

Report on the employment of disabled people in European countries

Country: Bulgaria
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Background:

The [Academic Network of European Disability experts](#) (ANED) was established by the European Commission in 2008 to provide scientific support and advice for its disability policy Unit. In particular, the activities of the Network will support the future development of the EU Disability Action Plan and practical implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People.

This country report has been prepared as input for the *Thematic report on the implementation of EU Employment Strategy in European countries with reference to equality for disabled people*. The purpose of the report ([Terms of Reference](#)) is to review national implementation of the European Employment Strategy from a disability equality perspective, and to provide the Commission with useful evidence in support of disability policy mainstreaming. More specifically, the report will review implementation of EU Employment Strategy and the PROGRESS initiative with reference to policy implementation evidence from European countries, including the strategies addressed in the EU Disability Action Plan (such as flexicurity and supported employment).

PART ONE: GENERAL EVIDENCE

1.1 Academic publications and research reports (key points)

The Bulgarian folder of disability research documents is quite thin – generally, as well as by types of disabilities or by social areas (not employment). It was only in 2001 when the national census data included disabilities as an indicator in their data collection forms and reported that 263,143 Bulgarians have a medically identified disability. Later in 2005 the National Statistical Institute performed a Disability Research (www.nsi.bg) aimed at determining the health and social status of disabled people in Bulgaria and the possibilities for their integration but refrained from making policy recommendations.

In 2005 Open Society Institute (EUMAP and Mental Health Initiative) in cooperation with the Open Society Foundation - Sofia and the Bulgarian Association for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities (BAPID) issued a monitoring report called Rights of People with Intellectual Disabilities: Access to Education and Employment (2005-06) (http://www.eumap.org/reports/2005/inteldis_country/bulgaria). It represents a comprehensive overview of the legislative framework related to education and employment, public policies implemented in the area and 36 recommendations for improvement. The key findings conclude that people with intellectual disabilities have no access to proper education and training, which results in almost 100% unemployment rate within this social group of disabled people. The few employed usually occupy low-paid jobs in sheltered workshops.

The above research involved also the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, which is active in policy monitoring of mental disabilities and institutionalisation of disabled children, psychiatric hospitals and institutions for people with mental health problems (www.bghelsinki.org) though not focusing especially on employment.

The International Disability Rights Monitor (IDRM) for 2007 (<http://www.ideanet.org>) performed by the Centre for International Rehabilitation (CIR) in Chicago, US, covered fourteen European countries and Bulgaria was one of them.

It could be well summarised that domestic research is almost non-existent – at least what is made available publicly. Most of the research results come from international sources and are funded internationally. On the other hand there is little interest on the part of local researchers and research institutes to study disabilities from social perspective, including employment. There is not much funding allocated for disability research either – government is not pushed effectively to invest in research, private donors are interested in action, whilst post-research action is hardly ever noticeable. So far no evidence could be found that public policies have been seriously questioned by influential factors (EC for instance) on the grounds of unreliable data, irrelevancy or inconsistency.

1.2 Employment statistics and trends (key points)

The NSI research of 2005 covered 3.000 people at the age of 16 to 64. 92% of them fall into the age group of 16 – 64 years. It found that 51% percent of the disabled male population and 49% of disabled women have low educational levels (up to primary education). 43% of disabled men and 42% of disabled women had completed high school education.

Differences occurred in university education levels, where 6% of men with disabilities and 10% of women with disabilities have a university degree.

Disability pension is the main source of income for 72% of the respondents, 8% rely on support from another person, 8% receive salary for work or pension for work. Only 13% of the respondents are currently employed, i.e. remuneration for job. 8% of all employed are involved in subsidised programmes.

In order to raise people with disabilities' competitiveness on the labour market, vocational training programmes have been launched. These are based on targeted projects for unemployed disabled people and usually cover computer skills, specific professional skills (for example, accounting), foreign languages, etc. Their duration is limited to 2 – 3 months. NGOs and training providers licensed by the Vocational Training Agency are eligible for funding.

The research report says also that only 6% of the employed receive special on-the-job support, whereas 16% admit a need of such. 14% of the latter cannot specify the type of support needed, another 12% look for moral support and the same number claim a need for help related to their job. Still different but serious problem for disabled people constitutes the infrastructure – for 5% only it is accessible, 46% encounter difficulties, 24% judge it as entirely inaccessible. Almost a third of the respondents think that they can do certain type of work. The overwhelming preferences go for permanent job contracts (75%) in the public or private sector, 22% share no preferences and 3% only would like to develop their own business. 11% of the disabled in the sample are willing to join vocational training programmes with the top priority given to computer courses (58%), foreign language courses (13%), accountancy and business related trainings (7%).

Due to the lack of reliable statistics it is hard to estimate current rates of unemployment among people with all types of disabilities, though the National Action Plan on Employment for 2008 reports their average number for the first nine months of 2007 at 14.928 and for the whole year – 14.414, which is by 9,4% less than in 2003. The same government document says that the unemployment rate among disabled people over the last three years is approximately 5% of the overall number of registered unemployment. These numbers could be misleading, however, given that most of the disabled people are pensioners and

anecdotal evidence shows that when unemployed they are refused registration with the Labour Offices.

The government does not have reliable statistics to back up its policies, which in turn does not allow independent researchers to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of these policies with consistent methodologies – when it happens it is usually made on the grounds of extrapolations, assumptions and partial data. Official data could be obtained from special reports issued and posted on the website of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (MLSP) (www.mlsp.government.bg) and its agencies – the Employment Agency (www.az.government.bg) and the Agency for Disabled People (www.ahu.mlsp.government.bg). Primary data however is available upon request under the Access to Public Information Act, which is a time-consuming exercise requiring an individual letter of request to each institution separately.

The main reason for the above situation could be identified in the very definition of disability, which is explicitly medical – disability status is granted as “percentage of lost ability to work” on the basis of medical diagnosis alone without any assessment reference to the environment. Furthermore, the disability status is one of the eligibility criteria for all benefits (except for monthly integration allowance – a negligible amount of money), including free public transport, tax relieves, access to rehabilitation, technical aids or support for daily activities.

This leads to a situation that the statistical group of ‘disabled people’ is comprised of people with lasting health problems and people with impairments (disabled as defined by the UN Convention), all under the same statistical heading. Thus ‘employment rates among disabled people’ include all employees with disability status regardless of their impairment, which in turn blurs out the picture of unemployment – most people with severe disabilities are unemployed, not to mention those with intellectual disabilities (OSI Report of 2005). It is commonly believed that the disability-related prejudices among employers account for the high unemployment rates among disabled people. Though it might be true, this assumption has never been tested in Bulgaria through a qualitative research, interviews with employers, etc. There is however hard evidence in support of other reasons for disabled people not to be able to find a job: (1) on individual level - low education, lack of working experience and social skills; and (2) on environmental and policy level – inaccessible built environment and transport, lack of adequate technical aids and personal support on the job.

1.3 Laws and policies (key points)

Most of the new Bulgarian legislation passed after 1990 includes antidiscrimination clauses and the regulations related to employment are no exceptions. Article 2 of the Employment Promotion Act states that “when this law is implemented no direct or indirect discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, age, gender, religion, political or trade unions affiliation, social and family status, physical or mental disabilities, is allowed”.¹

The Labour Code also deals with the employment of disabled people. It introduced the quota system, which applies to businesses with 50 plus workers employed and requires them to reserve 4% of the jobs for “people with reduced working abilities”. It also provides for protection against dismissal – no matter what the reason for this is, the employer has to go through a hard procedure to acquire an approval of the Labour Inspection Office and the Expert Medical Panel. There is circumstantial evidence that this procedure discourages employers from having disabled people in the business despite that the loose state agencies’

¹ Employment Promotion Act, prom. State Gazette 112, 29th December 2001, last amendments of 2006

control operations, which result in no fines for non-compliance with this requirement. Some companies manage to circumvent their quota obligations by placing orders to special enterprises.

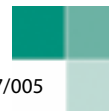
The Law on Integration of Disabled People contains a whole section on employment where mainstream employment is mentioned, quota system and special enterprises are regulated in a comprehensive manner.² Its Article 25 requires the Agency for Disabled People to keep a record of special enterprises and to provide funding for their business development projects on the top of the subsidies granted by virtue of having disabled people on the payroll. Further on, taxation laws stipulate incentives for self-employment of disabled people in addition to start-up business grants provided by the Agency for Disabled People. People with a disability status are entitled to double tax-free income levels.³ Employers of disabled people benefit from corporate tax relieves proportionately to the number of the disabled people hired in the business, while special enterprises are totally exempted from paying corporate taxes on the profit they make, as well as from paying local taxes.⁴

There are number of policy documents that contribute to the shaping of the labour market in Bulgaria. The Revised Employment Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for 2008 – 2015 (www.mlsp.government.bg) and National Action Plan on Employment for 2008 (www.mlsp.government.bg) are the key documents that proclaim equal treatment in employment, flexsecurity of the labour force, lifelong learning and improved opportunities for job accommodation of all Bulgarian citizens. The Strategy to Provide Equal Opportunities for Disabled People 2008-2015 <http://www.mlsp.government.bg/bg/docs/index.htm>, is designed to specify the measures to strengthen the position of the disabled people on the labour market. Its Goal 5 aims at “providing opportunities for employment of disabled people and their involvement in programmes for job search and accommodation”. The seven bullets formulate the key areas of intervention: improved efficiency of the employment programmes for disabled; better targeted incentives for the employers to hire disabled workers; change in attitudes of the employers; support for employers to adjust the working environment; promotion of training and lifelong learning among disabled people; increase in self-employment; promotion of social entrepreneurship. These priorities speak for themselves: disabled people will not yet enjoy the support they need to find and retain a job. These Strategy measures will benefit the employers’ community, perhaps people with granted disability status, but it is quite unlikely that they will change the labour situation of people with profound disabilities in the years to come, as they haven’t done so until now. Low education levels, lack of professional experience and social skills, which make disabled people vulnerable on the labour market, are tackled by the government through vocational training programmes. Their objectives are to raise disabled people’s competitiveness on the labour market. These are based on targeted projects for unemployed disabled people and usually cover computer skills, specific professional skills (for example, accounting), foreign languages, etc. Their duration is limited to 2 – 3 months. NGOs and training providers licensed by the Vocational Training Agency are eligible for funding. At the same time the Agency for Disabled People funds corporate business projects to adjust the working environment – to build ramps, to adapt and equip a working place to the needs of the disabled employee.

² Special enterprises are commercial entities registered under the Bulgarian corporate law as trade companies or cooperatives which have a defined share (different according to the nature of impairment) of disabled workers in the overall employment. For example, enterprises for deaf people have to employ 30% of their workforce with disabilities, whereas this share in case of physical and visual impairments is 50%.

³ Individual Income Tax Act of 1st January 1998. The tax-free level of income was BGN 180 (Euro 90) for 2005.

⁴ Corporate Taxation Act of 5th December 1997.



1.4 Type and quality of jobs (summary)

There is no statistical data or research evidence that would inform about the type and quality of jobs performed by disabled people, though given the reported low educational levels for the disabled community it could be assumed that these would be low qualification jobs, which implies also low salary ones. Government reports quote decreasing numbers of subsidised employment but fail to provide information on the number of disabled people employed in the open market.

There are 91 specialised enterprises employing 14,572 disabled people, the new Strategy to Provide Equal Opportunities for Disabled People 2008-2015 says. Most of them are associated with organisations of disabled people with officially acknowledged national representative status. In 2005, enterprises run by the Union of Deaf People received €267,000 for 14 projects, the Union of the Blind got funding for 9 projects worth €275,000, National Union of Cooperatives of Disabled People received €271,000 for 9 projects.

PART TWO: SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

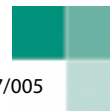
2.1 Reasonable accommodation in the workplace

The Agency for Disabled People each year is given a budget to finance adaptations on the workplace, access to the workplace, necessary equipments for disabled people on the job, etc. In 2005 the Agency reported that 49 individual mainstream business projects were funded at a total value of €120,000 to create accessible working environment. The size of funding, however is fixed at minimum level (for physical access to the work place €2.250; for adjustments on the work place € 1 250 and for equipment at the work place: € 2.500) and regardless of the individual needs of the disabled people. There is no personal assistance or transportation allowances for the disabled employees.

Currently the Employment Agency, along with the MLSP run disability programmes that support the demand side of the labour market. Under these programmes, employers may apply for funding to employ disabled people with a commitment to maintain the job for 24 to 36 months. The allocated money is earmarked for minimum monthly salaries over 12 months plus social security contributions. However, disabled employees under these programs have no access to individual support on the job such as personal assistance, mobility allowance, etc. It is reasonable to expect that people with health problems would constitute the major group of beneficiaries of such programs. The Employment Agency reports for 2005 that 1,313 people with disabilities got a job under their programmes and the budget for supporting employers amounted to approximately €1 million.

2.2 One example of best practice

There are isolated cases of successful and meaning employment of disabled people in the open market though the size of the phenomenon does not make them a “good practice”. It is often the individual manager who makes things happen rather than the system.



PART THREE: SUMMARY INFORMATION

3.1 Conclusions and recommendations (summary)

Generally, disabled Bulgarians – referring to the UN Convention definition of disabilities – are not included in the open labour market yet. Most of the employment activation policies affect positively people with disability status, who are not necessarily disabled (have no accessibility problems or difficulties in performing daily activities). Statistical data on employment of disabled people is scarce and questionable in terms of reporting methodology and accuracy. It is reasonable to assume that low education levels and lack of professional experience and social skills, account for the low employment rates among the disabled population. The existing welfare schemes and benefits for special enterprises are responsible for the preferred employment in sheltered facilities usually managed by non-disabled people. Substantial funding allocated for mainstream employers is not tailored to the needs of individual job applicants, which significantly diminishes its relevance, effectiveness and efficiency. Lack of accessibility and individual on-the-job support makes people with profound disabilities lifelong outsiders for the open labour market.

In order to change the employment situation of disabled people new type of public support should be designed focusing on the individual needs of the disabled people. In addition, access to mainstream education should be wide open for children and young people with all kinds of impairments. And finally, the existing employment promotion programmes should be evaluated (from inclusion perspective) and amended in a way that would accommodate the needs of all disabled people, including those with the most severe disabilities. Massive research should precede the process of revision suggested above. It should cover attitudes (on both sides – employers' and disabled people), levels of satisfaction and disabled citizens' aspirations.

3.2 References

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