital world, always remembering to place human needs and rights at the centre of technological development (UNESCO 2023).

The **Mislimeter mobile app**, launched in October 2023, is 'designed to teach kids and teachers about

### Areas for improvement

Limited effort in supporting the digital transformation of education and training; more efforts are needed in this direction, including the capacity of systems to develop digital skills (European Commission 2023)

No noticeable progress after the adoption in 2021 of a document on vocational education and training (see the box on the left) (European Commission 2023)

At least 6% of the students who lack access to ICT are Roma (OECD, 2022b) and as of November 2023, 30.24% of the schools in BiH have no internet connection and 8.47% have moderate connectivity (Vashchenko 2023)

Media literacy is not part of educational curricula from an early age; public discussion on the matter is not adequate or does not include many relevant stakeholders (YouthWiki 2023a)

Digital competence is taught as a (compulsory) separate subject, but in other countries, it is common for at least two of the approaches to teaching digital competence to co-exist <sup>3</sup> (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2023).

media literacy and critical thinking'. It includes thematic modules on 'information analysis, recognising false information, distinguishing opinions from facts, understanding conspiracy theories and other engaging lessons (Delegation of the EU 2023).

A 2023 partnership between UNDP in BiH and Stemi aimed at boosting **girls' participation in the ICT sector in BiH**. The collaboration resulted in providing over 30 primary and secondary schools with science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) equipment and laboratories, developing an AI curriculum, enhancing teachers' self-confidence in STEM equipment use and involving at least 500 students (with an aim of 50% female participation) and 50 professors in the activity (Stemi 2023).

<sup>3</sup> These are compulsory/optional separate subjects; Integrated in other compulsory subjects; and Cross-curricular.

## Case 2: Bulgaria

Bulgaria remains significantly below the EU average regarding the share of the population aged 16-74 possessing 'at least basic digital skills' – for the country, this percentage is 31.18%, while the EU average is 53.92% (European Commission, DESI 2023). This is confirmed by the EU's 2022 Education and Training Monitor, which also mentions the even lower level of digital skills among adults (European

Commission, Directorate-General for Education 2022a). According to the 2022 Digital Economy and Society index, since 2019 the Bulgarian Ministry of Education has allocated EUR 1.6 million 'to reform and modernise kindergartens and schools with inclusive educational technologies, such as hearing aids, braille machines and other specialised software for children and students' (European Commission 2022a: 7).

## Positive developments and areas for improvement

### Positive developments

The Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria 2021-2030 developed by the Ministry of Education and Science lists as a priority area 'Educational innovation, digital transformation and sustainable development' (OECD 2022c)

The Strategic Framework (see box above) includes as specific objectives 'Training focused on the formation and development of key competencies and skills for living and working in the 21st century' and 'Overcoming regional, socio-economic and other barriers to access to education' (OECD 2022c)

High number of ICT specialists who are female (European Commission 2022a)

The 2022 Recovery and Resilience Plan envisages significant funding and efforts to speed up the digital transition, develop the population's digital skills and ensure inclusiveness of education and training, in particular for Roma and other disadvantaged groups (Council of Ministers 2022)

The Ministry of Education and Science launched an online platform in 2023 to address challenges related to remote teaching and learning

### Areas for improvement

Although most schools are connected to the internet, digital equipment and IT infrastructure in schools are still lagging behind. Teachers' insufficient digital competences also hamper the use of technology in classrooms (European Commission, Directorate General for Education 2022a)

Further efforts are needed to increase media literacy in Bulgaria, as Bulgaria ranks last in the EU with respect to it (Заедно в час (Teach for Bulgaria) 2022/2023)

As of November 2023, there is still no sustainable funding mechanism for the activities of the Safer Internet Centre, which develops materials aimed at raising public awareness of the risks children encounter when using the internet (UNICEF 2023c)

Digital competence is taught as a (compulsory) separate subject, but in other countries it is common for at least two of the approaches to teaching digital competence to co-exist <sup>4</sup> (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2023)

Improving educational outcomes and equity in education remain challenges for Bulgaria, while the inclusion of Roma has been identified as a key challenge (European Commission, Directorate General for Education 2023a)

<sup>4</sup> These are compulsory/optional separate subjects; Integrated in other compulsory subjects; and Cross-curricular.

### Good practices

Since 2005, the **Safer Internet Center** has designed various training methodologies and materials and conducted numerous training sessions for children, parents and professionals, aimed at helping children protect themselves from risks they encounter online. The organisation is a member of the European network of Safer Internet Centres INSAFE and the global network of 54 member hotlines INHOPE.

For six consecutive years, the Media Literacy Coalition has organised the **Media Literacy Days** campaign to unite the efforts of all people working in both formal and informal education to enhance media literacy for all age groups. **Schoolmedia.com** is a national online platform for student journalism, forming part of the **Media Literacy in the Classroom** initiative, which seeks to develop Bulgarian students' skills to assess, critically analyse, interpret and evaluate information.

Since the 2017 launch of the platform **Shkolo.bg**, its coverage has expanded to include 1,849 of 2,378 schools in Bulgaria. The platform is committed to contributing to the **digital transformation** of education in the country by providing software solutions to reduce bureaucracy in schools and

increase parent and student engagement (such as an electronic teacher's book, automatic notifications for parents and students, and the possibility for teachers and students to share and evaluate digital learning content, etc.).

### Case 3: Croatia

The share of the population aged 16-74 in possession of 'at least basic digital skills' is higher than the EU average, namely 63.37%, while 31.18% were identified as having 'above basic digital skills' (compared to 26.46% EU average) (European Commission, DESI 2023). For 2023, the number of female ICT specialists is relatively low – 9.4 thousand of individuals, compared to 34.9 thousands of individuals for Bulgaria and 1,771 thousands of individuals for the EU (European Commission, DESI 2023). The 2022 DESI report acknowledges that promoting digital literacy from a very early age remains a priority for the country; during the 2021 EU Code Week, Croatia was in the top ten countries in terms of the number of activities organised (1,111), which reached more than 68,000 participants, 49% of whom were women (European Commission 2022b: 7-8).

### Positive developments and areas for improvement

#### Positive developments

A strategic framework for digital maturity of the schools and school education (2030) was published in 2020; activities are funded by the European Social Fund and the national budget (European Commission 2022b: 7)

In March 2023, the National Plan for the Development of the Education System until 2027 and the accompanying Action Plan were adopted – the digitisation of the education system is a major goal (Eurydice 2023a)

The 2022 Digital Croatia Strategy 2032 was adopted – one strategic goal is digital transition as support for the development of the educational and research system (Eurydice 2023a)

#### Areas for improvement

Supplementary efforts, especially to increase the number of ICT specialists, are needed to reach the ambitious targets in the Digital Decade (European Commission 2022b: 8). There is a shortage of STEM teachers, although the government has taken measures to resolve the issue (European Commission, Directorate General for Education 2023b)

A study (Šabić, Baranović & Rogošić 2022) of teachers' self-efficiency in the use of ICT suggests that older female teachers should be given targeted support

Croatia still lacks a strategy devoted to media literacy and safe use of new media (YouthWiki 2023b)

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### Positive developments

The primary school curriculum and the secondary school curricula have topics dealing with media literacy in the Croatian language classes (YouthWiki 2023b)

The Agency for Electronic Media created a dedicated platform where teachers can access pedagogical tools (YouthWiki 2023b)

### Areas for improvement

Digital competence is taught as a (compulsory) separate subject, but in other countries it is common for at least two of the approaches to teaching digital competence to co-exist <sup>5</sup> (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2023)

There is limited information about the level of digital skills and competences of children from minorities and/or vulnerable groups

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### Good practices

The **Croatian Safer Internet Centre (SIC)** promotes a safer and better use of the internet and mobile technologies among children and young people. In collaboration with the telecommunications company A1 Hrvatska, the centre organises the Safer Internet Day campaign, which reaches children and youth, parents and guardians, teachers, educators and professional associates, as well as industry, decision-makers and politicians. In 2023, the campaign focused on online challenges (Safer Internet Day 2024).

The **Croatian Academic and Research Network (CARNET)** is a public institution operating since 1991 within the Ministry of Science and Education, focusing on ICT and its application in education. Its e-School (e-Škole) programme aims to guarantee a reliable ICT environment adapted to schools' needs, improve the efficiency and coherence of educational processes and improve digital competences and strategic leadership of schools to increase their digital maturity.

The project **Croatia - Schools of the Future** has been recognised as a good practice (Martinović 2023)<sup>6</sup> spanning 22 countries (among which BiH and Serbia). Its success lies in introducing more than 3,000 Croatian students and 400 teachers to AI over 16 months. Students developed and launched 300 chatbots and upgraded ten association websites, while more than 10,000 AI-related training sessions took place.

### Case 4: Serbia

OECD (2022d) reported that 'based on surveys of school principals, only about 40-50% of students in Serbia have adequate access to digital technology in the classroom' and that 'about 56% of teachers report having a need for professional development in ICT-related fields'. According to a study by the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications, 'more than 51 percent of the population over the age of 15 does not have any of the basic skills in the field of information and communication technologies: sending and receiving emails, internet search, word processing, etc.' (UNICEF 2022).

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<sup>5</sup> These are compulsory/optional separate subjects; Integrated in other compulsory subjects; and Cross-curricular.

<sup>6</sup> The Digital Skills & Jobs Platform contains descriptions of good practices from all over the world and is a good starting point and example for a repository of best practices related to digital skills, media literacy, etc.

## Positive developments and areas for improvement

### Positive developments

The Strategy of Digital Skills Development (2020 – 2024) defines digital skills as a necessary response to the emergence of new technologies (YouthWiki 2023c); The Strategy for Development of Education in Serbia by 2030 also discusses digitisation and digital skills (Eurydice 2023b). Action plans accompany both

The Digital Competence Framework – Teacher for a Digital Age (updated in 2019) aims to support teachers in integrating digital concepts, tools and content into everyday educational practice (YouthWiki 2023c)

In 2020, a new Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System (2020 – 2025) was adopted. It involves improving media literacy by continuing to introduce it into the formal education system, as well as developing the competencies of teachers and professors (YouthWiki 2023c)

Serbia is one of the European countries combining all three approaches to teaching digital competence at one or several education levels <sup>7</sup> (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice 2023)

SELFIE for work-based learning (SELFIE WBL) was piloted. A self-reflection tool for vocational schools that use WBL, it is designed to assess digital readiness and to encourage a practice of collective reflection on the use of digital technologies for teaching and learning; the average user satisfaction score for the pilot use was 7.31 (scale of 1 to 10) (European Training Foundation 2021: 31)

### Areas for improvement

Reporting on the implementation of the Strategy of Digital Skills Development would help identify those areas where more efforts, funds and resources are needed. The most recent report on the Education Strategy (see box on the left) shows that many targets for 2021-2022 were achieved, while others, like establishing state online primary and high schools and developing further the digital capacities of many educational institutions, remain (Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Education 2023)

A more recent report, similar to the 2019 Report on Digital Inclusion in the Republic of Serbia for the Period 2014–2018 (Ožegović 2019), would be helpful to determine the country's progress and remaining gaps in advancing digital inclusion

Although the strategy (see box on the left) does not exclude young people, it does not point out them as a separate target group YouthWiki 2023c)

There is no explicit policy on media literacy in the formal education system; at the level of primary and secondary education, media and information literacy are incorporated in the optional subject Citizenship Education (YouthWiki 2023c)

As a major challenge for the SELFIE WBL scale-up in Serbia has been identified the low involvement of schools and companies reluctant to digitalise and use the SELFIE WBL tool (European Training Foundation 2021: 34)

<sup>7</sup> These are compulsory/optional separate subjects; Integrated in other compulsory subjects; and Cross-curricular.

### Good practices

The Digital School – European Program has been recognised as noteworthy in the report on Strategy for Development of Education in Serbia by 2030 (Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Education 2023). The report recommends expanding this practice to the entire pre-university education system, given the gaps in digital capacities across numerous educational institutions. The programme’s website features the community of digital schools, utilising the SELFIE self-assessment tool, and welcomes other schools interested in joining.

The project ‘Stop Digital Violence’ has been implemented by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development. Activities aimed to engage children who are active on the internet encompass promotional campaigns, training and

conferences, and the development of manuals like ‘Digital Violence – Prevention and Response’ (YouthWiki 2023d). The 52nd ‘Education and Teaching Tools Fair’ provided a platform for promoting digital skills. Attended by students and teachers from approximately 60 secondary, vocational, musical and art schools, the event featured activities dedicated to dispersing stereotypes in both the physical and digital realms (UNDP 2023).

In 2023, as part of the ‘Bridging the Digital Divide in Serbia for the Most Vulnerable Children’ project, nearly 2,000 electronic devices were distributed to 30 primary schools. The aim was to facilitate the adaptation of teaching methods to digital education and provide learning and psychosocial support to many students, including those considered the most vulnerable (UNICEF 2023d).

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## Policy recommendations

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The countries mentioned in this brief are taking significant steps to promote digitalisation, digital skills and inclusion. Many initiatives, collaborations, and policy and legislative efforts have been realised or are underway. However, it is also important to shape and inform future policies and therefore we propose several specific policy recommendations. While the following policy recommendations are based on the analysed countries, the majority of them are applicable for all SEE countries.

### Recommendations for national governments of the analysed countries

#### Governments should:

- Put in place robust policies that promote and support the digitalisation of education systems, **inclusive digital education** and the fostering of **digital skills and competences**. The implementation of these policies should be monitored and regularly evaluated. Preferably, the policies should include a clear and comprehensive definition of digital literacy and a list of digital skills.
- Work, in collaboration with the EU and CoE, and through involving children, on **basic guidelines for digital tools in education**, including indicators for periodic monitoring and evaluation.

- Approach digitalisation from an **intersectional perspective** because this can help prevent the deepening of inequalities. Institutions should guarantee equal access to digitalised education and digital literacy training to all children, especially those from marginalised and vulnerable groups.
- Support independent studies to identify significant **risks posed by technologies and the internet** to children and possible solutions. Their findings should serve as the foundation of strategies and action plans.
- Support **independent studies** to evaluate the education digitalisation process and existing programmes for digital skills, digital literacy, media literacy and inclusive education. Such studies could help **monitor and review education strategies and action plans**.
- Include **compulsory programmes, subjects or training modules** in curricula that teach children **how to use digital tools ethically** and emphasise responsible online behaviour.
- Collaborate and **partner with civil society and the tech industry** to improve the digitalisation of education and design training tools; the needs, expectations and capabilities of children, teachers and education professionals should be taken into consideration.

- Adopt strategies, action plans, curricula and programmes to promote the digitalisation of education and **foster media and digital literacy**. To measure their effectiveness and ensure regular monitoring, benchmarks or indicators should be set, ideally at the EU or the CoE levels.
- Adopt a **policy on media literacy**. Ideally designed with the active involvement of media and civil society, this policy should ensure that, from a young age, people are equipped with the skills to assess information critically.
- **Cooperate with international donors and partners** to expand digitalisation and policies aimed at teaching digital competences. This could facilitate the introduction of good practices.
- Aided by civil society, put in place policies that encourage the **influx of more girls and young women** in the STEM sectors.
- Follow the trend (possibly good practice) to have in place **at least two of the approaches to teaching digital competence** (whether as a compulsory/ optional separate subject, integrated into other compulsory subjects or cross-curricular) and ensure the **coexistence of at least two of these teaching approaches**.
- Introduce lifelong learning programmes that foster digital skills within both secondary and tertiary education.

#### Recommendations for national governments and other actors (civil society, media, business) in the analysed countries

- Civil society should pressure governments and companies to ensure **ethical design, comprehensive and regular risk assessments**, and publication of detailed reports on the impact of digital technologies and digitalised education on children and teachers.
- **Quantitative and qualitative research** on digital skills and competences, internet access, inclusivity, etc., should include collecting disaggregated data. Such research should employ participatory methods to gather information about different vulnerable and marginalised groups because this could help address their specific needs.
- There should be a commitment to providing

**long-term funding** and securing the **continuity of projects** and initiatives like the Safer Internet Centres.

- The fact that certain digital literacy and media literacy skills can be taught without access to the internet (for instance, understanding phishing or developing critical thinking) should be considered when designing policies, curricula and training programmes.
- All actors should commit to supporting an infrastructure that allows students to access the internet not only within schools but also on their mobile devices, thus recognising that many skills develop in an informal setting, through peer-to-peer communication.

#### Recommendations for national governments in cooperation with international, regional or other actors such as foreign governments (including Italian institutions)

- Governments should **regularly monitor and assess** companies' compliance with the relevant acts and directives, especially with respect to adherence to human rights standards and protecting children's rights and safety. Where relevant, international and regional bodies should exercise monitoring as well.
- Assisted by civil society and informed by possible guidelines established by international or regional organisations, national governments should set **specific criteria** to evaluate the digital tools introduced in education systems, focusing on human-centred design, the centrality of children's safety and well-being, as well as on whether the tools reflect the needs of children, teachers, parents and education professionals.
- There should be a concerted effort, driven by the EU, CoE and governments, to pinpoint and promote **best practices** from the SEE region. Establishing criteria for recognising these practices as successful will help this process; some possible criteria include positive outcomes, compliance with ethical standards, engagement of multiple stakeholders, sustainability, etc. Such practices could include legislation, strategic documents, collaborative projects, school curricula, etc.
- Tools and frameworks such as the **SELFIE tool** or the **EU Digital Competences framework**, adopted by most countries, should be further promoted, resulting in standardised evaluation and self-evaluation at SEE and EU levels.

- Relevant Italian institutions and agencies (such as the Ministry of Education and Merit, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation) could aid the implementation of the above-

mentioned activities by participating in, and collaborating on, and potentially providing funding for, projects and programmes on the digitalisation in education and the development of digital skills.

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## Conclusion

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Considering these recommendations and building upon existing frameworks and policies, governments of SEE countries can and should work towards improving the digital skills of children and adults and enriching their knowledge about the benefits and risks associated with digital technologies. Aided by civil society, media and business, they should work towards more efficient, digitalised education systems, with less risk and more online inclusivity and accountability.

Any significant progress in these areas is connected to the constant and meaningful collaboration among diverse stakeholders at the national level. Sharing know-how and experience across borders, involving different countries, and engaging regional and international actors is equally important.



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