

## **SHADOW REPORT**

Implementation of the Council of Europe  
Convention on preventing and combating  
violence against women and domestic violence  
in Serbia

### **Article 16.**

National Network for the Work with Perpetrators  
of Domestic Violence-OPNA

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## 1. Introduction

This report was prepared by the National Network for the Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence -OPNA<sup>1</sup> in August-September 2024. During the preparation of the report, several civil society organizations dealing with the protection of victims of violence were consulted. These organizations had previously cooperated with OPNA in the context of the implementing victim-safety oriented perpetrator programmes: „Žene za mir“ Leskovac,<sup>2</sup> „Ženski centar Užice“,<sup>3</sup> „SOS Ženski centar“ Novi Sad,<sup>4</sup> Association of Roma Women „Osvit“ Niš<sup>5</sup> and „Oaza sigurnosti“ Kragujevac.<sup>6</sup> Their considerations and suggestions have been integrated into this document.

This report refers to the implementation of Article 16 of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (hereinafter referred to as the Istanbul Convention) in Serbia, focusing on programmes intended for perpetrators of domestic violence. Programmes for perpetrators of sexual violence are not addressed in the context of this document.

In order to collect current and up-to-date information on programmes working with perpetrators of domestic violence in Serbia, OPNA conducted research on existing programmes in the Ministry of Justice system, social welfare institutions and civil society organizations (Adamović Zdravković, 2024). The collected data included information on active programmes and their characteristics, specifically regarding their compliance with the European Standards for perpetrator programmes (WWP EN, 2023).

The National Network for the Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence - OPNA was established in 2015 as an informal network of nine institutions and organizations, mostly Social Welfare Centres, which implemented programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence at that time. In 2020, OPNA became a civil society organization, gathering professionals interested in implementing perpetrator programmes focused on ensuring victim safety.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://opna.org.rs/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://womenforpeace.org.rs/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://zenskicentaruzice.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://sosns.rs/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://osvit.rs/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ozasigurnosti.rs/>

## 2. Development of domestic violence perpetrator programmes in Serbia

The systematic introduction of the programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence in Serbia began in 2011, when their development was foreseen by the National Strategy for Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women in the Family and in Intimate Partner Relationship (2011-2015)<sup>7</sup>, within the framework of the social welfare system. As part of the project “Combating Sexual and Gender Based Violence”,<sup>8</sup> 16 experts from Social Welfare Centers were trained to implement the Norwegian “Alternative to Violence” programme.<sup>9</sup> After adapting the programme to the national context, these trained experts created a curriculum for working with perpetrators of domestic violence in Serbia (Sekulić & Malešević, 2012), and a training programme for professionals accredited by the Republic Institute for Social Protection.<sup>10</sup> During that period, perpetrator programmes were implemented in the Social Welfare Centres in Belgrade, Kragujevac and Niš, as well as by civil society organization “Crisis Center for Men” in Belgrade. The programmes began spreading to other Social Welfare Centers that underwent training (Čačak, Kraljevo, Subotica, Novi Sad, Leskovac, Kruševac), supported by short-term project funds.<sup>11</sup>

In 2017, an analysis on the compliance of perpetrator programmes in Serbia with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention and accompanying documents was conducted (Jovanović Belotić, 2017). The analysis identified 11 active programme providers,<sup>12</sup> while 4 institutions stopped providing this service.<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that, in most cases, programmes for perpetrators took place within the framework of the regular activities of these institutions, without specific funding for the implementation of this particular service. The analysis also pointed to multiple challenges in the implementation of these programmes in Serbia:

- the development of programmes within the social welfare system is driven by the personal motivation of professionals or the decision of Social Welfare Centres, without systemic coordination by the relevant ministry. This lack of coordination results in unreliable data on these programmes, the termination of a number of programmes, and implementation of some programmes in a way that can jeopardize the

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<sup>7</sup> Work with perpetrators of domestic violence is defined within the strategic area "Prevention", within the special goal "Preventing the recurrence of violence", in point 3.4.

<sup>8</sup> The project was implemented from 2009 till 2012 under the protection of the Directorate for Gender Equality of the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs, with professional and technical support from UNDP and financial support from the Kingdom of Norway.

<sup>9</sup> <https://atv-stiftelsen.no/english/>

<sup>10</sup> The professional training program was accredited in July 2012 and registered in the register of accredited programs under serial number 126. A summary of the program can be found [here](#). The program has not been reaccredited and is no longer active.

<sup>11</sup> As part of the project “Combating Sexual and Gender Based Violence” – the project implemented by the Directorate for Gender Equality of the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs, with professional and technical support from UNDP and financial support from the Kingdom of Norway.

<sup>12</sup> City Centre for Social Work in Belgrade, civil society organization "Crisis Center for Men" Belgrade, Center for Development of Social Services "Kneginja Ljubica" Kragujevac, Social Welfare Centres in Apatin, Osečina, Subotica, Niš, Vršac, Novi Sad, Nova Varoš and Sombor.

<sup>13</sup> Social Welfare Centres in Kraljevo, Čačak, Leskovac i Kruševac

safety of victims and the quality of work (e.g., implementation of programmes by professionals who have not undergone accredited training, providing marriage counseling in situations of violence and mislabeling that intervention as a programme for perpetrators of violence).

- difficulties in implementing these programmes within the regular activities of the Marriage and Family Counseling Centers operating within the Social Welfare Centres or local Centers for the Development of Social Services. Marriage and Family Counseling Centers in many local communities are the only resource for free counseling and psychotherapy for citizens, including victims of violence. Inducting the perpetrator programmes to these counseling centers without additional human resources, and bearing in mind that the same professionals cannot work with perpetrators and victims of violence at the same time, paradoxically denies support to victims of violence. At the same time the question of the capacity of the Marriage and Family Counseling Centers to implement these specialized programmes alongside their regular activities is raised. The analysis questioned if these service providers can implement programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence along the quality standards, particularly standards focusing the need to provide an independent support to the victims.
- although the curriculum for working with perpetrators of violence was assessed as adequate (meeting 7 out of 9 recommended indicators, according to Hester and Lilley, 2013), the programmes generally did not meet the recommended quality indicators. These indicators primarily relate to cooperation with victim support services, risk assessment, and inclusion of perpetrator programmes in a multisectoral framework.

The conclusions of the aforementioned analysis indicated the necessity of ensuring the quality of work by establishing standards. At the same time, following the development of this field at the European level and good practices with the acquisition of many years of work experience, has led many professionals to believe that programmes for working with perpetrators of violence must be implemented as specialized service. This includes close cooperation with organizations that provide support to victims. Further development of the programmes within the social welfare system takes place primarily in that direction. However, the efforts are still within civil society organizations, and without the involvement of the relevant ministry, i.e., without coordination with the relevant statutory bodies.

A group of experts from the NGO National Network for the Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence-OPNA, experts from civil society organizations working with victims of violence (such as “Oaza sigurnosti” from Kragujevac, “SOS Ženski centar” from Novi Sad, “Žene za mir” from Leskovac and “Peščanik” from

Kruševac) and representatives of the Republic and Provincial Institutes for Social Protection created a draft proposal for standards related to working with perpetrators of intimate partner violence in our country in 2018.<sup>14</sup> These standards clearly define that programmes must be implemented in cooperation with services that provide support to victims, establish procedures for joint work, and include continuous risk assessment. The special value of the standards is that they were created by both the professionals who work with perpetrators and professionals that provide support to victims of violence. The standards also provided a basis for further cooperation and joint implementation of programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence in Serbia. They were first piloted in Kragujevac and Novi Sad in 2019, and later in Niš, Leskovac and Užice in 2022, through projects supported by UNDP.<sup>15</sup> In each of these places, professionals working with perpetrators worked closely with professionals from victim support organizations (“Oaza sigurnosti” from Kragujevac, “SOS Ženski centar” from Novi Sad, “Žene za mir” from Leskovac, “Ženski centar Užice”, and “Osvit” Niš). Unfortunately, even though the standard proposal is aligned with international recommendations and good practices (WWP EN, 2023), it has still not been adopted by the relevant authorities, and not all service providers in our country follow these standards.

With the need to integrate the new approach in working with perpetrators into the training of professionals, in 2022 a group of experts created and accredited a new programme for working with perpetrators of intimate partner violence at the Republic Institute for Social Protection. The new curriculum and training programme, in addition to topics relevant to the problem of partner violence, also defines the way of cooperation with specialized services for victim support, continuous joint assessment and risk management during the implementation of the programme and extends the duration of the programme (Jovanović Belotić, Adamović Zdravković, Padejski Šekerović, Perić and Petronijević, 2022).<sup>16</sup>

Programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence within the Ministry of Justice have been developed for the past few years, within the Administration for the Execution of Criminal Sanctions (district prisons and penitentiary institutions). A specialized programme was created within the project supported by the Council of Europe and the European Union<sup>17</sup> and it was turned into a curriculum with clear guidelines for work. The aforementioned curriculum was made available to all penitentiary institutions and district prisons, and employees received additional training for the implementation of

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<sup>14</sup> Draft proposal of the standards was developed under the project “Integrated Response to Violence against Women and Girls in Serbia II.” The project was financially supported by the Government of Sweden, and implemented by UNDP, UNICEF, UN Women and UNFPA. The main partner in the project is the Coordinating Body for Gender Equality.

<sup>15</sup> The projects were part of the comprehensive project „Integrated response to violence against women and girls in Serbia”, phases 2 and 3. The project was financially supported by the Government of Sweden, and implemented by UNDP, UNICEF, UN Women and UNFPA. The main partner in the project is the Coordinating Body for Gender Equality.

<sup>16</sup> The program „RESTART - Training of professionals for the implementation of a programme for working with perpetrators of intimate partner violence based on victim safety“ is accredited by the Republic Institute for Social Protection under serial number 324. The list of accredited programs can be seen [here](#).

<sup>17</sup> „Strengthening human rights protection of persons deprived of liberty and convicted persons in Serbia“, phase II, which was implemented by the Council of Europe in Serbia in cooperation with the Administration for the Execution of Criminal Sanctions, with the financial support of the European Union and the Council of Europe.

this programme, as part of the efforts of the Administration for the Execution of Criminal Sanctions to standardize the quality of work with convicted persons in all penitentiary institutions and district prisons.

### 3. Current situation of the programmes implemented in the social welfare system

Research conducted in 2024 (Adamović Zdravković, 2024), which was forwarded to all relevant institutions in the social welfare system (Social Welfare Centres and local Centres for the Development of Social Services) in Serbia and civil society organizations (NGOs) that implemented the programmes, identified the existence of 13 programmes in Serbia, 4 of which are currently active.<sup>18</sup>

*Table 1: Organizations providing programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence in Serbia*

	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Type of the organization</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Status</b>
1.	City Center for Social Work - Marriage and Family Counseling Center	Statutory	Belgrade	active
2.	Centre for the Development of Social Services - Marriage and Family Counseling Center	Statutory	Užice	active
3.	Association of children with developmental disabilities and their parents	NGO	Bajina Bašta	active
4.	Social Welfare Centre - Intermunicipal counseling center for premarital, marital and family relationships	Statutory	Vršac	active
5.	<i>Social Welfare Centre – Marriage and Family Counseling Center</i>	<i>Statutory</i>	<i>Subotica</i>	<i>inactive</i>
6.	<i>Social Welfare Centre</i>	<i>Statutory</i>	<i>Apatin</i>	<i>inactive</i>
7.	<i>Social Welfare Centre ‘St Sava’- Marriage and Family Counseling Center</i>	<i>Statutory</i>	<i>Niš</i>	<i>inactive</i>
8.	<i>Social Welfare Centre</i>	<i>Statutory</i>	<i>Novi Sad</i>	<i>inactive</i>

<sup>18</sup> 82 institutions/organizations responded to the questionnaire, about half of those to whom the questionnaire was sent.

9.	<i>Social Welfare Centre</i>	<i>Statutory</i>	<i>Čačak</i>	<i>inactive</i>
10.	<i>Social Welfare Centre</i>	<i>Statutory</i>	<i>Leskovac</i>	<i>inactive</i>
11.	<i>National Network for the Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence - OPNA</i>	<i>NGO</i>	<i>Leskovac<sup>19</sup></i>	<i>inactive</i>
12.	<i>PEC - Preventive Educational Center</i>	<i>NGO</i>	<i>Niš</i>	<i>inactive</i>
13.	<i>Center for the Development of Social Services in Kragujevac „Kneginja Ljubica“</i>	<i>Statutory</i>	<i>Kragujevac</i>	<i>inactive</i>

In addition to the information presented in the Table 1, results of the mapping in 2017 (Jovanović Belotić, 2017) showed that the programmes were also implemented in Sombor, Nova Varoš and Osečina. However, the information obtained via phone for the purpose of collecting the data for this shadow report shows that the programmes are not currently being implemented in the aforementioned cities.

A significant decrease in the number of active **service providers** was observed when compared to the previous mapping (11 active service providers identified in 2017 versus 4 active service providers identified in 2024).<sup>20</sup> The described decline may partially reflect incomplete data, as not all institutions that received the questionnaire responded. Information from institutions and organizations that no longer implement programmes points to several key reasons for the termination of these services: lack of funding, negative impact on core activities (as existing resources had to be reallocated to perpetrator programme implementation), and the inability to ensure quality work according to established standards. As many as 12 institutions/organizations that initially offered this service are no longer doing so.<sup>21</sup>

Public longer-term **funding** is available just for one programme currently being implemented in Serbia (the programme in Bajina Bašta). The programme is defined as one of the social welfare services and is funded by the local government, while the engaged professionals are implementing only this service. This kind of specifically dedicated longer-term funding represents a good practice. In the other three active perpetrator programmes (Belgrade, Užice and Vršac) the work with perpetrators is implemented as part of the Marriage and Family Counseling Centres within the Social Welfare Centres and Centre for the Development of Social Services. This means that there is no specifically dedicated financing for the programme, leading to institutions

<sup>19</sup> OPNA is registered in Leskovac. However, this NGO is a network that gathers experts from different cities in Serbia, and thus has been implementing programmes in several cities in Serbia.

<sup>20</sup> Note, from one organization, which was identified as a service provider in the 2017 survey, no responses were received in the 2024 survey (NGO "Crisis Center for Men" Belgrade).

<sup>21</sup> The reference is to 9 programs that are currently inactive (as listed in table number 1), and 3 programs that were identified in the 2017 research, and contacted via phone for the purpose of obtaining information for this report (Sombor, Nova Varoš and Osečina).



implementing programmes within already existing resources, while these professionals usually have other roles (counseling and psycho-therapy).

The research also indicated a small **number of perpetrators of violence** who are enrolled in the programmes (Adamović Zdravković, 2024). A total of 75 perpetrators of violence in Serbia were referred to the programmes in 2023, that is, 48 perpetrators in the period January-May 2024. Given that the police in Serbia in 2023 registered 28,413 incidents of domestic violence and 22,695 so-called risky perpetrators of violence (Ignjatović, 2024), it is clear that the number of those referred to the programmes is negligible.

*Table br. 2: The number of perpetrators referred to the programme in 2023 and 2024 in Serbia*

Service providers	The number of perpetrators referred to the programme	
	2023	2024 <sup>22</sup>
City Centre for Social Work - Marriage and Family Counseling Center, Belgrade	53	38
Centre for the Development of Social Services - Marriage and Family Counseling Center, Užice	7	1
„Association of children with developmental disabilities and their parents“, Bajina Bašta	3	1
Social Welfare Centre - Inter-municipal counseling center for premarital, marital and family relationships, Vršac	12	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>48</b>

The practice of referring perpetrators to programmes is mainly developed in Belgrade. This issue is likely related to the size of the city (Belgrade, with approximately 1.6 million inhabitants, is the most populous city in the country). Additionally, the programme for perpetrators in Belgrade stands out as one of the few with consistent continuity in its operations. It's interesting to note that the programme in Bajina Bašta, for which longer-term and dedicated funding is provided, is not being fully utilized and that the number of referred perpetrators is negligible. It can be assumed that the small number of referred perpetrators in Serbia is connected with insufficient service providers on one hand, especially lack of those working continuously, which is crucial for court referrals. On the other hand, this can be due to insufficient information that potential referral authorities have about programmes for

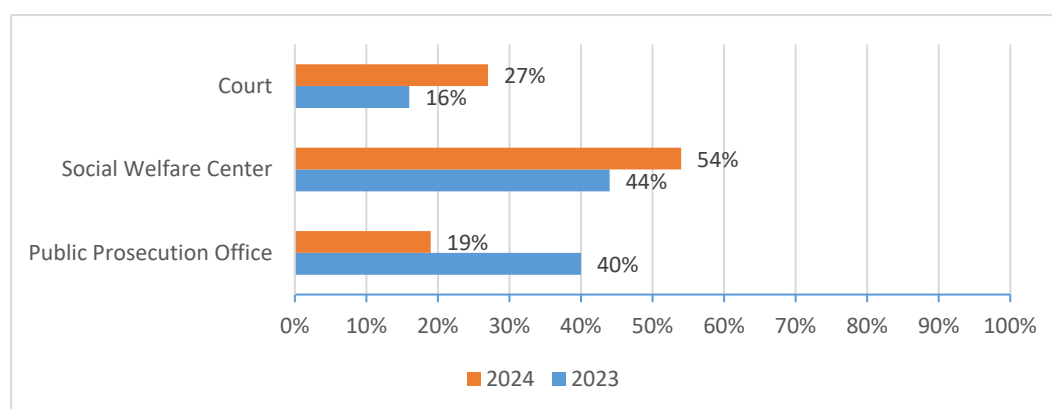
<sup>22</sup> It refers to the period January-May (questionnaires were filled in April and May 2024)

perpetrators of violence. It is important to note that the number of perpetrators who complete these programmes is certainly even smaller, but no data were collected on this within the aforementioned research.

The lack of referrals to programmes, and the shutting down of the majority of programmes for perpetrators of violence in the country is particularly indicative in relation to the fact that the number of perpetrators of violence who relapse increases from year to year. As stated in the Twelfth Report on the Independent Monitoring of the Implementation of the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence in Serbia for 2023, the number of perpetrators who repeated violence increased from 6,002 perpetrators in 2019 to 10,365 perpetrators in 2023 ( Ignjatović, 2024). Programmes for working with perpetrators of violence can certainly be one of the measures that will contribute to preventing the recurrence of violence.

In terms of **referral methods**, the dominant sources of referrals are the Social Welfare Centres and Public Prosecutor's Offices.

*Chart 1: Percentage of referred perpetrators according to referral authority in 2023. i 2024.<sup>23</sup>*



Legal mechanisms for referring perpetrators to programmes are not sufficiently developed, while the existing mechanisms are underutilized. Perpetrators may be referred to programmes in one of the following ways:

- by the court in the case of a suspended sentence with a protective supervision when the perpetrator is convicted of the crime of domestic violence. Article 73 of the Criminal Code, in point 9, foresees the possibility of imposing the obligation to "visit certain professional and other counseling centers or institutions and act according to their instructions." The imposition of this obligation can also be applied to the criminal offense of domestic violence. In practice, this mechanism is

<sup>23</sup> It refers to the period January-May (questionnaires were filled in April and May 2024)

rarely used and applied mainly in Belgrade (only one perpetrator was referred to a programme outside Belgrade in this way in 2023 and 2024).

- by the Public Prosecutor's Office through the application of the institute of deferred prosecution. Based on the Code of Criminal Procedure, Article 283, point 6, the public prosecutor can postpone criminal prosecution if the perpetrator “undergoes psychosocial treatment to eliminate the causes of violent behavior”. This referral mechanism has been criticized because it allows individuals to avoid criminal proceedings and punishment (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021). The GREVIO committee (2022) clearly emphasized in its evaluation procedures that referral to programmes for perpetrators of violence should not serve as a substitute for the prosecution, trial or punishment of perpetrators. Although criticized, this mechanism is still used. This is likely due to the absence of other, more appropriate referral mechanisms for individuals who are not yet in criminal proceedings and convicted.
- referral by the Social Welfare Centre is possible through the development of a beneficiary service plan, or through imposing measures of corrective supervision over the exercise of parental rights. These mechanisms are significant because they allow perpetrators to enter programmes independently of other initiated proceedings and include individuals who are not part of the criminal justice system. However, they can only be formulated as recommendations and cannot mandate perpetrators to participate in the programmes.

Voluntary inclusion of offenders in programmes has not been well-developed; it occurs sporadically, often when clients seek Marriage and Family Counseling Centers for other reasons, mainly couple therapy.

In a recent study by Adamović Zdravković (2024), the focus was on assessing the compliance of perpetrator programmes with the European Standards for Perpetrator Programmes (WWP EN, 2023), i.e. the provisions of the Istanbul Convention and its accompanying documents (CoE, 2011). The research gave an overview of good practices, such as **collaboration** between professionals from the National Network for the Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence (OPNA) and various **women support services** such as „Oaza sigurnosti“, „SOS Ženski centar“, „Žene za mir“, „Osvit“, and „Ženski centar Užice“. Following the draft standard that was jointly developed (Jovanović Belotić, 2019), these organizations collaborated closely on each case, **jointly assessed the risk**, created measures to manage that risk, continuously exchanged information, and directed all activities toward the well-being and safety of victims of violence. However, despite the promising results, the described practices were "short-lived", due to lack of funding for such models.

The described good practices are unevenly applied in Serbia (Adamović Zdravković, 2024). Many current programmes lack established procedures for assessing and managing risks, there is no cooperation with women's non-governmental

organizations, or it is limited only to referring victims to support (and not to exchange and joint work). Some programmes provide victim support at the same location where they work with perpetrators of violence, or the same professionals work with both victims and perpetrators, which goes against European standards. These practices are mainly due to limitations imposed by the very context in which the programmes are implemented: having contact with victims of violence while respecting all standards is difficult to achieve from the point of view of a social welfare institution, which has various other responsibilities. Similarly, in the case where dedicated funding for a perpetrator programme exists (in Bajina Bašta), it does not include resources for the local victim support NGO to conduct partner contact with victims. The aforementioned research once again prompts the question of the possibility of implementing these programmes as a regular activity of social welfare institutions, and advocates the establishment of specialized programmes, with dedicated human and financial resources, which will work according to standards.

Research by Adamović Zdravković (2024) indicates that the perpetrator programmes in Serbia are mostly aligned with European standards in terms of **methodology** (when it comes to programme structure, programme design that was created specifically for male perpetrators of violence against female partners, principles and topics on which the program is based). However, there is room for improvement, including increasing the programme duration from 39 to 51 hours, further expanding the focus on masculinity and gender roles, enhancing professional training hours, providing supervision and conducting programme evaluation.

#### **4. Current situation of the programmes implemented within Ministry of Justice system**

Since 2022, the Ministry of Justice has developed a specialized programme for perpetrators of domestic violence within the system of institutional sanctions, (including district prisons and penitentiary institutions). This programme is carried out as part of the regular activities of professionals employed in treatment services at penitentiary institutions and district prisons. It was created as a result of project activities and has since been made available to all penitentiaries and district prisons. Additionally, the employees of these institutions have undergone additional training for the implementation of this programme.

The programme is not implemented within the framework of the Probation Service,<sup>24</sup> which focuses on monitoring individuals serving sentences outside of prison, and which has offices in 25 cities in Serbia. The reason for the absence of these programmes is insufficient human resources for their implementation. At the same time, the impression is that the cooperation between the Probation Offices and the

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<sup>24</sup> In Serbian „Poverenička služba“, or „Odeljenje za izvršenje vanzavodskih sankcija i mera“

perpetrator programmes within the social welfare system and civil society organizations is underdeveloped. Perpetrators are not referred to these programmes by the Probation Service (Adamović Zdravković, 2024). This could be a way to ensure that perpetrators of domestic violence who are monitored by the Probation Service are also included in perpetrator programmes.

The research identified 4 active programmes within the Ministry of Justice system, and 5 institutions that currently do not implement programmes (Adamović Zdravković, 2024).

*Table 3: Institutions within the Ministry of Justice that implement/have implemented programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence* <sup>25</sup>

	<b>Current programme implementers</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Status</b>
1.	Special prison hospital	Belgrade	active
2.	Penitentiary institution	Pančevo	active
3.	Penitentiary institution	Sombor	active
4.	District Prison	Zaječar	active
5.	<i>District Prison</i>	<i>Vranje</i>	<i>inactive</i>
6.	<i>District Prison</i>	<i>Leskovac</i>	<i>inactive</i>
7.	<i>District Prison</i>	<i>Smederevo</i>	<i>inactive</i>
8.	<i>District Prison</i>	<i>Kraljevo</i>	<i>inactive</i>
9.	<i>Penitentiary institution Zabela</i>	<i>Požarevac</i>	<i>inactive</i>

All aforementioned institutions that have implemented or are implementing a perpetrator programme are following a curriculum intended for individuals who have committed violence against a family member (partner, children, parents, siblings, etc.). This programme is not specially designed for certain groups of perpetrators of domestic violence, such as male perpetrators of intimate partner violence, which is one of the recommendations of the European Standards (WWP EN, 2024). The programme consists of 16 sessions, each lasting 90 minutes.

Considering the compatibility of the programmes implemented in the system of the Ministry of Justice with European standards, Adamović Zdravković (2024) gives the impression that the programme is dominantly focused on developing conflict management and emotion regulation skills, while it lacks sufficient representation of topics related to attitudes towards women, masculinity, gender roles, and fatherhood. However, it's important to note that the research did not include a curriculum analysis or focus groups with professionals, so definitive conclusions cannot be drawn. This raises questions about how gender-informed the work with perpetrators of violence in

<sup>25</sup> Note: the research collected data from about half of the penitentiaries and district prisons in Serbia.

prisons in Serbia is. Also, to what extent is it possible to create a gender-based perpetrator programme if the same curriculum is applied to perpetrators of violence against all family members (violence against children, against partners, against parents, and other family members). Professionals involved in the research highlighted challenges in forming a homogeneous group of perpetrators of domestic violence, which is why they sometimes work with a heterogeneous group not only of perpetrators of domestic violence but also of other crimes, which then further raises the question of the effects of working in such a mixed context.

It is beneficial that the Ministry of Justice has organized an 8-day training (64 hours) for the administration of this particular programme. Bearing in mind that the training is designed for working with various groups of convicted individuals, including alcohol and drug addicts, perpetrators of domestic violence and perpetrators of other crimes - and not specifically for perpetrators of domestic violence or partner violence, the existing training programme in this segment is not aligned with European standards (WWP EN, 2023) which define longer, specialized training (minimum 84 hours), as well as the necessity of creating a specific programme for each target group of perpetrators of violence (Adamović Zdravković, 2024).

There is significant room for improvement in post-criminal protection of victims, particularly in establishing cooperation between penitentiary institutions, district prisons, and Probation Offices with community-based perpetrator programmes. This cooperation is crucial during the period when perpetrators are released from prison, which typically carries an increased risk of repeated violence.

## **5. Key barriers and recommendations**

Since the first baseline evaluation by the GREVIO committee (GREVIO, 2020), some progress has been made in developing high-quality and effective perpetrator programmes in Serbia. A model of victim-safety oriented perpetrator work was developed and piloted in close cooperation with NGOs that provide support to victims in Kragujevac, Novi Sad, Leskovac, Užice, Bajina Basta and Niš. This model, which implied a partnership between professionals of the National Network for the Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence -OPNA and local women's NGOs („Oaza sigurnosti“, „SOS Ženski centar“, „Osvit“, „Žene za mir“, „Ženski centar Užice“ showed promising results that can serve as a reference point for further programme development in the country. Furthermore, a new curriculum for working with perpetrators of violence was created, integrating joint work with victim support services and procedures for risk assessment and management. In addition, it extends the duration of work with perpetrators of violence and integrates good practices on the topics of masculinity, gender roles, fatherhood and other important topics. Based on this curriculum, a professional training programme was created and accredited. A programme for perpetrators of domestic violence was created and established within the Administration for the Execution of Criminal Sanctions under the Ministry of Justice.

However, the described progress was achieved due to the efforts of dedicated professionals and international organizations that supported these activities. Insufficient work has been done to ensure the conditions for implementing these programmes, as well as to follow the recommendations previously given by the GREVIO committee. These recommendations are related to providing adequate resources for the sustainable implementation of programmes (especially those outside prisons), adopting standards, and evaluating programmes. These tasks cannot be implemented without the involvement of government ministries and state institutions.

Presented below are the key barriers in establishing effective perpetrator programmes focused on victim safety in Serbia, along with recommendations for their improvement.

- ***Lack of understanding of perpetrator programmes as specialized services;*** the previous approach of state institutions in establishing perpetrator programmes was reflected in placing these programmes within existing services in the social welfare system (most often Marriage and Family Counseling Centers within the Social Welfare Centres), without additional funding or dedicated human resources. This approach not only jeopardized the capacity of most of these institutions to perform their basic activities but also made it impossible for the programmes to be implemented according to defined quality standards (Adamović Zdravković, 2024; CoE, 2024; Jovanović and Vall, 2022). Furthermore, this approach significantly limits the number of perpetrators who can participate in the programmes. In most local communities, it also has a negative impact on victims by preventing them from accessing the only service offering free counseling or psychotherapy, without implying that they will be working with the same professionals who are treating the perpetrators of violence.

#### Recommendations:

- ✓ establish programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence as specialised services.
- ✓ even if the programmes are developed within existing institutions, ensure additional human and financial resources for their implementation.
- ***Lack of financing for perpetrator programmes and organizations that provide support to victims;*** perpetrator programmes in Serbia have mostly been implemented without additional funding. When there has been additional funding, it has typically been project-based and short-term, mostly from international donors rather than from the state or local budgets.

#### Recommendations:

- ✓ ensure stable funding for perpetrator programmes.
- ✓ ensure stable funding for organizations that provide support to victims and activities they carry out to protect victims in the context of cooperation with perpetrator programmes.

✓ ensure that funding for perpetrator programmes does not reduce resources for victim support.

- ***Lack of a systemic solution regarding the issue of service providers of perpetrator programmes***; it is insufficiently clear who can be a service provider for working with perpetrators of domestic violence. Existing practices where programmes are developed within the Marriage and Family Counseling Center in many local areas actually jeopardize the support provided to victims and limit the capacity for the development of this service. In some local areas, Marriage and Family Counseling Centres do not even exist. There is also a lack of strategic planning on the most effective models for establishing these programmes, including whether programmes should be developed predominantly in the social welfare system and refer perpetrators there from different referral authorities, or whether social welfare system and the Ministry of Justice should develop separate programmes.

- Recommendations:

✓ continue developing specialized programmes for working with perpetrators of domestic violence in district prisons and penitentiary institutions within the Ministry of Justice, given the specific nature of working with perpetrators in that system, as well as the existing resources and expertise.

✓ develop perpetrator programmes outside of prison in the social welfare system. This should take into account the already existing capacities and expertise in that system. Considering the limited resources in both systems, the decision to develop programmes in one instead of two systems is more affordable. This approach also enables the further development of the specialized expertise of the professionals who would implement the programmes.

✓ establish cooperation between the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Justice and other relevant institutions regarding the financing of the programmes.

✓ refer perpetrators from various referral authorities to specialized programmes within the social welfare system. This includes referrals from courts, Probation Offices, Social Welfare Centres, the police, and others. This approach ensures that the perpetrators of violence, regardless of where they were identified within the system, are held accountable and guided to change their beliefs and behavior.

✓ establish cooperation between prisons, Probation Service and programmes within the social welfare system, in order to include perpetrators in programmes during the post-penal period.

✓ best practice implies providing services in the social welfare system through specialized NGOs, based on a piloted model in relation to the created draft standard (Jovanović Belotić, 2019). This ensures that programmes can meet quality standards,



without compromising support for victims or creating conflicts of interest or professional roles.

- ***Lack of mechanisms for referral of perpetrators and timely application of the existing mechanisms;*** mechanisms for mandating perpetrators into programmes exist only within the criminal justice system, which covers only a small percentage of perpetrators who have been charged and convicted. There are no mechanisms in place to mandate inclusion in programmes in other situations, such as when emergency measures are imposed under the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence, or protection measures under the Family Law. Social Welfare Centres play a crucial role in referring perpetrators to programmes and can reach a broad group of perpetrators of violence. However, these referrals take the form of a recommendation. There are currently no activities which promote and stimulate the voluntary involvement of perpetrators of violence in programmes.

- Recommendations:

- ✓ form a working group with the task of defining the model of referring perpetrators outside of the criminal justice system in perpetrator programmes, and integrating this model into the legislative framework. It is recommended that referral to the perpetrator programme is defined as one of the protection measures within the Family Law.

- ✓ issue an instruction to Public Prosecutor's Offices regarding the application of the institute of deferred criminal prosecution in situations of domestic violence, i.e. referring perpetrators to programmes, bearing in mind that these programmes should not replace criminal prosecution, trial or punishment.

- ✓ conduct continuous training of all potential referral authorities on the importance of the perpetrator programme and the method of referral.

- ***Absence of programme quality assurance activities;*** the standards developed by civil society organizations, the Republic and Provincial Institute for Social Protection have not been adopted or recognized by the competent ministry. Although the development of standards is envisioned as one of the activities within the Strategy for the prevention and fight against gender-based violence against women and domestic violence for the period 2021-2025 (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021), no steps have been taken in this direction.

Recommendations:

- ✓ adopt standards for working with perpetrators of violence.

- ✓ define mechanisms for continuous programme evaluation.

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