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ANIMAL WELFARE AND CORRUPTION IN SERBIA – HOW THE STATE ENABLES SYSTEMATIC ANIMAL ABUSE***

Summary: *This study investigates how systemic corruption within Serbia's publicly funded animal-welfare apparatus perpetuates large-scale cruelty toward dogs and cats. Its primary aim is twofold: (1) to trace the legal and administrative gaps that allow municipal authorities to outsource statutory animal-control duties to profit-driven private contractors, and (2) to show how this outsourcing – coupled with weak enforcement and opaque public spending – transforms shelters into sites of abuse, illicit killing and financial misuse. To achieve these aims, the research employs a qualitative, document-based methodology. It triangulates the analysis of legal provisions, publicly available documents, responses to FOI requests, reports from the State Audit Institution and the Ombudsman, and investigative journalism. Selected case studies of both public and private shelters are cross-referenced with media evidence to map recurring patterns of legal evasion, inflated contracting, and systemic animal abuse. Although field interviews were not conducted, the breadth of institutional sources enables a reconstruction of governance failures and corruption pathways. The objective is to demonstrate that the suffering of abandoned animals is not an accidental by-product of social neglect but a structurally reproduced outcome of legal inertia, administrative indifference and profit-seeking behaviour. By quantifying public expenditures – over €50 million for zoohygiene services and a further €43 million in dog-bite compensation during 2017–2020. – the paper exposes stark inefficiencies and perverse incentives that thwart humane, cost-effective solutions such as municipal catch-neuter-return programmes and regulated breeding. The findings seek to initiate policy reform, strengthen prosecutorial oversight and re-centre animal welfare within Serbia's rule-of-law agenda.*

Keywords: *animal welfare, abandoned animals, criminal offences, corruption*

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1. INTRODUCTION

A proper coexistence of humans with other members of the living world, and especially with animals as sentient beings, is one of the prerequisites for establishing the rule of law.¹ Animals, as beings capable of experiencing pain, suffering, fear, and stress, have interests that deserve to be nurtured and protected from human harm, both through ethical actions and through the laws that humans enact on their behalf.² However, in practice, we often encounter a form of speciesism – a bias that favors human interests over those of other species, treating non-human beings as ethically irrelevant and negligible.³ This attitude enables institutional irresponsibility and creates space for the abuse and neglect of animals. Such neglect and abuse are particularly evident in the case of abandoned animals, which are the most vulnerable and are often left to the care of publicly funded shelters, and it is precisely these animals that constitute the focus of this paper.

State-funded shelters for abandoned animals in the Republic of Serbia are financed by taxpayers, yet they remain largely closed to public scrutiny. This secrecy stands in direct contradiction to Article 67(2) of the Serbian Animal Welfare Act,⁴ which obligates shelter managers to cooperate with animal protection organizations and regularly inform the public about the animals under their care.

1 Tomislav Nedić, Dubravka Klasiček, 'Questioning Animals' Status as Objects of Property Rights in Croatian and Comparative Property Law' (2023) 39(2) *Pravni vjesnik* 54.

2 David Favre, 'Living Property: A New Status for Animals Within the Legal System' (2010) 93(3) *Marquette Law Review* 1070.

3 The most well-known critic of speciesism, Peter Singer, points out that we must assign the same value to the lives of animals and humans who are at the same level of mental development. Therefore, the life of an animal can be more valuable than the life of a human, because the characteristics of a being determine the value of its life (Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation – The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement, 40th anniversary edition* (Open road integrated media, New York 2015) 52-53). Tom Regan, an American philosopher and another prominent opponent of speciesism, states that all human subjects-of-a-life are equal in their morally significant (inherent) value, regardless of how much or little they know, how talented or incapable they are, how wealthy or poor, and so on. He argues that only the lingering traces of speciesism can prevent us from reaching the same conclusion regarding animals as subjects-of-a-life (Tom Regan, *Animal Rights, Human Wrongs: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (Roman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., Lanham 2003) 93). Similarly, according to AMC theory (the argument from marginal cases) intellectually disabled humans have legal rights that are recognized and enforceable in courts, and given that they lack intellectual capacities, they enjoy these rights on the basis of having feelings and emotions. To be morally consistent, we must extend the same rights to any being with equivalent capacities, and it has been established that animals possess both feelings and emotions, as well as a certain level of consciousness (Elizabeth Anderson, 'Animal Rights and the Values of Nonhuman Life' in Cass R. Sunstein and Martha C. Nussbaum (eds.), *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions* (Oxford University Press, New York 2004) 279–280, 285–286). Jeremy Bentham compared the position of animals to that of Black slaves, joyfully anticipating that "the day will come when animal creatures will be able to obtain those rights which could never have been justly withheld from them, except by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the color of the skin is no reason why a human being should be left unprotected before the whim of a tormentor. One day it may be realized that the number of legs or the wrinkliness of the skin are equally insufficient reasons to consign a sentient being to the same fate" (Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (T. Payne and son, London 1780) Chapter XVII, ft. a, 309). As Tomislav Nedić notes, the protection of animal life, health, and welfare within any legal system inevitably reflects the tension between anthropocentric and biocentric ethical perspectives. This tension raises the question of whether existing legal frameworks truly aim to safeguard animals themselves or primarily serve human interests. Ultimately, the achievement of a fair and balanced coexistence between humans and animals depends on recognizing this distinction and ensuring that such coexistence is meaningfully integrated into the functioning of contemporary society (Tomislav Nedić, 'Pravni sustav zaštite života, zdravlja i dobrobiti životinja – bioetički pristup u pravnom okviru' (2018) 27(1) *Socijalna ekologija* 72). For a more detailed discussion of animals as sentient beings, their legal status, and the necessity of their protection, see also Vanja Bajović, 'Pravni status životinja – pokretne stvari ili nešto više?' in Đorđe Ignjatović (ed.), *Kaznena reakcija u Srbiji* (Pravni fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu 2023).

4 Animal Welfare Act – AWA, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 41/2009 (RS).

The primary reason for this lack of transparency lies in the grim reality behind shelter walls. In most public shelters, dogs are confined indefinitely in overcrowded cages, deprived of space, sunlight, and stimulation. Many lose the ability to walk after spending years crammed into enclosures of just two square meters alongside multiple other animals. Others succumb to infectious diseases spread by unsanitary conditions and contaminated food and water. Some die from injuries inflicted by cage mates or failed escape attempts, while others are dumped outside city limits – starved, injured, and abandoned to die.

Serbian laws on animal welfare prescribe entirely different standards. Between 2017 and 2020, more than 6.4 billion RSD (approximately €50 million) were allocated from public funds for animal control services (zoohygiene services).⁵ Yet, despite this substantial public investment, many shelters resemble internment camps rather than refuges of care.

A key explanation for this disconnect is corruption. Although Article 46(1) of the Veterinary Act⁶ obliges local governments to establish and manage animal control services directly, these responsibilities are routinely outsourced to “preferred” private contractors. These companies often employ illegal capture methods, transport animals in overcrowded, airless vehicles, and prioritize profit over humane treatment. Their main incentive is to secure recurring contracts – not to resolve the issue of stray animals. Even Serbia’s Ombudsman has expressed concern over the repeated awarding of contracts to a single company and questioned its legal and operational competence.⁷

This dynamic reflects what some scholars have identified as “*contract corruption in public service outsourcing*”, a process by which public responsibilities are delegated to private actors whose financial motives subvert the public interest.⁸ In the case of Serbia’s stray animal management, the result is not only financial misuse but a systematized and normalized cruelty toward animals.

Despite public access to data and widespread violations of animal welfare laws, prosecutions remain exceedingly rare. From 2006 to 2023, only 408 convictions were recorded for the criminal offense of animal cruelty and killing (Article 269 of the Serbian Criminal Code⁹).¹⁰ There are no publicly known convictions for corruption-related offenses in the animal welfare sector. One illustrative case involved the owner of a private shelter in which 108 dogs died from hunger and dehydration. Despite receiving over €7.000 in donations in the five months preceding the inci-

5 Državna revizorska institucija – DRI, *Izveštaj o reviziji svrsishodnosti poslovanja – efikasnost rešavanja problema napuštenih životinja* (2021) 10, <<https://www.dri.rs/storage/upload/documents/revision/2022/2021-2-SV%20Efikasnost%20re%C5%A1avanje%20problema%20napu%C5%A1tenih%20%C5%BEivotinja.pdf>> accessed 15 May 2025.

6 Veterinary Act, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, Nos. 91/2005, 30/2010, 93/2012, and 17/2019 – amended law (RS).

7 Zaštitnik građana Republike Srbije, *Poseban izveštaj Zaštitnika građana – Problemi u primeni odredbi Zakona o veterinarstvu i Zakona o dobiti životinja o staranju o napuštenim i izgubljenim životinjama* (2019), 10-11, <<https://www.ombudsman.rs/index.php/izvestaji/posebni-izvestaji/6069-p-s-b-n-izv-sh-zg-pr-bl-i-u-pri-ni-dr-dbi-z-n-v-rin-rs-vu-i-z-n-d-br-bi-i-ziv-inj-s-r-nju-n-push-ni-i-izgublj-ni-ziv-inj>> accessed 15 May 2025.

8 Amir Hefetz, Mildred Warner, ‘Privatization and Its Reverse: Explaining the Dynamics of the Government Contracting Process’ (2004) 14(2) *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 175–177.

9 Criminal Code, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, Nos. 85/2005, 88/2005 – corr., 107/2005 – corr., 72/2009, 111/2009, 121/2012, 104/2013, 108/2014, 94/2016, 35/2019, and 94/2024 (RS).

10 Natalija Živković, *Kaznena dela protiv životinja kao predmet krivičnog i prekršajnog postupka* (PhD thesis, Pravni fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu 2024), 171; Republički zavod za statistiku, *Bilten – punoletni učinioci krivičnih dela u Republici Srbiji, 2023* (2024) 55, 82; Republički zavod za statistiku, *Bilten – maloletni učinioci krivičnih dela u Republici Srbiji, 2023* (2024) 52.

dent, the owner received only a six-month suspended sentence, while a shelter employee was sentenced to six months of house arrest.¹¹ No corruption charges were pursued.

These cases reveal that corruption in Serbia's animal welfare system is not an abstract – it materializes in the daily suffering and deaths of abandoned animals. Its consequences extend far beyond, eroding the rule of law, undermining public trust, and enabling a parallel economy of cruelty supported by public funds.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, document-based methodology focused on analyzing the structural drivers of corruption and animal cruelty in Serbia's public animal welfare system. Primary sources include official public records, Freedom of Information (FOI) responses, procurement contracts, reports from the State Audit Institution and the Ombudsman, investigative journalism, and legal and regulatory texts. Supplementary material includes data retrieved from the Serbian Business Registers Agency, the Serbian Kennel Club (KSS), and municipal budget decisions. Case studies were selected based on documented patterns of abuse, financial irregularities, or judicial outcomes and were cross-referenced with media reports and NGO investigations. While the study does not include field interviews or ethnographic data, it triangulates publicly available institutional evidence to map recurring patterns of legal evasion, financial misuse, and systemic cruelty. Limitations of the study include the partial availability of criminal case outcomes and the absence of comprehensive government data on shelter inspections or enforcement actions.

3. LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND CORRUPTION AT THE EXPENSE OF STRAY ANIMALS

Abandoned animals, mostly dogs and cats, are among the most vulnerable and are frequently subjected to killing, injury, torture, and abuse.¹² Even when they are not direct victims of violence, their lives are often marked by prolonged suffering – they die slowly and painfully from starvation, exposure to cold, disease, injury, or end up being hit by vehicles.¹³ Their lives are marked by systemic abandonment and institutional failure.

11 Inšajder, *Slučaj masovne smrti pasa u Velikom Gradištu*, <<https://www.insajder.net/teme/slucaj-masovne-smrti-pasa-u-velikom-gradistu-tuzilastva-ne-odgovaraju-sta-je-sa-krivicnim-prijavama-protiv-vlasnice-prihvatilista-video>> accessed 01 July 2025.

12 Between 2006 and 2018, the Organization for Respect and Care for Animals (ORKA) received reports of approximately 6,500 cases of animal abuse and killing, which it professionally processed and analyzed. ORKA found that the most prevalent form of abuse was physical abuse (52%), followed by neglect (32%), psychological abuse (13%), and, to a lesser extent, hoarding (2%) and sexual abuse of animals (1%). – ORKA, *Da li su životinje u Srbiji zaštićene – šta kaže statistika?*, <<https://orca.rs/da-li-su-zivotinje-u-srbiji-zasticene-sta-kaze-statistika/>> accessed 20 March 2025. During the same period, 2024 criminal complaints were filed for the killing and abuse of animals, while many cases remained unreported. Živković (n 10) 162, 168.

13 Natalija Živković, 'Delatnost zoohigijene – pitanje zakonitosti poveravanja poslova' in *Aktuelna pitanja savremenog zakonodavstva i pravosuđa – Zbornik radova sa savetovanja pravnika, Budva 7–9. jun 2025. godine* (Savez udruženja pravnika 2025) 504.

Recognizing this heightened vulnerability, Serbian lawmakers have sought to regulate certain aspects of the status and protection of stray animals. The Animal Welfare Act contains provisions specifically aimed at improving the treatment of abandoned animals, including obligations for humane capture, adequate shelter, veterinary care, and eventual adoption or return to their original habitat.

However, as subsequent sections of this paper demonstrate, these legal norms are routinely violated. Moreover, enforcement mechanisms remain weak or compromised, enabling widespread corruption and institutional indifference. As a result, the suffering of stray animals is not merely a consequence of social neglect but is structurally reproduced by legal ambiguity, administrative inaction, and financial exploitation within the system ostensibly designed to protect them.

3.1. LEGAL OBLIGATIONS OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENTS AND INSTITUTIONAL EVASION

The *Animal Welfare Act* explicitly defines the obligations of local self-government units in managing and caring for stray animals. Unlike the Croatian model, which explicitly allows for public-private partnerships in the management of animal shelters,¹⁴ Serbian legislation does not permit such arrangements. Instead, each municipality where stray animals are present is directly obliged to establish a public shelter (*Animal Welfare Act*, Art. 66). Similarly, the *Veterinary Act* mandates in Article 46 that municipalities must organize animal control services (zoohigiene) within their jurisdiction. The original deadline for the establishment of such shelters was three years after the enactment of the Animal Welfare Act – meaning by 2012. Yet, according to the State Audit Institution's 2021 report, 97 municipalities (more than a half of all municipalities in Serbia) had failed to establish a shelter by that time.¹⁵

Furthermore, the Ombudsman's report revealed that 68 out of 118 responding municipalities had failed to organize animal control service at all. Even in municipalities where such services exist, they are often severely understaffed – typically between one and six employees – and lack the resources necessary for effective operations.¹⁶

Additionally, Article 54(1) of the Animal Welfare Act requires each municipality to develop and implement a population control program for stray dogs and cats, tailored to local conditions. However, according to the same DRI report (2021), 55 municipalities had failed to adopt such a program.¹⁷

Article 83 of the Animal Welfare Act defines penalties for responsible officials who fail to fulfill these duties – specifically, for failure to establish shelters, organize transport and care for stray animals, or implement a population control program. Despite clear violations,

14 Boris Bakota, 'Public Administration and the Law of Animal Protection in Croatia' (2023) 12(2) *Perspectives of law and public administration* 198–200.

15 DRI (n 5) 6.

16 Zaštitnik građana Republike Srbije (n 7) 9.

17 DRI (n 5) 24; Zaštitnik građana Republike Srbije (n 7) 6.

enforcement is virtually nonexistent. According to data obtained through response to FOI requests, by the end of 2022, only one misdemeanor conviction had been issued and one proceeding discontinued related to these infractions.

The failure to enforce these legal obligations amounts to systemic legal inertia. The legal norms concerning the treatment of stray and lost animals remain “dead letters of the law”. At the same time, over €50 million (6.4 billion RSD) was spent from local budgets over four years on animal control services (zoohygiene). This raises a fundamental question: Where did the money go? Since all data confirming municipal violations are publicly available, the logical question arises: Why have competent institutions failed to initiate proceedings against public officials who have not fulfilled their statutory duties? Are they, too, entangled in the broader chain of corruption?¹⁸

3.2. OUTSOURCING MUNICIPAL ANIMAL CONTROL TO PRIVATE ENTITIES – VIOLATION OF THE LAW AND INSTITUTIONAL FAILURES

One of the primary reasons Serbian municipalities have failed to fulfill their legal obligation to establish local animal control (zoohygiene) services is their preference for outsourcing these tasks to private companies. The Law on Communal Services¹⁹ classifies stray-animal control as a communal activity and, under Article 5, allows local governments to entrust it to private legal entities.²⁰ In practice this legal design treats stray dogs and cats much like *communal waste*, and many contractors act accordingly.

This legal framework opens the door to widespread corruption, manifesting in a now well-documented pattern: municipalities pay substantial sums to a small number of “privileged” private companies to capture stray dogs, transport them, house them in private facilities, and provide sterilization, vaccination, and veterinary care. In practice, however, the treatment of animals by these companies is often cruel and unlawful.²¹ The primary goal of private companies is profit, which is why they do not resolve the problem of stray dogs but instead deliberately and knowingly prolong it – by failing to sterilize females, transferring dogs from one location to another to secure new contracts.²²

A paradigmatic example is *Avenija MB*, the company that has dominated the market since 2015. Although registered in the Serbian Business Registers Agency for “*regular building-cleaning services and miscellaneous agricultural work*”, it has become the country’s largest provider of animal-control services. In 2025 alone it signed 33 municipal contracts worth RSD 60.543.656

18 Vanja Bajović, ‘Pravna reakcija na napuštanje životinja – problematika napuštenih životinja i životinja u prihvatilištima’ in Vanja Bajović and Ivana Marković (eds.), *Zbornik radova: Pravna zaštita životinja – U susret izmenama i dopunama Zakona o dobrobiti životinja* (Univerzitet u Beogradu – Pravni fakultet 2024) 80.

19 Law on Communal Services, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, Nos. 88/2011, 104/2016, 95/2018, and 94/2024 (RS).

20 On the issue of the legality of outsourcing animal control (zoohygiene) services, see: Živković (n 10) 515–518; Bajović (n 18) 79–80.

21 Živković (n 10) 62.

22 Bajović (n 18) 82.

(≈ €516.600),²³ despite operating only a single shelter – located in Vrnjačka Banja – that demonstrably fails to meet the minimum standards set by the Rulebook on Conditions for Animal Shelters and Boarding Facilities.²⁴ Here arises another illegality, as outsourcing animal control services to providers of communal services whose headquarters are not located within the territory of the local government unit is justified only if the service provider meets the conditions specified by the Regulation,²⁵ which, in practice, is usually not the case. This illegality results in dogs captured in various municipalities or regions of Serbia being transported up to 300 km to Vrnjačka Banja, where the *Avenija MB* shelter is located.

Numerous media reports and citizen videos document inhumane practices. One viral video from December 2023, filmed by a schoolgirl from her classroom in Sjenica, captured the violent capture and apparent killing of a well-known stray dog that had peacefully lived in the schoolyard for two years. Activists claim that workers crushed the dog's neck with metal clamps, dragging it across the schoolyard while children watched. The girl filming the incident asked, "Will anyone be held accountable?" – but no criminal charges were filed.²⁶ Nonetheless, *Avenija MB* was again contracted by the same municipality in 2025 to provide animal control services worth 4.4 million RSD (approximately €38.000), despite public outrage and prior abuses.²⁷

Because veterinary inspections frequently ignore citizens' complaints – or, worse, deem harsh practices lawful – animal-rights activists have been forced to intervene directly. According to these activists, they often pay "ransoms" of 2.000–3.000 RSD (approximately €20–25) to recover dogs within a few hours of capture, although many animals still fail to survive.²⁸

These patterns suggest systemic regulatory failure, in which outsourcing animal control not only undermines the ethical standards of animal welfare but actively facilitates illegal and exploitative practices under the guise of municipal service delivery.

3.3. SYSTEMIC ABUSE IN ANIMAL SHELTERS IN SERBIA: LEGAL GAPS AND INSTITUTIONAL FAILURES

Despite legal obligations established by the Serbian Animal Welfare Act, a significant number of local municipalities still do not operate any form of shelter for abandoned animals. In facilities that do exist, legal requirements are routinely disregarded. Animal protection organizations have documented widespread cases of systematic killing of healthy and sociable

23 Data on contracts are available at: <<https://jnportal.ujn.gov.rs/contracts>> accessed 2 July 2025.

24 Rulebook on the Conditions that must be met by Animal Shelters and Boarding Facilities, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 19/2012 (RS).

25 Article 20 of the Regulation on the Method and Conditions for Commencing the Performance of Communal Activities, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, Nos. 13/2018, 66/2018, and 51/2019 (RS).

26 NIN ISTRAŽUJE Monopol na zlostavljanje: Jezivo mučenje pasa o trošku građana (2), <<https://www.nin.rs/drustvo/vesti/71596/jezivo-mucenje-pasa-o-trosku-gradana-monopol-na-zlostavljanje>> accessed 15 May 2025.

27 Decision on Contract Award, <https://sjenica.rs/dokumenti/javnenabavke/2025/odluka_o_dodeli_ugovora-hvatanja_pasa-2025.pdf> accessed 20. May 2025.

28 NIN (n 26).

animals under the false pretense that they are either aggressive or terminally ill.²⁹ Such practices reflect blatant misuse of Article 7 of the Animal Welfare Act, which permits euthanasia only in strictly defined situations, such as incurable suffering or proven inability to adapt to shelter conditions. Crucially, the statute sets no criteria for assessing “inability to adapt”, stipulates no minimum adaptation period, and requires no attempt to place animals in alternative shelters before euthanasia – loopholes that local authorities and shelter operators exploit for administrative convenience and financial gain.

In practice, municipalities often report that stray dogs have been microchipped and sterilised, yet the procedures are never carried out while substantial budget funds are still disbursed.³⁰ Volunteers have documented newly sterilised dogs – still bleeding from fresh surgical wounds – dumped in remote areas without food or water. One volunteer found five dogs registered to the city of Čačak whose sterilisation dates were only one or two days old; the next day she discovered twenty more in the same emaciated condition.³¹

A case study of the municipal shelter *Naš dom* in Požega highlights the scale of abuse. Between January 2020 and July 2022, the shelter reported capturing 2.561 dogs, yet 2.778 deaths were recorded inside the facility: 2.070 by euthanasia and 708 from neglect or disease. Only 36 dogs were sterilised, vaccinated, microchipped and adopted. Financial records show the shelter spent just 150 RSD (€1.30) per euthanised dog, although the market price of euthanasia services is roughly 7.500 RSD (€64).³²

Conditions are similar elsewhere. At the Ruma municipal shelter, dozens of dog carcasses were found near the facility, showing blunt force trauma to the head, with no microchip identification. Volunteers later documented emaciated and dying dogs inside the shelter.³³ Despite this, in 2024, the Ruma municipality allocated €128.000 (15 million RSD) for animal control services, increasing the amount to €145.000 (17 million RSD) in 2025.³⁴ According to whistleblowers, veterinarians never visited the shelter despite budget allocations for veterinary care. Conflict of interest was blatant: the same person served as both director of the public utility company running the shelter and head of the municipal inspection authority overseeing it.

Such conditions raise serious questions about the criminal liability of shelter managers, staff, and associated veterinarians – not only for direct violations of Article 269 of the Serbian

29 Nataša Stojanović, 'Deset godina Zakona o dobrobiti životinja Republike Srbije' (2019) 53(2) Zbornik radova Pravnog fakulteta u Novom Sadu 449.

30 *Ibid.*

31 NIN ISTRAŽUJE Jezivo mučenje pasa o trošku građana: Ministarstvo ne vidi zlostavljanje životinja (4), <<https://www.nin.rs/drustvo/vesti/72918/jezivo-mucenje-pasa-o-trosku-gradana-4-deo-ministarstvo-ne-vidi-zlostavljanje-zivotinja>> accessed 15 May 2025.

32 The data were obtained from a response to a Freedom of Information request dated 26 July 2022. Based on similar data from other state-run shelters, a comparable pattern emerges – high numbers of euthanised and deceased dogs relative to the number of captured dogs.

33 HOROR U RUMI: Brutalno pobijen veliki broj pasa – tupim predmetom u glavu, ima i ubodnih rana!, <<https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/4416839/horor-u-rumi-brutalno-pobijen-veliki-broj-pasa-tupim-predmetom-u-glavu-ima-i-ubodnih-rana-uznemirujuce-slike>> accessed 03 June 2025.

34 The budget decisions for the years 2024 and 2025 are publicly available at: <https://www.ruma.rs/kategorija_lat.php?menu_id=40> accessed 03 June 2025.

Criminal Code (animal cruelty and killing), but also for related misdemeanors and corruption offenses.³⁵ Despite publicly available data, criminal convictions in these cases remain rare.

The situation is equally alarming in private shelters. In June 2024 at least 108 dogs died of hunger and dehydration at a private facility in Veliko Gradište, despite the owner having received more than €7.000 in donations five months earlier. The registered animal protection organization “PUŽ”, founded by the same individual, submitted “inactive” financial reports to the Serbian Business Registers Agency for 2021-2023. Nevertheless, in 2023 the local municipality allocated 30 ares of public land to the organization for official activities.³⁶ A criminal complaint was filed for corruption, though no proceedings have been initiated so far. The shelter owner was eventually sentenced to a six-month suspended sentence for animal cruelty, while one employee received six months of house arrest.

These examples reveal a deeply rooted pattern of institutional failure, legal ambiguity, and systemic impunity in the management of both public and private animal shelters in Serbia. Unless mechanisms of oversight and prosecution are strengthened, the violations will persist, and public funds will continue to support cruelty under the guise of animal welfare.³⁷

3.4. COMPENSATION CLAIMS FOR INJURIES CAUSED BY STRAY DOGS

A significant portion of municipal budgets in Serbia is allocated to compensating citizens for injuries caused by stray dogs. According to the 2021 report by the State Audit Institution, between 2017 and 2020, Serbian municipalities received 68.682 claims for compensation related to dog bites. During this period, more than 5 billion RSD (approximately €43 million) were paid out from local budgets. Of these claims, 55% were resolved through out-of-court settlements, while the remaining 45% were adjudicated in court proceedings. The amount paid in compensation based on claims resolved through out-of-court settlements and mediation accounts for 26%, while the amount paid in compensation and legal costs for claims resolved through court proceedings accounts for 74% of the aforementioned 5 billion RSD.³⁸

While stray dogs are often microchipped by municipalities, liability in such cases is not based on Articles 173 and 174 of the Serbian Law on Obligations,³⁹ which regulate the liability of keepers of dangerous objects (typically applied in cases involving owned dogs). Instead,

35 For more on the possible criminal liability of responsible and employed persons in shelters, see: Bajović (n 18) 80–81; Živković (n 10) 64–65.

36 See the website of the Serbian Business Registers Agency (APR), registration number of the association “PUŽ” 28122519, section “Published Financial Reports”, statement of inactivity for the years 2021, 2022, and 2023, <<https://fin.apr.gov.rs/JavnaPretraga/FiDetails?mbr=28122519&rnd=f5a68c04-d735-48cd-9b6c-f0881231613c>> accessed 03 June 2025; Decision of the Municipal Council of Veliko Gradište no. 464-146/2023-01-4 dated 20 June 2023.

37 Some authors emphasize that the enforcement of anti-cruelty laws needs to be improved, which requires joint efforts by prosecutors, the police, and society. – Joseph Sauder, ‘Enacting and enforcing felony animal cruelty laws to prevent violence against humans’ (2000) 6 *Animal Law Review*, Lewis & Clark Law School 18–19.

38 DRI (n 5) 21–22.

39 Law on Obligations, *Official Gazette of the FFRY*, Nos. 29/1978, 39/1985, 45/1989 – Decision of the Constitutional Court, and 57/1989; *Official Gazette of the FRY*, No. 31/1993; *Official Gazette of SCG*, No. 1/2003 – Constitutional Charter; and *Official Gazette of the RS*, No. 18/2020 (RS).

municipalities are held liable under Article 184 Law on Obligations, which relates to liability in connection with the performance of activities of public interest.⁴⁰

Public concern has grown over suspected fraud in compensation claims. It is commonly alleged that injuries caused by owned dogs are falsely reported as stray dog attacks or that incidents are fabricated entirely.⁴¹ For instance, the animal welfare organization *Kučica za spas* indicating that over a two-year period the municipality of Arilje paid out 31.249.500 RSD in compensation for dog bites. Given that the average payout per incident was estimated at 40.000 RSD, this would suggest nearly 800 bite incidents in a municipality of just 17.000 residents. Similar patterns were reported in other municipalities: within 2 years Bor paid out over 83 million RSD, Knjaževac nearly 27 million RSD, Užice over 44 million RSD, and Sokobanja 840.626 RSD but within only two months.

These figures suggest an urgent need for systemic reform. When compared to the modest investments in building and maintaining animal shelters, the financial inefficiency becomes starkly apparent. For instance, the city of Novi Sad invested approximately 30 million RSD in 2015 to construct a shelter for 300 dogs and an additional 20 million RSD in 2017 for its expansion. Leskovac built a 200-dog shelter for roughly 20 million RSD, while the municipalities of Vlasotince and Bojnik jointly established a 100-dog capacity facility for just 13 million RSD.⁴²

Investments in infrastructure for humane care, sterilization, and adoption of stray animals are not only more ethical but also financially rational. Studies in other jurisdictions confirm that coordinated *catch-neuter-return* (CNR) programs, combined with responsible shelter management, significantly reduce the stray dog population and thereby lower public health risks and associated compensation payouts.⁴³

4. UNREGISTERED BREEDING FACILITIES: A LEGAL AND STRUCTURAL FAILURE IN ANIMAL WELFARE GOVERNANCE

According to Serbian law, the sale of dogs and cats is permitted only through licensed breeding facilities that are officially registered with the Veterinary Directorate and that meet specific animal welfare requirements regarding housing, premises, and equipment (Article 59(1) of the AWA). Selling pets from unregistered facilities is a punishable offense under Article 82(1) (74) of the same law.⁴⁴ Additionally, breeders are required to maintain detailed records of each animal's microchip number, vaccination status, number of litters, breeding females, and data

⁴⁰ Supreme Court of Cassation ruling No. Rev 1676/2015 dated 22 October 2015.

⁴¹ Nataša Stojanović, 'Odgovornost za štetu koju životinja prouzrokuje prema Prednacrtu građanskog zakonika Republike Srbije' (2018) 57(81) Zbornik radova Pravnog fakulteta u Nišu 340.

⁴² DRI (n 5), 22.

⁴³ Jennifer Jackman, Andrew Rowan, 'Free-roaming dogs in developing countries: The benefits of capture, neuter, and return programs' in David Salem and Andrew Rowan (eds.), *The State of the Animals IV* (Humane Society Press 2007) 70–71; Jonathan Reece, Shreedher Chawla, Adrian Hiby, 'Decline in human dog-bite cases during a street dog sterilisation programme in Jaipur, India' (2013) 172 (18) *Veterinary Record* 473.

⁴⁴ The penalty for natural persons is likewise merely "symbolic", despite the potential profits from this activity, and ranges from 5.000 to 50.000 dinars (approximately €43-€430).

on buyers.⁴⁵ Veterinary inspectors are authorized to issue corrective orders and even suspend the operation of facilities that fail to meet legal standards (Article 79(1)(11) of the AWA).

Yet, in practice, enforcement is virtually nonexistent. In May 2024, only 98 dog breeding facilities were registered on the Veterinary Directorate’s website, while the Serbian Kennel Club (KSS), a private association, listed 4.566 dog breeding facilities on its public website.⁴⁶ This suggests the existence of at least 4.468 illegal breeders, whose operations remain unregulated and untaxed. Veterinary inspectors are authorized to order the correction of irregularities in the operation of breeding facilities and may even prohibit their activities if the deficiencies are not remedied within the prescribed timeframe (Article 79(1)(11) of the AWA). However, they consistently fail to do so, raising serious concerns about potential corrupt ties between inspectors and Serbian Kennel Club.⁴⁷

According to the Federation Cynologique Internationale (FCI), the Serbian Kennel Club issued 184.989 puppy pedigrees over four years (2021-2024), far surpassing countries with comparable populations. For example:

Data for 2022⁴⁸

Country	Number of puppies registered with the Kennel Club of Serbia (KSS)	Number of litters registered with the Kennel Club of Serbia (KSS)
Serbia	48.690	12.811
Austria	8.300	1.470
Switzerland	6.429	1.326
Slovenia	4.070	852
Croatia	10.722	2.330
Bosnia and Herzegovina	8.217	1.575

Data for 2021⁴⁹

Country	Number of puppies registered with the Kennel Club of Serbia (KSS)	Number of litters registered with the Kennel Club of Serbia (KSS)
Serbia	61.974	15.263
Austria	8.521	1.521
Switzerland	7.439	1.417
Slovenia	4.396	888
Croatia	13.413	2.653
Bosnia and Herzegovina	8.417	1.647

45 Article 27 of the Rulebook on the Conditions that Animal Breeding Facilities Must Meet, *Official Gazette of the RS*, Nos. 14/2012 and 49/2021.

46 The data on the number of breeding facilities are as of 15 May 2025. See the register of breeding facilities maintained by the Veterinary Directorate and the list of breeding facilities advertised by the Serbian Kennel Club (KSS) at: <<https://www.vet.minpolj.gov.rs/registri/>>; <<https://ksrs.rs/odgajivacnice/>> accessed 15 May 2025.

47 Bajović (n 18) 71.

48 Statistics of the FCI members & partners: 2022, <<https://www.fci.be/en/statistics/ByYear.aspx?year=2022>> accessed 27 May 2025.

49 Statistics of the FCI members & partners: 2021, <<https://www.fci.be/en/statistics/ByYear.aspx?year=2021>> accessed 27 May 2025.

This data implies an unsustainable rate of breeding in Serbia. The market is saturated, and surplus puppies that remain unsold are often abandoned, directly contributing to the stray animal crisis and further burdening municipal budgets.

Financially, the Serbian Kennel Club has profited enormously. If only standard pedigrees are considered (without calculating income from duplicate documents, export pedigrees, or kennel name protections), the organization earned approximately 462,4 million RSD (~€4 million) in just four years.

The Serbian State Audit Institution identified this issue, noting that the Veterinary Directorate had contacted KSS and requested they require proof of registration before issuing pedigree documentation. However, the report noted that no action had been taken by the time the audit was completed.⁵⁰ Instead of strengthening oversight, the Ministry's rule change institutionalized deregulation and undermined animal welfare, given that the Ministry of Agriculture amended the Rulebook on Breeding Facility Conditions in a way that legalized existing violations. Specifically, a provision was added to exclude breeders with three or fewer females from regulatory oversight, effectively legitimizing the activities of unregistered breeders operating under the KSS umbrella.⁵¹

The failure to sanction illegal breeding operations has significant consequences. These facilities typically avoid taxation, keep animals in inhumane conditions, and use breeding females until they are no longer profitable – at which point the animals are abandoned. As Stojanović rightly notes, this legal absurdity reflects a dual failure: economic (tax evasion and illegal labor) and ethical (unchecked abuse of animals whose welfare is entirely unmonitored).⁵² Ultimately, the proliferation of unregistered breeding facilities facilitates the hyperproduction of puppies, many of whom end up as strays, feeding back into the municipal budget crisis linked to dog bite compensation and shelter overpopulation.

Despite clear legal provisions (e.g., Article 82(1)(74) and (75) of the Animal Welfare Act), which allow fines up to 1.000.000 RSD for legal entities, 500.000 RSD for entrepreneurs, and 50.000 RSD for individuals, enforcement remains almost entirely absent. A simple cross-reference between the Veterinary Directorate's registry and the public KSS breeder database would suffice to identify and sanction unregistered breeders.

More worryingly, the high volume of undocumented dog sales – many of which occur through informal or clandestine channels, both domestically and abroad – suggests that elements of the breeding industry may intersect with organized crime. Although this hypothesis requires further criminological investigation, the current situation exposes regulatory weakness and the state's unwillingness to confront a profitable but abusive sector.

⁵⁰ DRI (n 5) 53.

⁵¹ Article 2* of the Rulebook on Conditions that Animal Breeding Facilities Must Meet.

⁵² Stojanović (n 29) 450.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings presented in this paper reveal a deeply entrenched system of corruption, legal inertia, and institutional failure that underpins Serbia's approach to animal welfare. When funds intended for the protection of abandoned and vulnerable animals are misappropriated and pocketed by individuals, and law enforcement agencies fail to act due to corrupt influences, animals remain unprotected and exposed to abuse and killing. Instead of having shelters, zoohygiene services, implementation of "catch-neuter-release" programs for stray animals, strictly regulated dog breeding facilities, and a record of convictions for crimes against animals and related corruption offenses, there is mass killing of dogs in shelters and on the streets, alongside overproduction of dogs in conditions that do not meet even minimal standards of humanity.

Hundreds of thousands of abandoned dogs still roam the streets, state shelters resemble "camps", and nearly 50 million euros have been "spent" on zoohygiene services over four years. A single private company is repeatedly engaged year after year in dozens of municipalities across Serbia, despite receiving hundreds of complaints from animal welfare organizations and individuals. In some municipalities, there is approximately one dog bite per every twenty residents, and nearly 43 million euros have been spent from local budgets over four years on compensation for dog bites. The Serbian Kennel Club earns millions of euros annually from issuing pedigrees, while around 4.500 unregistered breeding facilities avoid paying taxes. All this occurs alongside the overproduction of dogs, while animals that have exhausted their reproductive lives and unsold puppies are abandoned on the streets. Veterinary inspectors "turn a blind eye", while prosecutorial authorities claim to be "unaware" of data widely spread on social media, websites, and detailed in numerous criminal complaints.

If corruption did not plague the animal welfare sector, the problem of abandoned animals would have been resolved in the 16 years since the Animal Welfare Act came into force. Funds would be spent on sterilizing stray dogs, reducing their numbers instead of increasing them. Shelters would be safe havens for the most vulnerable, rather than places where animal welfare volunteers exert all efforts to rescue dogs because life there is unbearable. Zoohygiene services would operate in every municipality, instead of relying on private companies. Without corruption, public money would not be wasted on compensation for dog bites but would instead fill the state budget through taxes on breeders' profits.

The issue of animal welfare reflects the level of development of a given society – its care for the weaker and more vulnerable, the cultivation of empathy, the suppression of violence, and the awareness of others and those who are different, with whom we share the planet. The enforcement of laws is a matter of the rule of law; a state in which laws are not applied cannot be considered a state governed by the rule of law. The lack of regulation in this area leaves significant room for corrupt activities and manipulation – by various associations and individuals, as well as by certain companies, administrative bodies, and local authorities. In this context, it is justified to state that the issue of animal welfare is closely correlated with a country's economic standard – the wealthier and more organized societies tend to pay more attention to this topic, whereas in poorer and more rural communities, it is often reduced to the notion that "people are more important than animals", without an understanding of the

cause-and-effect relationship that caring for animals is, in fact, a form of caring for the weak and helpless, and a marker of a society's empathy development.

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DOBROBIT ŽIVOTINJA I KORUPCIJA U SRBIJI – KAKO DRŽAVA OMOGUĆUJE SUSTAVNO ZLOSTAVLJANJE ŽIVOTINJA

Sažetak

Ova studija istražuje kako sistemska korupcija unutar javno financiranog aparata za dobrobit životinja u Srbiji potiče okrutnost prema psima i mačkama velikih razmjera. Njezin primarni cilj je dvostruk: (1) pronaći pravne i administrativne praznine koje omogućuju općinskim vlastima da prepuštaju zakonske dužnosti kontrole životinja privatnim izvođačima radova usmjerenim na profit i (2) pokazati kako ovo prepuštanje – u kombinaciji sa slabom provedbom i netransparentnom javnom potrošnjom – pretvara skloništa u mjesta zlostavljanja, nezakonitog ubijanja i financijske zlouporabe. Kako bi se postigli ovi ciljevi, u istraživanju se koristi kvalitativna metodologija temeljena na dokumentima. Triangulira analizu zakonskih odredbi, javno dostupnih dokumenata, odgovora na zahtjeve prema Zakonu o slobodi informiranja, izvješća Državne revizorske institucije i Pučkog pravobranitelja te istraživačkog novinarstva. Odabrane studije slučaja javnih i privatnih skloništa unakrsno su povezane s medijskim dokazima kako bi se mapirali ponavljajući obrasci izbjegavanja zakona, prenapuhanog ugovaranja i sustavnog zlostavljanja životinja. Iako terenski intervjui nisu provedeni, širina institucionalnih izvora omogućuje rekonstrukciju neuspjeha u upravljanju i puteva korupcije. Cilj je pokazati da patnja napuštenih životinja nije slučajni nusprodukt društvenog zanemarivanja, već strukturno reproducirani rezultat pravne inercije, administrativne ravnodušnosti i ponašanja usmjerenog na profit. Kvantificiranjem javnih rashoda – više od 50 milijuna eura za usluge zoohigijene i dodatnih 43 milijuna eura za naknadu za ugrize pasa u razdoblju od 2017. do 2020. godine – rad otkriva očite neučinkovitosti i izopačene poticaje koji sprječavaju humana, isplativa rješenja poput općinskih programa hvatanja, kastracije i vraćanja životinja te reguliranog uzgoja. Rezultatima istraživanja nastoji se pokrenuti reformu zakonodavstva, ojačati tužiteljski nadzor i ponovno staviti dobrobit životinja u središte srbijanskog okvira vladavine prava.

Ključne riječi: dobrobit životinja, napuštene životinje, kaznena djela, korupcija



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